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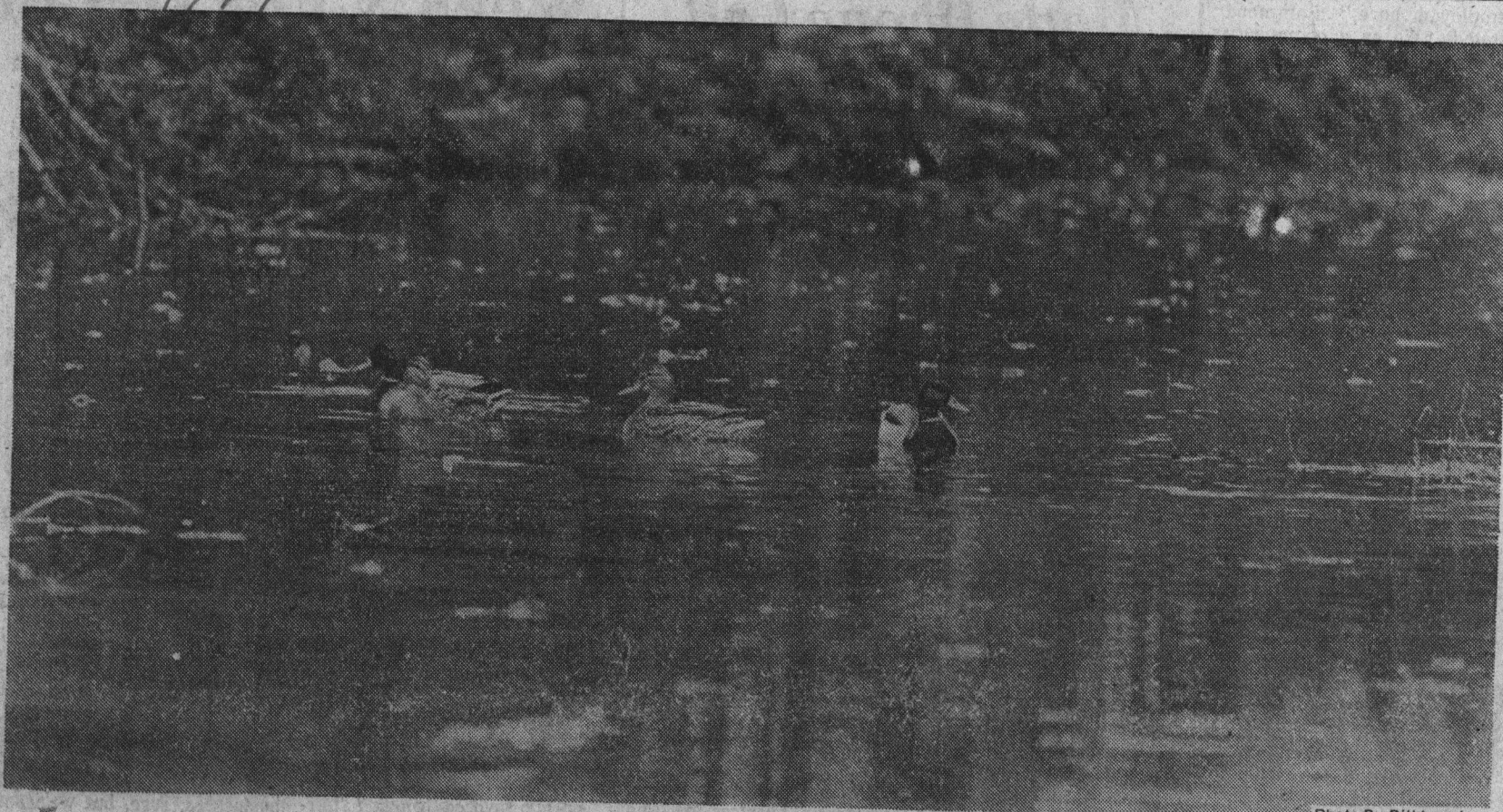


Photo By Bill Lovejoy

Mallards are visible in the lower reaches of Soquel Creek in Capitola.

Soquel Creek: Ordinary And Important

By TOM HONIG

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Soquel Creek is nothing special, as streams go. If it were a day of the week, it would be Wednesday; if it were a baseball player, it would be a utility infielder. It's just a creek, and there are scores of them just like it throughout California.

But in its ordinariness lies its importance. By sitting on its banks and watching leaves, logs, fish or trash drifting by, you are witnessing a model of the California creek, circa 1977. And by using a bit of imagination, you can imagine how things used to be.

"Soquel Creek is in fair shape. There's no real

problem with it, but it's no shining example of the way a creek should be, either." The speaker was Steve Singer of the county watershed management office, which has been studying the stream's general health during the last couple of years.

Like most streams this year and last, Soquel Creek has seen better days. Its flow during the drought of 1976 and 1977 is just a taste of what it once was.

The drought, in fact, has prevented watershed experts from completing their tests on the stream. Depleted of its usual water by the drought, Soquel Creek just isn't itself, and tests would be meaningless.

"As far as we know, the fish population is

good," Singer said. "There are steelhead, sticklehead, and possibly salmon, although there is very little spawning because of the drought." The lack of water may have disrupted one link of the food chain, because the water insect population has dwindled during the last two years, he said.

The headwaters of Soquel Creek rest near the summit of the Santa Cruz Mountains, not far from the imposing Loma Prieta Peak above Aptos. It gathers its water from an intricate network of streams, finally picking up a big flow from Hinckley Creek, which originates in the Forest of Nisene Marks State Park.

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Even in the highest reaches it flows through settled land; the redwoods and Douglas firs provide a woody atmosphere for it to gurgle through; roads, homes, cars, beer cans and sundry other man-made items prevent the word pristine from being attached to its description.

In the lower reaches, Soquel Creek does battle against the pressures of suburban life as it meanders through the bustling town of Soquel. It has a brief respite as it flows through a stand of oaks off Bay Avenue, but soon the flow slackens as it reaches the creekside homes of Capitola. Each summer, the creek is dammed at Capitola's beach, and it becomes a lagoon.

Thanks to technology and the number of bridges that crisscross it, Soquel Creek doesn't pose much of a barrier to modern travelers. Traversing it hasn't always been so easy; the towns of Capitola and Soquel were often split during the winter months by the rain-swollen creek.

Paul Johnstone, an Aptos resident who first came to Capitola in 1899, has recalled the power the creek once wielded. He was interviewed by a member of UCSC's Regional History Project a few years ago, and his copyrighted story lies between the covers of a blue volume in the UCSC library.

In the book, he recalls that the townspeople used to build a summer bridge across Soquel Creek between Capitola and So-

quel each year, but the creek washed out the bridge during the rainy season.

The ravaging water spelled trouble for the Soquel Paper Mill, also known as the South Coast Paper Mill, near what is now Cherryvale Avenue in Soquel. Each winter the mill, which transformed rags and other material into heavy wrapping paper, had to close down because of the flood.

The pulp mill was one of the few industries to inhabit the banks of Soquel Creek. The building was erected in the 1840s, and first served as a flour mill. In 1848, a sawmill was constructed, and the paper mill took it over in 1879. It ran continuously until 1904, and then intermittently until 1934.

The operators of the mill did not use the stream water for power; they got all the power they needed from burning redwood logs. Johnston has explained that the water was used only for washing and cleaning the paper before it left the mill.

Johnston notes in his book that even at the turn of century, the mill wasn't allowed to dump industrial wastes into the stream. Instead, the operators of the pulp mill constructed a flume to get rid of the acid and sewage wastes from the mill. The flume ran along the creek all the way into Capitola, and the residents there decided that using the flume was a good way to get rid of their own sewage. So Capitola's sewage also went into the mill's flume, and all the waste was transported into the ocean.

The character of the creek changed through the years. After the mill closed and permanent bridges across it were built, Soquel Creek's stature lessened a little. Like all streams, it became taxed by those who had built along its shores, and it hasn't been until recently that steps have been taken to establish water rights of those living along the creek.

Singer, the watershed man, explained that in 1971 the City of Capitola requested the state to do a survey along the length of the creek to establish a system of water rights. For the next four years, the state conducted public hearings, made official notifications and studies along the creek, and finally presented a list to property owners along the stream, advising them that there are limits to how much water they can divert from Soquel Creek.

"Such a plan has a beneficial effect on the creek, because you know where the water is going and what the limits are," Singer said. The plan actually has not been implemented, he said, because CHY, a corporation which owns a big plot of land in the mountains near the creek, has appealed the findings of the state to an appellate court in order to obtain what it feels are adequate water rights.

But when the legal battle is finished, Soquel Creek may have its first claim to uniqueness. Not many streams have a formal plan of water rights, Singer said. "Soquel Creek is pretty rare," he opined.