

## Salmon take a liking to small Yakima River tributary

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Biologists have found a surprise in Amon Creek, the small stream that runs through south Richland.

The creek is dotted with redds, or gravel beds where salmon have laid their eggs. By mid-to late-winter, hundreds of tiny salmon should start emerging from the rocks.

Paul Hoffarth, a biologist for the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife, recently surveyed the creek, which runs from above the Meadow Springs Golf Course down through the canyon along Leslie Road to the Yakima River.

Salmon have been spotted before in the creek, including at the golf course.

But there's been limited evidence of them spawning in Amon Creek in the past, and the state had not previously tried to document spawning.

"I was expecting to find a handful of adults, a couple of redds," Hoffarth said. "This is phenomenal."

He counted 47 redds in the lower portion of the creek and a couple other that may or may not be viable.

The female salmon uses her tail to dig out a nest 6 to 18 inches deep in the gravel for her eggs. Her work leaves a wide mound of rocks that have been turned over and shine brighter in the water than surrounding rocks.

Areas of Amon Creek as it flows through Leslie Canyon provide perfect sites for redds -- "fast water moving over cobble," said Paul LaRiviere, another state biologist. The habitat is enhanced by the periodic flush of irrigation water that comes down the stream, scouring out gravel and breaking beaver dams to distribute wood and cobble throughout the stream as a natural flood would.

Hoffarth and LaRiviere believe these are coho redds, which can have 3,000 to 4,000 eggs each.

This year, 4,054 coho have been counted passing through the Prosser Dam in the Yakima River. That's up from 2,828 last year and compared with a low of 475 in 2002.

There's no way to know if the redds were created by wild or hatchery salmon. But the increase in coho returning up the Yakima and its tributaries could be the result of both the Yakama Nation's hatchery efforts and a natural cycle, Hoffarth said.

Coho tend to like smaller tributaries. Once hatched, the juveniles spend a year and occasionally two before migrating.

As they grow they may tend to move up the creek to where the water will be cooler this summer. When water gets to 72 or 74 degrees, it can be lethal, Hoffarth said.

In August 2005, he took temperature readings in Amon Creek and found maximum temperatures in the lower creek reaching about 74 degrees. But in the west fork of the creek above the golf course, the maximum readings were a few degrees below 70.

"In all likelihood there's been some limited spawning in Amon before," Hoffarth said.

But its a myth that salmon always return to the same stream to spawn, he said. Because irrigation releases of water from higher up the Yakima River run down Amon Creek, it may smell like home to the salmon, he said.

The high redd count "validates what we have been saying all along -- that Amon Creek is a viable salmon stream," said Scott Woodward of The Tapteal Greenway Association.

The association is raising money and support to save as much of the Amon Creek area from development as possible and turn it into an urban wilderness where people can go to hike and see wildlife and school children can learn about the environment.

Now, parts of the area are too often used for illegal dumping of trash, and three-wheelers create mud bogs in the east fork, sending sediment downstream that salmon don't like.

"This is what we're hoping for -- salmon spawning right here at the culvert," said LaRiviere as he pointed out a redd on the lower end of the creek. "Kids can come and ooh and aah."