



Park biologists monitor spawning coho in Olema Creek from November through February with the help of volunteers. Michael Reichmuth and Sarah Carlisle counted three salmon, including one dead male (pictured on right), during a survey on Tuesday. Photo by Jacoba Charles.

## Tramping through the creek to count salmon

by Jacoba Charles

The salmon have returned to spawn in the Lagunitas Creek watershed, and a small steadfast group of volunteers is putting on their waders to count fish.

The National Park Service runs a countywide salmon surveying program based at the Point Reyes National Seashore (PRNS), which depends on both employees and volunteers to keep track of the salmon's status.

"I clear out my winter schedule so there's nothing conflicting when I get the call to come count spawners," said Peter Van der Naillen, a retired lawyer who has attended nearly every fish count in the park for the last seven years. "Salmon don't have a calendar. We can't say, 'Gee, I'd rather not go on Wednesday.' If that's the day when conditions are right, that's the day we go out."

Throughout spawning season, park staff and volunteers slip, slide, and sometimes slog through waste-deep water in order to monitor salmon. Many volunteers return year after year, Reichmuth said, including Van der Naillen and 11 year-old NoahLani Litwinsella of Berke-

ley, who has been surveying salmon with his mother Julie since he was six.

The Lagunitas watershed is the southernmost stable population of endangered coho in the state: up to 1,300 of the fish return each year. Of those spawners, between 80 and 180 return to Olema Creek. Steelhead, and occasionally Chinook, also inhabit the watershed.

Last Friday, park volunteers got the first call to duty of the season.

"After receiving over an inch of rain in West Marin, we should now have coho in lower Olema and Pine Gulch Creeks," National Park Service fisheries biologist Michael Reichmuth wrote in an email. He asked people to sign up for surveys on Monday and Tuesday.

On Tuesday morning, five volunteers and four staff members met at the headquarters to survey lower Olema Creek. The group was divided into teams of two or three, given chest waders and measuring rods, and shuttled to four different access points.

I joined Reichmuth and PRNS Association fisheries technician Sarah Carlisle on the team assigned to the lowest "reach," or stretch of the stream.

Tires crunched down the gravel road leading to the Olema Marsh, echoing away into silence. We were alone, and over a mile from the nearest house.

"Once you're in, you're in," Reichmuth said. "You just have to hope someone left a car at the other end, like they were supposed to."

We spent the next three hours making our way up nearly two miles of the channel, beginning a few hundred yards above Olema Creek's confluence with Lagunitas Creek. Alder trunks crisscrossed the stream like low bridges, and debris dams of slippery logs, old fence posts, and leaves lurked invisibly beneath the surface.

Our task was to identify redds, or nest sites built by the females, as well as to spot as many coho as we could find – all while remaining upright.

Redds are hard to spot without experience. The subtle depressions in the gravel are made where the large fish use their tail to flip stones and sand downstream. For me, steep edges running parallel to the bank were the best suggestion of a redd. Sometimes the freshly exposed rocks were paler, and easier to

see.

With their experience, Reichmuth and Carlisle identified redds quickly. "You kind of get your fishy sense," Reichmuth said. "After a while, you figure out where they like to be."

We used our measuring rods to poke among the roots and leaves beneath overhanging banks trying to spook out fish that might be hiding there. The measuring rods were also useful for balance, as chilly water clamped the rubber-lined waders against our legs.

The creek widened as we proceeded upstream, changing from a tangled corridor of narrow alders to older, broader trunks growing like cathedral columns from more gradual banks. Glimpses of oak-studded hillsides and, occasionally, traffic on Highway One were visible beyond the creek corridor. It was a very different view of the world - which is, in part, what attracts volunteers to return time and again.

"It's just a real special place to be," said Van der Naillen.

*If you are interested in volunteering for a salmon survey, email Michael\_Reichmuth@nps.gov.*

