

# Steelhead spawning in Elwha after removal of dam

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**By Lynda V. Mapes, Seattle Times staff reporter**

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John McMillan, fish biologist based in Port Angeles for NOAA's Northwest Fisheries Science Center of Seattle, saw the 35-inch male steelhead in the Little River last month. The fish had no tag and was much bigger than the fish he and colleague Ray Moses of the Lower Elwha Kallam Tribe have been capturing, tagging and relocating to help spark colonization of the river.

This fish found its way back on his own.

"We saw this really large fish; we hadn't tagged anything like it; it was also in better condition than all the other fish," McMillan said. "We could only conclude it had made it up there on its own."

McMillan and Moses have been working all spring capturing wild steelhead congregating in the outflow of the Elwha hatchery, where the water is clear. They capture the fish with a seine, put them in tanks and slow them down a bit with a drug, so they can be handled, then tag them.

Already, wild steelhead are spawning in the Little River, after being relocated there. Some are spawning with each other, and some are spawning with resident rainbow trout. And while the team didn't relocate any fish to Indian Creek, another Elwha tributary, it did see a spawning redd about a mile and a half up the channel. "It was a fish that made it past the dam on its own, and it could be that there are others out there," McMillan said.

Also seen in the river are the juvenile outmigrants from coho relocated above Elwha Dam last winter.

The female steelhead Moses and McMillan tagged have already returned to the sea after spawning — steelhead don't perish after spawning, as salmon do, and they can even return and spawn again. The males, however, have been hanging around in the Little River, hoping to mate with another female.

McMillan said the fish look to be in excellent condition. They're a bit scuffed from hitting a fence at the hatchery — they wanted to keep following the clear water upstream.

In all, McMillan and Moses relocated fish about six times since the wild winter steelhead migration began in late April. It is tapering off now after getting a late start, because of cold weather. They are tracking the fish about three times a week in the Little River. Of the 65 fish they tagged and relocated, about 15 are rainbow trout.

Next, the team will start snorkel surveys in Elwha side channels to look for offspring of coho relocated last winter. In all, they moved about 600 fish, all hatchery coho that had returned to the facility. The team radio tagged about 50 of the coho and relocated them to the main stem of the Elwha, the Little River, and Indian Creek.

Interestingly, some fish cruised back over the lower dam, which was still in the river at that time, and returned again to the hatchery. One fish went back four times. The homing instinct, apparently, can be as strong, or stronger, than the urge to colonize new ground.

Meanwhile, dam removal at Glines Canyon took a dramatic step forward this week as construction crews filled a part of the remaining structure with dynamite and blasted away a big chunk.