

Salmon trail offers close view of spawning

South Sound's premier trail for watching salmon spawn is about to open to the public. – South Sound's premier trail for watching salmon spawn is about to open to the public.

If you go

The Kennedy Creek Salmon Trail will be open to the public from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays Nov. 1-30, as well as the Friday after Thanksgiving.

Volunteer trail guides will be on hand to answer questions about chum salmon biology and spawning activities at viewing sites along the partly ADA- accessible, half-mile trail.

Weekday tours for organized groups are available by reservation only by contacting Stephanie Bishop at 360-427-9436, ext. 22, or stephanie@masoncd.org.

The trail is on 5 acres of forestland near the Kennedy Creek estuary off of U.S. Highway 101. From Olympia, turn west on Old Olympic Highway between mileposts 358 and 357. From Shelton, turn west on Old Olympic Highway at milepost 356. Go three-quarters of a mile to a gravel road marked Kennedy Creek Salmon Trail, then travel one-half mile to the trailhead parking lot.

The salmon trail is a project of the South Puget Sound Salmon Enhancement Group and Mason Conservation District.

The Kennedy Creek Salmon Trail offers an up-close look at thousands of chum salmon splashing around in an end-of-life mating display, scratching beds in the stream gravel to deposit their eggs, then succumbing to become a source of food for 137 species of fish and wildlife.

The trail, midway between Shelton and Olympia, just above the Kennedy Creek estuary off U.S. Highway 101, is open to the public from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays throughout November.

Now in its ninth year, the half-mile trail meanders through 5 acres of stately second-growth Douglas fir and Western red cedar trees, maple trees still partly cloaked in golden leaves in early November and an understory of ferns, vine maple and snowberry bushes, to name a few of the native plants on display.

But it is the chum salmon, which spawn in masses in the lower reaches of the stream, that are the main attraction.

"It's a great opportunity to view these fish," said Lance Winecka, executive director of the South Puget Sound Salmon Enhancement Group, which, with help from the Mason Conservation District, maintains the trail and 11 learning stations for the public. "They're not spooky, and unlike coho and steelhead, they don't disperse to spawn."

Last week, the fish were just starting to trickle back to the spawning grounds, still waiting for some fall rain storms to elevate flows in the stream. By mid-November, the spawning grounds should be full of an equal amount of live and dead fish, which marks the peak of a spawning season that tails off by mid-December.

The chum fry, or small fish, will emerge from the gravel in March and April, feed and provide food for other fish and birds in the creek estuary in the spring. Then the survivors head to sea.

After three years at sea, about 40,000 adults will return to spawn, although that number can vary depending on stream and ocean conditions.

The spawning scene along the salmon trail, the sounds of splashing fish and the thick smell of rotting fish carcasses once were commonplace in the South Sound streams in the fall, but no longer.

"All these small watersheds in South Sound are very important, very sacred, to the tribe," Squaxin Island tribal member Jim Peters said at a November 2000 ceremony that marked the opening of the trail.

The trail, bridges, interpretive signs, open air teepee-framed kiosk and parking lot were five years and \$250,000 in the making. The project was made possible by a 20-year lease with the Taylor Shellfish family, which homesteaded near the site in 1889.

About 5,000 people a year have visited the trail each ensuing November, nearly half of them schoolchildren who use the trail as an outdoor classroom.

The trail is a great place for children and adults to explore salmon biology in a natural setting, Brian Abbott, one of the original organizers of the trail project, told co-workers at the state Recreation and Conservation Office who visited the trail last week prior to the public opening.

"Typically, you'd have to go to a hatchery to see fish spawn," Abbott said.

Trail visitors this fall will be greeted by some of the 40 or so volunteer docents who are trained in chum salmon biology.

They'll explain that chum salmon are nicknamed dog salmon because of the canine-like teeth they develop at spawning time. They'll teach visitors how to spot the egg nests, or redds, in the gravel and direct them to an underwater camera for a unique view of the action.

"A trip to the Kennedy Creek Salmon Trail is a chance to learn a lot about salmon in very little time," Winecka said.