

Petaluma Nature Almanac: The salmon are spawning

Historic influx of Chinook surprises local conservation group this winter.

Nate Seltenrich

ARGUS-COURIER COLUMNIST







My son and I walked the old bridge at the northern terminus of the Cross Marin Trail and peered down into Lagunitas Creek, swift and clear.

Not a fish to be seen.

We followed the path under redwoods and bay laurels and bigleaf maples for another mile or so, eyes fixed on the water.

Nothing.

Earlier that week, in the days following the big November storm, a friend reported seeing numerous salmon in this very section of the creek. By now they must have moved farther upstream to the Leo T. Cronin Fish Viewing Area.

We could have driven another 10 minutes to see them, but I preferred to leave it at that – a reminder that while acts of nature may be predictable, they are also ephemeral.

Closer to home, Dan Hubacker of the United Anglers of Casa Grande High School was wondering what lesson to learn from an unprecedented influx of spawning Chinook salmon in creeks and tributaries and even drainages and ponds throughout the Petaluma River watershed over the last month, also triggered by the November rain.

“This year, there are numbers of Chinook that we have never seen before,” says Hubacker, who has worked with United Anglers for 27 years, dating to his time as a student at Casa. He’s directed the program since 2011.

“We’re finding them out in the middle of fields, pastures, tubes that run underneath the freeway” – in other words, even in poor habitat that won’t sustain a population. “We’re finding probably four to five times the amount of fish that we have seen in past years.”

I scanned his voice for a hint of jubilation. But Hubacker reported these unparalleled findings with the cool calculation of a scientist. That he certainly is, plus a teacher and an advocate.

As I soon learned, this brief explosion of fall-run Chinook in Petaluma was not necessarily the sign of a revival of the region's endemic population, nor of the success of any specific restoration work in the river or its tributaries, nor the result of the Casa Grande hatchery's own efforts to raise and release fish.

(Those focus on steelhead salmon, another native species that spends part of its life at sea and returns to its natal stream or river to spawn – and one that is increasingly rare in our watershed, with only one adult spawner observed last year. But that's another story for another time.)

Rather, Hubacker suspects that external factors explain this year's Chinook boom, including huge releases of hatchery-raised salmon from the Central Valley into San Pablo Bay by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Since these fish did not originate in local waterways, they had no home stream to revisit when it came time to spawn. They seem to have found their way up the Petaluma River, to wherever the stormwater flowed, purely by chance.

Favorable ocean conditions in recent years and closures of commercial and recreational salmon fisheries in both 2023 and 2024 also likely contributed to the somewhat "unnatural" (my word, not theirs) phenomenon that Hubacker and his team of high school scientists observed.

The fish, for their part, were merely obeying an ancient, inborn drive to follow freshwater pulses and then lay eggs and die. Nothing could be more natural. And to anyone who doesn't know the full backstory, is their arrival anything but wondrous?

Honestly, I'm not sure what to make of it all, either – except to remain in awe of the resourceful, opportunistic, and fleeting nature of life itself.

How about you?

Nate Seldenrich is a freelance science journalist who covers plants and animals, human health, climate change, and more for local and national publications.

“Petaluma Nature Almanac” runs the fourth Friday of every month in the Argus-Courier.