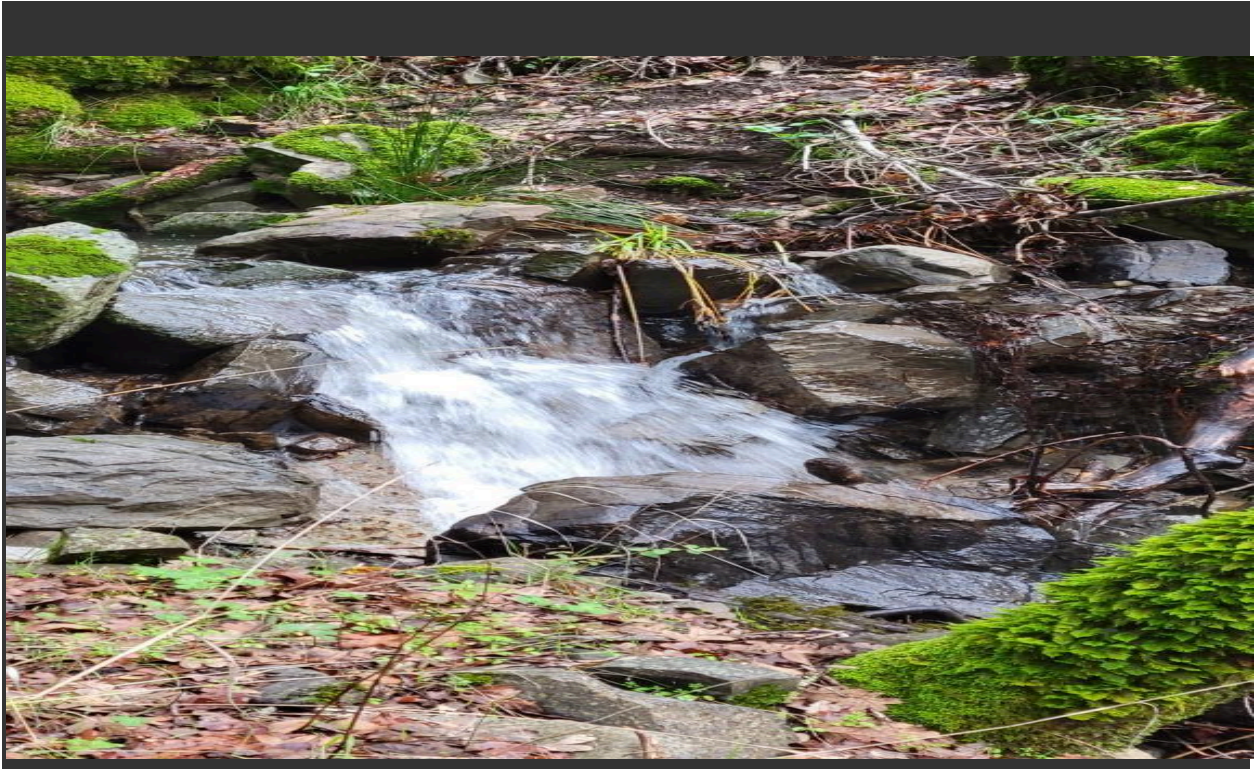


# Adobe Creek's wild origin story

*The uppermost stretch of this vital Petaluma waterway is special for so many reasons.*





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Near the source of Adobe Creek on Sonoma Mountain. (Nate Seltenrich)

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January 21, 2025

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## Seeing and Doing in Nature

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**WHAT TO SEE (AND WHERE):** Adobe Creek's headwaters (Lafferty Ranch; schedule a visit at [LandPaths.org](http://LandPaths.org)) and confluence with the Petaluma River (Shollenberger Park).

**WHAT TO DO:** At Lafferty, marvel at the perennial seeps, springs, and pools. At Shollenberger, consider the varying influence of bay tides and freshwater flows.

This story starts in a natural place – the beginning.

The beginning of Adobe Creek is a wild place way up on Sonoma Mountain, below some rocks at the bottom of a steep slope.

I'm visiting in early January, after a series of storms in November and December lit up the Petaluma River watershed from top to bottom. Yet the line is still clear – just above the seep, the earth is solid and relatively dry. Then, suddenly, clean water flows, trickling through a broad marshy area of rushes and watercress indicating perennial moisture, and then down, down, down the hill toward Petaluma and possibly all the way to its river, seven-and-a-half miles away.

This particular spot is only one beginning – one of a number of springs and seeps in the area that are wet year-round. Drawn by pressure gradients through permeable layers of rock from an underground aquifer, the water never stops coming, even this close to the top.

The spring at my feet is one of the largest and most accessible. It's a big part of what makes this uppermost stretch of Adobe Creek special.

How special? Back in 1959, the city of Petaluma bought the property around it, a 270-acre parcel called Lafferty Ranch, expressly to protect the headwaters of Adobe Creek – and, more to the point, to secure a reliable source of clean drinking water.

Water from Lafferty was stored a little farther down the mountain in Lawler Reservoir.

San Francisco had Hetch Hetchy. We had Lawler-Lafferty.

Lawler Dam was decommissioned in 1992 due to seismic vulnerability, and Petaluma began drawing all its drinking water from the Russian River. But the city never let go of Lafferty, and has been trying for decades to turn it into a public park. For now, the property and its awe-inspiring views are accessible only on tours led by Santa Rosa nonprofit LandPaths.

How else is this upper section of Adobe Creek special? It supports a stable population of steelhead, or perhaps rainbow trout. They're the same species, *Oncorhynchus mykiss*, but called steelhead if they swim to the ocean for part of their life before returning to spawn, or rainbow trout if they never leave home. One species, two lifestyles.

High school students with United Anglers of Casa Grande, who work to restore Adobe Creek's historic steelhead run, surveyed a stretch of the creek within and just below Lafferty last summer. They found *mykiss* in every pool, says director Dan Hubacker – a clear indicator of the upper creek's ecological value.

“It's a unique setting, for sure,” he says. “It's the one saving grace [in Adobe]. Regardless of what we're seeing downstream, with low flows or disconnection, that area stays intact.”

What they don't know is anything about the life history of these fish, given the variety of forms it can take in *Oncorhynchus mykiss* and the creek's mixed conditions.

“Are these fish holding up? Are they migrating out? Are they using this as rearing habitat and holding for years and years?”

To find out, this summer his group will tag fish from the upper creek with tracking chips.

“All of these fish, they carry that gene that allows them to become an anadromous, outgoing fish,” Hubacker says. “So you kind of have to treat them as if they're all steelhead. They have the potential of going out to the ocean.”

There's one more way I know this spot is special. About four months prior to my January visit, I had a chance to see the creek in opposite conditions – late October, when Petaluma is at its most parched.

Although flows were low, Adobe was running through the same pools and riffles and little waterfalls I'd later see in January. Beyond its rocky banks there was still green in the understory, including moisture-loving ferns and horsetails.

If you'd like to see it, too, sign up for a tour on the LandPaths website. And keep your ear out for news about the city's ongoing efforts to open the property more widely.

You can also visit the spot where Adobe Creek greets the Petaluma River at Shollenberger Park, completing its transformation from mountain spring to tidal slough.

And that, for all but the steelhead who may continue on, is where this story ends.

*Nate Seltenrich 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.*