

# KEEP THE SESPE WILD & FREE

The Newsletter of the Keep the Sespe Wild Committee

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## SOUTHERN

## STEELHEAD

The following is an adaptation from the National Marine Fisheries Service's (NMFS) Southern California Steelhead Recovery Plan Summary (2012).

### INTRODUCTION

Steelhead are the anadromous, or ocean-going, form of the species *Oncorhynchus mykiss*. They are one of six Pacific salmon species native to the west coast of North America, and are currently the only species in this group that naturally reproduces in Southern California's coastal watersheds.

Southern California steelhead were listed as a federal endangered species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1997; their listed range was extended south to the Mexican border in 2002. The northern extent of the southern steelhead is the Santa Maria River. In 2006 critical habitat was designated within 32 Southern California watersheds.

NMFS issued a Final Recovery Plan in January 2012. The basic goal of the Steelhead Recovery Plan is to recover anadromous steelhead and to ensure the long-term persistence of self-sustaining wild populations of steelhead across their range.

Ultimately, the goal is the steelhead's removal from the ESA, and also to see the re-establishment of a sustainable steelhead fishery.

### STEELHEAD BIOLOGY & ECOLOGY

Steelhead are the anadromous form of rainbow trout: juveniles are born and reared in freshwater, then undergo physiological changes that allow them to migrate to and mature in saltwater before returning to where freshwater they were born to reproduce.

After two to four years in the ocean, mature adult steelhead can navigate up to hundreds of miles upstream in freshwater, to reach the gravel beds in which they build a nest (called a redd) in which to lay their eggs. Unlike other salmon which die after spawning, some steelhead can return to spawn several times.

The southern steelhead can exhibit three distinct life-history patterns: migration between fresh and saltwater; migration to and from the brackish lagoon at the river's mouth near the ocean; and remaining in the river where they were born for their entire lifecycle; fish that exhibit the third pattern are commonly referred to as rainbow trout.

Steelhead that exhibit any one of these life-history strategies can produce offspring that exhibit one or more of the other strategies. This adaptability is vital to the steelhead's survival in a wide range of natural environmental conditions. Anadromous steelhead attain a larger body size and produce more eggs than do the freshwater forms. They may also return to other streams than where they were born, thus re-colonizing streams where steelhead had previously been extirpated, as a result of either natural causes (such as droughts or wildfires), or through human causes. Protecting this diversity is essential in recovering and ultimately delisting of the endangered southern California steelhead.

### FACTORS LEADING TO THE ESA LISTING

The destruction and modification of habitat is one of the primary causes of the steelhead's decline.

Water withdrawals for municipal, industrial, and agricultural purposes have greatly reduced or degraded historically accessible habitat. Dams and diversions have blocked steelhead access to important spawning and rearing areas in upstream portions of coastal watersheds. Modification of rivers and streams for flood control and the destruction of coastal lagoons has also contributed to the endangerment of southern California steelhead.

Additional factors contributing to the decline of southern steelhead include the introduction of non-native species such as bass, sunfish, bullfrogs and catfish into rivers and streams, and the spread of non-native plants such as the giant reed (*Arundo donax*) and tamarisk.



Fishermen display steelhead from Aqua Blanca Creek, c. 1915

## STEELHEAD RECOVERY GUIDANCE

These objectives address factors limiting the steelhead's ability to thrive in the wild:

- Prevent extinction by protecting existing populations.
- Maintain current distribution and restore steelhead to select areas that they once inhabited.
- Increase abundance of steelhead to viable, long-term population levels.
- Conserve existing genetic diversity and allow for the interchange of genetic stock between populations.
- Maintain and restore suitable habitat conditions, to support all stages of steelhead life-cycles.

The NMFS' viability criteria for steelhead require that several multiple populations be restored in each of the Recovery Plan's five geographic areas.

The geographic area containing Sespe Creek is referred to as the Monte Arido Highlands area, which comprises the watersheds of the Santa Maria, the Santa Ynez, the Ventura and the Santa Clara Rivers. All of these river systems extend far inland and reach relatively high elevations at their headwaters.

Threats to the viability of southern steelhead in the Santa Clara River watershed include the Freeman Diversion Dam on the Santa Clara River (downstream of where the Sespe joins the Santa Clara at Fillmore), groundwater extraction near Fillmore, non-native invasive species (both in the water and in the riparian corridor), in major tributaries such as Sespe Creek, and siltation following wildfires (such as the Day Fire).

Sespe Creek, flowing for all but four of its 55 miles through Los Padres National Forest, is fortunately free from a number of threats that affect other local watersheds, such as agricultural and urban effluents that discharge into creeks, mining operations, and road crossings and culverts that impede migration.

## PRIORITY RECOVERY ACTIONS

- Develop and implement operating criteria to ensure that water released from dams can provide adequate flows at the appropriate times of the year, to allow for successful steelhead migration and habitat.
- Develop and implement plans to physically modify dams to allow effective steelhead passage to upstream spawning habitat, and to assist the downstream migration of young steelhead smolts heading out to the ocean.
- Develop and implement groundwater extraction monitoring, to allow adequate streamflows to remain for steelhead migration and habitat.
- Develop and implement restoration and management plans for estuaries used by steelhead.



*Steelhead spawning habitat on Sespe Creek, 2011.*



*Steelhead caught in Sespe Creek, 1911.*

## BACK IN THE GOOD OLD DAYS

Before the Freeman Diversion Dam on the Santa Clara River, steelhead fishing along Sespe Creek was a thriving affair. Cars would line up from Fillmore up to West Fork (on the road that is all but gone now) for the first day of the season. This photo looks to us like it was taken between West Fork and Tar Creek.



## **CALTROUT and FREEMAN DIVERSION FISHLADDER UPDATE**

Nica Knite has recently left the Southern California staff position for Caltrout. We wish her the very best in her future endeavors. She has done an effective job in recent years, working on behalf of the trout populations in southern California.

Caltrout is expected to be hiring a new Southern California representative in the near future to address the important steelhead recovery issues which have been raised in southern California watersheds. In the Santa Clara River watershed, Caltrout has spearheaded ongoing efforts to secure improved fish passage at the Freeman Diversion Dam near Saticoy. This remains the main obstacle to steelhead attempting to reach their historic spawning grounds in all the upstream tributaries, including Sespe Creek. Currently a panel of fish passage scientists are analyzing the best way to provide effective passage up and over the relatively low diversion structure. This is as a result of a court settlement as a result of 60-day notice to sue by Caltrout.

The present fish ladder at the Freeman Diversion was not designed for the unusual conditions in southern California watersheds; thus it has not been known to allow any steelhead in two decades to find their own way up the ladder – until recently, that is.

In early April video cameras recorded short videos of two adult steelhead over a fish counting device at the top of the fish ladder, a vivid testament to the tenacity of these fish.

Caltrout is also working on dam release flows from the Santa Felicia Dam on Lake Piru, to allow migrating steelhead access up the Santa Clara River channel below the dam, as well as fish passage around the dam to allow fish to access the middle reaches of Piru Creek and its two major tributaries, Agua Blanca Creek and Fish Creek.



*Santa Clara River steelhead caught at Vern Freeman Diversion, 2009.*

## **PLEASE DONATE TO KSWC!**

Donations are our only means of support for KSWC's expenses, largely for the newsletter printing and mailing. They are not, unfortunately, tax-deductible.

## **WILDERNESS LEGISLATION UPDATE**

Congressman Elton Gallegly's legislation to designate more wilderness and wild rivers in Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties has not progressed towards hearings in the House of Representatives. There is a possibility these hearings may still be held later in June or July.

However, as we noted in our last newsletter in March, time is short in an election year for this bill to make it through the legislature in Washington, D.C. It is unlikely that Senators Boxer and Feinstein will be supportive of Rep. Gallegly's bill, with much of its content opposed by local environmental organizations, including the Piru land swap, and the opening of several dirt roads in Los Padres forest to motorized users. This bill will likely disappear with Congressman Gallegly's retirement.

Most of the wilderness and wild rivers in the bill (including most of Ventura County's Los Padres backcountry) will be in Rep. Lois Capps' Congressional District, a competitive race (voter registration being only a few points in favor of Rep. Capps).

We expect Rep. Lois Capps to be interested in the designation of further wilderness and wild rivers in our backcountry, very likely a proposal with more areas protected than in Rep. Gallegly's bill.

The stumbling block will be that the House of Representatives; if still under Republican control in 2013, it will continue to do very little to protect wild areas, particularly for a Democrat representative.

## **WASELL PAINTINGS**

Robert Wassell is a local painter who creates beautiful paintings of our local backcountry, and not just the easy to get to places. His website, where a lot of his artwork may be seen, is: <http://wassellart.com>

His oil paintings capture the colors and textures familiar to those of us that venture off down the trails into Los Padres Forest. You can get on an email list that will show you his new paintings as they are ready.

## **UPPER SESPE CABIN REMOVAL**

Up Hwy. 33 near Chorro Grande are a couple of illegal structures built over the last decade by a homeless individual, close to Sespe Creek and a few hundred feet back from the highway. These structures are now slated for removal by the Ojai Ranger District, who will have to construct 400' of roadway to get equipment in to the one-third acre cabin site. After the structures are removed, the access road will be remediated.

**Keep the Sespe Wild**  
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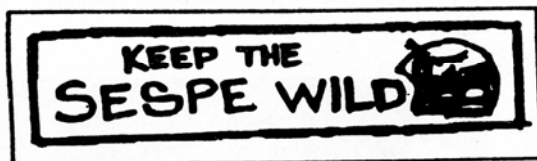
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Stop press! New book, "Hiking & Backpacking Santa Barbara and Ventura" by Venturan Craig Carey. Review next time!



*Fish ladder entrance (far left) on Freeman Diversion following high flows, 2006.*



*Steelhead found in the Freeman Diversion fish ladder in April, 2012. It was held until scale samples could be taken, and then released upstream.*