

THE L.A. RIVER

THE SECRET LIFE BELOW THE SURFACE By Marshall Bissett

To answer the perennial question “Are there any fish here?”, every fly angler holds a secret urge to stretch a huge net across the river and find out exactly what, if anything, is living below the surface. Last Tuesday fellow Club member Pat Case and myself were given that rare opportunity on a stretch of the LA River between the bridge on Burbank Boulevard and the Sepulveda Dam, not a stone’s throw from our monthly meeting venue.



The recent rains had swept more than normal detritus into the shallow Sepulveda Basin. Undaunted, Rosi explained the drill; two large (30 foot) weighted seine nets are stretched from shore to center river to form a triangle, while a two-person team works a smaller seine net scooping a mixture of sand, gravel and fish into its fine mesh. No fish is too small to be counted by the irrepensible Rosi who carefully separates the fish by size and species into bright orange buckets. Each area is fished to depletion which occurs when three consecutive passes with the net produce a zero count of fish. Temperature and water clarity readings are taken of each section. The process is repeated in five separate areas and the results carefully recorded in a journal. Rosi explains:” We fished these precise



spots exactly one year ago, and now we are able to gather comparative data that helps us to monitor the health of the river.” Of special interest is evidence of the return of any native species like the Chubb. On this day, we caught over

120 fish, mostly tilapia (an omnivore that was planted years ago, to reduce the mosquito population), along with gambusia, red swamp crayfish (very invasive and unwanted) and a South American visitor called Plecostomus which resembles an armored catfish. It is a tribute to the hardiness of these species that they can

survive at all in a muddy hard bottomed trash strewn environment surrounded by predatory birds. While we were netting, two massive bulldozers were systematically stripping great clumps of vegetation and other fish habitat as a reminder that the LA River is first and foremost



a flood channel for the city. As we were wrapping up our gear at the end of the day, Rosi took the time to thank Sierra Pacific Fly Fishers for the \$1000 donation we made to her group last year. I was extremely encouraged to see these funds being put to good use by Rosi and her team.

Three days later, the conditions could not have been more different and I was ready to catch some of the monster carp for which the river is famous. I met Michael Schweit, local guides Chris Leonard and Kesley Gallagher in the Atwater Park area of the river about ten miles downstream at the ridiculous time of 6.30 am. As the sun came up on the gin clear water it was possible to see large singles and schools of (mostly fleeing) large carp. I did manage to



hook up three times finally losing a ten-pound monster at the end of a feisty battle. I will never again test my luck with six-pound test. The moral of this tale is simple; we have a great nearby fishery in the LA River and, if you give your time as a volunteer, you will be rewarded with large fish and large hearts.

