

Carpinteria Creek Steelhead Revival

By- Matt Stoecker

In 1769, when the Portola Expedition first encountered Carpinteria Creek and Chumash natives inhabiting the stream banks, they named the village “Carpinteria” due to the native carpenters who were building redwood plank canoes. In 2004, many inhabitants of the Carpinteria Creek watershed and surrounding area are working together to “unbuild” barriers to steelhead migration along the creek, to allow the creek to once again support the amazing life cycle of steelhead trout.

Steelhead migration between the stream and ocean is currently being prevented by several human-made structures that were built within the creek over the last one hundred years.. These barriers are the main cause of the near elimination of the historic annual run of steelhead up Carpinteria Creek. The Carpinteria Creek Watershed Coalition provides an open forum for watershed stakeholders to work together and remove or modify known steelhead migration barriers with the goal of reviving the steelhead run to Carpinteria Creek. The group has been highly effective at collaborating with private landowners and public agencies, as well as obtaining large grants to begin restoration projects that will benefit steelhead and human interests in the watershed.

One public pedestrian crossing structure just upstream of Highway 101 is scheduled for modification this summer to improve steelhead migration. Two private road crossings that were built on the streambed are being studied for removal and replacement with bridges. Other landowners that own similar road crossing barriers on the creek have expressed interest in removing and/or modifying their crossings to allow fish passage and improve vehicle access during all stream flows. The Santa Barbara County Water Agency owns two debris dams in the Carpinteria Creek watershed that completely prevent upstream fish passage. The County is currently developing plans, with stakeholder input, for modifying or removing the dams to allow fish passage to excellent upstream steelhead habitat.

Several of these fish passage projects will be implemented within the next couple of years, and others will take place as additional grant money is obtained and landowners with steelhead migration barriers recognize the benefits of obtaining valuable property improvements from available grants. These fish passage projects are a huge benefit to all stakeholders involved including; the public agencies with mandates and fish passage funding to restore endangered steelhead populations, private landowners who gain improved road crossings that improve their property value without paying the bill, and the public who will soon be able to welcome the annual return of large, silver steelhead to Carpinteria Creek.

Matt Stoecker is a private consultant working with the Carpinteria Creek Watershed Coalition to identify fish passage improvement projects and coordinate project planning and implementation efforts with local landowners.

| Creek photo [caption](#): Healthy stretches of Carpinteria Creek (shown here) provide important habitat for endangered steelhead trout.

Trout illustration: Steelhead Trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*)