

# Karen Telleen-Lawton: The Steelhead Are Coming

Efforts are under way to restore Mission Creek habitat and bring back spawning grounds

By [Karen Telleen-Lawton](#), [Noozhawk Columnist](#) | Published on 10.12.2009

They may not be coming by the school-full, but the temerity of our small rainbow trout population combined with the intrepid work of a few visionaries has raised their local run prospects from pipe dream to work in progress. With the cooperation of public and private agencies and homeowners, restoring the health of our creek and ocean habitats is nearly an unstoppable idea.

[Carpinteria Creek](#) may be free of migration impediments from the Pacific Ocean to its headwaters in as little as four to five years. Within a decade, it's possible that [Skofield Park](#) and the [Santa Barbara Botanic Garden](#) could again be spawning grounds for steelhead in Rattlesnake and [Mission](#) creeks.

Rainbow trout begin life as an egg in a gravel redd, typically in the upper reaches of a stream. They incubate for a month, then spend several weeks as alevin, slowly absorbing their yolk sacs as they learn to swim. After another month as fry, swimming an inch above the gravels, they explore the reaches of their pond, catching insects and trying to avoid dogs and introduced green sun fish. They stay one to two years before considering their next venture.



At that point, some rainbows get the notion to check out the ocean. The successful ones travel as far as Japan, gaining 10 to 30 pounds before returning to spawn. Celestial navigation guides them most of the way; their sense of smell aids them in finding their particular natal stream. Now they are steelheads.

As an indicator of watershed health, trout have been sounding the alarm for decades. Since 2000, about a half-dozen steelhead per year have attempted to navigate Mission Creek to spawn. None is believed to have succeeded. The impediments on larger creeks are mainly dams such as [Twitchell](#) and [Bradbury](#), which annihilated the largest steelhead runs south of San

Francisco, estimated at 25,000 annually. On the South Coast, road crossings and creek channelizations halt their migration.

The answer lies in restoring the connection between the ocean and the headwaters by building bridges and naturalizing the creeks. “If you can do that, they come back against all odds,” said Matt Stoecker of [Stoecker Ecological](#).

Stoecker is working with the [city of Santa Barbara](#) and the [Environmental Defense Center](#) to restore 3.86 miles of habitat in lower Mission Creek.

“The first two miles isn’t good habitat,” the EDC’s Brian Troutmein said, “but they have to pass through that to get to upper habitat, which is good.”

The restoration of Mission Creek depends on three criteria: successful fish passage, no increase in sedimentation and no increase in flood elevations. Several test models were built before a workable design emerged.

“Nothing like this has ever been done,” said George Johnson, creeks supervisor for the city. It is being done, though, thanks to a complex arrangement of grants and permissions from the [county Flood Control District](#), the [Department of Fish & Game](#), the [National Marine Fisheries Service](#) and the EDC.

The winning stream reconfiguration design involves cutting periodic deep side pockets into which the fish can swim and rest between charges upstream. Then, in the not-too-distant future, Santa Barbara residents and wildlife will be the beneficiaries of all those deep pockets.

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton’s column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at [www.CanyonVoices.com](http://www.CanyonVoices.com).*