

# Threatened Fish Return To Tryon Creek

By Rob Manning

Portland, OR March 24, 2008 9:24 a.m.

People living near Tryon Creek just west of the Willamette River might not realize they have some new neighbors. Threatened Lower Columbia steelhead and coho salmon are now swimming among neighborhoods and park land in Portland and Lake Oswego. Scientists and advocates are applauding the creek's successful restoration. But as Rob Manning reports, they're also scratching their heads about how exactly the fish got there.

That buzzing you hear is the sound of federally protected fish, like coho salmon and steelhead, returning to Portland's west side.

Justin Cook: "... and that's a definite steelhead, there's no slashes under the jaw like a cutthroat would have. You can see it's very silver and that's another sign of a steelhead. We'll tag him – he's 198 millimeters."

Manning: "Ten inches?"

Justin Cook: "Yup, that's about ten inches."

Justin Cook is a fish biologist with U-S Fish and Wildlife. Over the course of an hour or so, he'll sedate, weigh, measure, and tag, about a dozen trout and salmon. Then, the fish will hang out in the buzzing, bubbling recovery bucket until they're dumped again into their new home, Tryon Creek.

It's the second year in a row that federal scientists have found migrating salmon and trout here. There's only a handful of each species, but the reappearance has advocates calling the area "restored." Dan Rolfe is on the faculty at Lewis and Clark law school, located just above Tryon Creek.

Dan Rolfe: "We can see salmon coming right into our backyards, and what we all need to do, collectively, to try to bring them back and try to restore our watersheds, and I think this can be a great learning opportunity for everybody in the city."

So, how did the fish come back? The federal Endangered Species Act protects the steelhead and coho populations swimming in the Willamette. But law professor, Dan Rolfe, says that the law can really only prevent the fish from declining further.

Dan Rolfe: "For species like Lower Columbia Coho, and Lower Columbia Steelhead, where there's a great deal of non-federal land, and where federal agencies consequently play a much less prominent role in management, efforts by landowners, by state and local governments, are absolutely crucial to recovering the species."

Organizations like the Friends of Tryon Creek and the local Watershed Council recruited hundreds of volunteers to work literally thousands of hours. Their projects focused on removing sediments and barriers that got in the way of a healthy salmon habitat.

The result is a stretch of urban stream that's as good as any in the Northwest for migrating fish. Mike Hudson, is with U-S Fish and Wildlife's native trout program. He says Tryon Creek stands in stark contrast to most urban rivers he sees.

Mike Hudson: "They just get pounded by the impacts from urbanization, and you don't see a lot of fish in them very often. You can see a lot of runoff, sedimentation, it just fills in these habitats that salmonids love and have to have to spawn in. I'm pretty impressed by what I see here."

But while Hudson is convinced that the stream is good for salmon – he's at a bit of loss about how the threatened fish got from the Willamette River to this creek in the west hills.

Hudson: "Right now, there are steelhead in here, there's quite a number of them in here, but it's very possible that it's driven by the resident component of steelhead. I don't know if that's the case at this point in time, but again, we've only been in here a year, looking at these fish."

By "resident component," Hudson means that the juvenile salmon and steelhead aren't migrating away and coming back. It's possible though, that the juveniles' parents spawned around here, just downhill from Westside Portland neighborhoods. Either way, Hudson believes the young steelhead and coho his scientists have found, are becoming residents, of a sort.

Hudson: "When they smolt, likely the size of the fish we're catching, they're going to smolt from this stream, this spring, and imprint on this stream. So if they survive, they'll come back to this stream."

There are some fish already making journeys out of the Willamette up to the restoration area on Tryon Creek – like one hatchery fish that biologists found a few days ago. Scientists say that hatchery fish and perhaps other migrating fish must somehow be getting by a nearly impassable culvert where Tryon Creek meets the Willamette.

In coming years, advocates are hoping to remove the concrete culverts that restrict the natural flow of the creek and make it hard for fish. They say that would turn Tryon Creek into a two-mile corridor that more salmon and steelhead could easily call home.