Steelhead Beach Regional Park

The Russian River is the 15th most threatened river in North America. With this in mind, Steelhead Beach Regional Park and River Access has been designed to protect both wildlife and plant species within the 26 acres of our park boundaries. This natural stretch of the river is relatively rare because much of the area adjacent to the river has been developed for agricultural uses. In addition, this significant acreage has had little disturbance, except for a gravel mining operation near the entrance to the park many years ago, creating a unique example of an intact ecosystem that has largely disappeared from the middle to lower Russian River. We ask that visitors follow park rules and trail designations out of respect for this rare section of the river and help us protect the environment that supports our endangered coho salmon and threatened steelhead fish population.

NATURAL COMMUNITIES OF STEELHEAD BEACH

Mixed Riparian Forest

The most predominant plant community in the park is populated by tall, dense deciduous forest consisting of a canopy of cottonwoods casting shadows onto the shorter species of California walnut, big-leaf maple, Oregon ash and California bay scattered throughout the forest with various species of willow and box elder in the sub canopy. The shrub strata has saplings of many trees as well as American dogwood, California blackberry and to a lesser extent, Himalayan blackberry. The ground cover is predominantly willow dock with lesser amounts of California fogwort, ivy and English plantain.

North Coast Riparian Scrub

This broad-leaved, winter-deciduous thicket is primarily composed of arroyo willow, red willow and sandbar willow. It exists on gravel bars and on the sandy banks of the river and is subject to flooding which frequently uproots the trees causing the succession cycle to begin again and again. As a result, more permanent woodland cannot survive. The willow species are short (10 - 15 feet) and are often separated by larger stretches of sand or patches of Himalayan blackberry. Infestations of Arundo Donax, a member of the Giant Grass family, have invaded these areas and are in the process of being removed. The sandy soils and steep slopes of this community are at risk of erosion from foot-traffic so we ask that park visitors stay on the trails to protect this delicate environment.

Alluvial Redwood Forest

At Steelhead Beach, this forest exists as a stand of large redwoods between River Road and the riparian forest. It occurs on the bottom land of the river's flood-plain where it is subject to periodic flooding in winter and fog in summer.

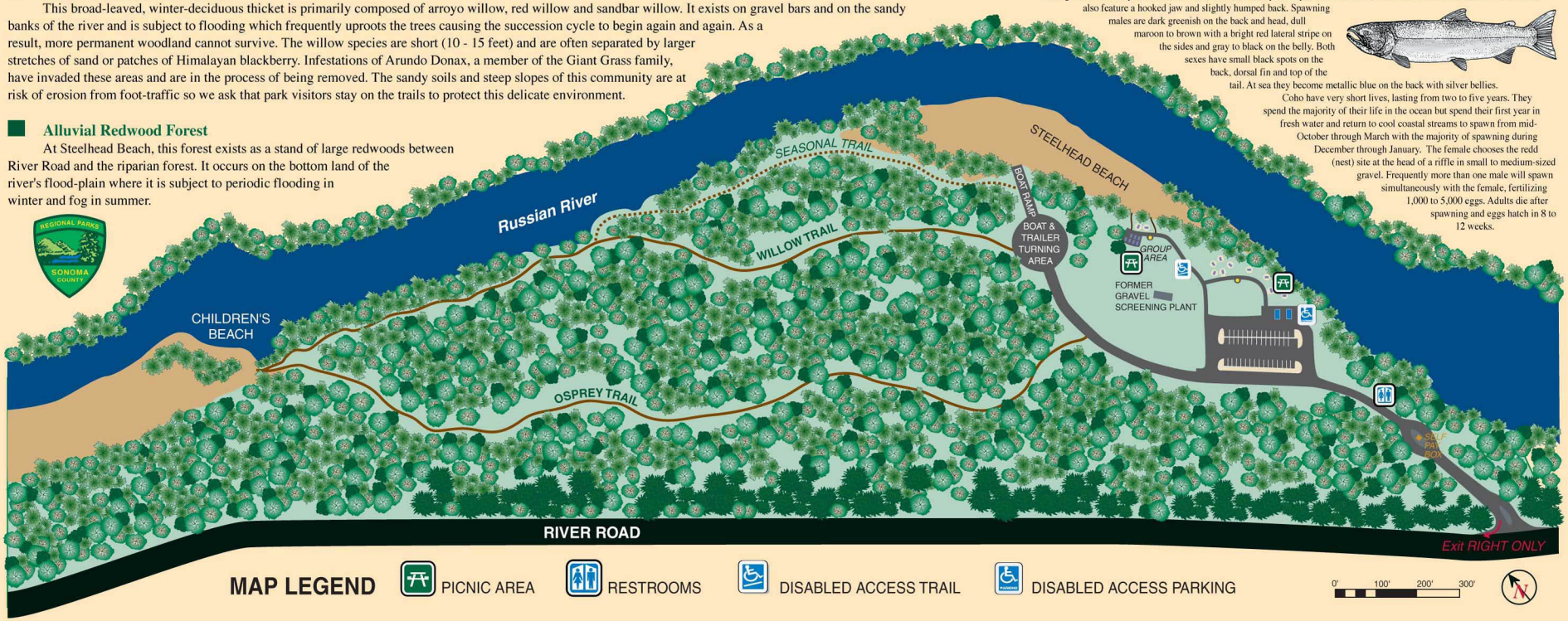
THREATENED & ENDANGERED SPECIES

Coho salmon are on the endangered list and steelhead (rainbow) trout were put on the threatened list of the Endangered Species Act by the National Marines Fisheries Service, thus preservation and restoration of the Russian River are vital to the continued survival of these fish. As part of the Sonoma County Regional Park's development of this site, great care is being taken to restore plant, animal and fish habitats to protect these and all other species of the river community. Fishermen are advised to check with Fish & Game for current limits.

Steelhead

Steelhead live in cool, clear streams and rivers for two to three years until they are old enough to go to sea where they reside until they are ready to return to the rivers to spawn between November and April. Within their lifetime they will spawn two to three times, usually once a year, and can live as long as nine years. The juveniles are very similar in color to the adults who can grow up to 45 inches and weigh as much as 10 pounds. Gravel riffles in rivers are essential to their spawning needs as well as territories where young fish grow protected until they are old enough to go to sea. Steelhead are known to aggressively protect feeding territories and will defend them from other fish, including fellow steelhead. These are very social fish when they are young, then develop clearly defined hierarchies as they mature where large fish dominate over small. In fresh water, Steelhead feed upon terrestrial and aquatic insects as well as amphipods, snails and small fish. At sea they dine on estuarian invertebrates and other fish.

Coho Salmon

Also known as the Silver Salmon, these fish vary widely in appearance. They can grow up to 38 inches and weigh on average from 6 to 12 pounds but have been found as heavy as 22 pounds. Males are darker and richer in color than females and also feature a hooked jaw and slightly humped back. Spawning males are dark greenish on the back and head, dull maroon to brown with a bright red lateral stripe on the sides and gray to black on the belly. Both sexes have small black spots on the back, dorsal fin and top of the tail. At sea they become metallic blue on the back with silver bellies.

Coho have very short lives, lasting from two to five years. They spend the majority of their life in the ocean but spend their first year in fresh water and return to cool coastal streams to spawn from mid-October through March with the majority of spawning during December through January. The female chooses the redd (nest) site at the head of a riffle in small to medium-sized gravel. Frequently more than one male will spawn simultaneously with the female, fertilizing 1,000 to 5,000 eggs. Adults die after spawning and eggs hatch in 8 to 12 weeks.