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Story last updated at 8:14 PM on Wednesday, September 6, 2006

Small streams provide bountiful home for young fish

By Coowe Walker
Kachemak Bay Research Reserve

"There's one ... and there's two more there," exclaimed Megan Murphy, a technician with the Kachemak Bay Research Reserve, as she sent a small net through the water to capture three tiny silver salmon.

Not much larger than a paper clip, these juvenile fish were temporarily immobilized by a weak electric current from a backpack electrofisher worn by Jeff Back, a Baylor University doctoral graduate student. Back and his adviser, Ryan King, worked with the Research Reserve this summer, investigating how small streams at the headwaters of our local watersheds support juvenile salmon. The netted fish were added to a holding bucket with dozens of others; once recovered from their temporary shock, they darted about as a school in the water. After being measured for weight and length, they were returned to the stream. Back also collected aquatic invertebrates to gauge the amount of food available for these young salmon.

Downstream of the sampling, Dennis Whigham, a visiting researcher from the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center, called out measurements to local botanist Conrad Field. Field and Whigham documented the vegetation communities along the stream banks and the physical character of the headwater streams as part of the same fish habitat project. Measuring habitat variables — bank undercuts, stream bed particle sizes and pool depths — they progressed along each section of stream being sampled.

The streams where this research took place are called "first-order" streams because they are the uppermost branches in the watershed system; these are the beginnings of our rivers. Due to their small size, these waterways are beyond the reach of most adult fish and often overlooked as significant fish habitat areas are being identified. Yet, we are learning that many of them support thousands of juvenile fish.

Although development is occurring rapidly throughout the Kenai Peninsula, most of the headwater streams in the Anchor River, Ninilchik River, Stariski Creek and Deep Creek watersheds have not yet been impacted. This presents residents of the lower peninsula with a unique opportunity to avoid mistakes that have plagued watersheds elsewhere.

Throughout June and July, 30 streams were sampled across the upper reaches of the major river networks on the lower peninsula. While the streams are frozen and fish wait out the winter, we'll be busy analyzing the summer's data. Hopefully, what we learn will help people understand the significance of the small streams that feed the rivers we fish in.

If you have questions about Kachemak Bay, contact reserve staff at 235-4799 or visit the Web site at www.kbayrr.org.

Coowe Walker is the watershed specialist for the Kachemak Bay Research Reserve. This project is funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Baylor University and the Smithsonian Center for Environmental Research.

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