

2025 Elwha River Winter Steelhead Escapement Estimate Based on ARIS Multi-Beam SONAR Data

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Executive Summary

We used an ARIS 1800 multi-beam SONAR unit to monitor winter run steelhead escapement in the Elwha River by estimating daily passage from January 22, 2025 through June 16, 2025. For the third year in a row, only one channel, the Mainstem, was monitored as changes to channel morphology precluded significant flow and therefore likely fish passage up the Hunt Road Channel. We reviewed 20 minutes of each hour of data and then adjusted these raw counts for expansion to full hour, species composition, observer error and data gaps. This process yielded a steelhead escapement estimate above the SONAR site of 1,414 fish, with a coefficient of variation (CV) of 6.1% (95% CI 1,255 – 1,601). This is the lowest escapement of winter steelhead to the Elwha since 2017 and about 150 fish less than the 2014-2025 average of 1,684 winter steelhead. This estimate also includes 120 kelts, or downstream migrating post spawn steelhead.

The Mainstem SONAR was installed on January 22, 2025. Fish were detected migrating past the SONAR site on the first day of operation and one winter steelhead was sampled in the upper river on January 15. Fifty percent of the recorded steelhead passed the SONAR site by April 11, which was one day earlier than the average 50% passage date for 2014-2024. Species composition netting in conjunction with additional upstream tangle net and hook and line sampling indicated that 74% of the total run, or 1,042 fish, were of natural-origin (NOR) with the remaining 372 fish originating from the Lower Elwha Klallam native broodstock hatchery program (HOR). Hatchery and natural origin proportions exhibited significant spatial and temporal distribution differences: 100% (43/43) of the fish captured in the upper and middle river were NOR. In the whole lower river, 52% of fish captured (22/42) were NOR, while 69% (9/13) of the fish captured below the channel split at RKM 1 were NOR. Temporal shifts in NOR:HOR proportions in the lower Elwha ranged from 100% (3/3) natural origin in January and June to 54% natural origin in May (7/13).

Our recommendations for next year are similar to last year and include an additional one: perform net sampling throughout December and January even if the SONAR cannot be installed at that time. Alternative sources of funding are needed, as the National Park Service's ten-year commitment to funding adult enumeration following dam removal expired after the 2022 steelhead season. A final recommendation is to explore the rates of anadromy for bull trout as an increasing population and life history diversity of bull trout will complicate enumerating steelhead.

Introduction

One of the most important pieces of information for salmon fisheries managers is an accurate count of adults returning to spawn in a river system, hereafter referred to as escapement. Multiple methods have been used to estimate escapement of adults, including aerial surveys, counting towers, weirs, redd surveys, mark recapture, and SONAR technology (reviewed by Cousens et al., 1982). Over the years, the technology and techniques involved have remained basically static for most of these methods except SONAR, whose technology and application to escapement estimation has rapidly evolved over the last few decades (Maxwell 2008).

Single beam SONAR systems have been used to enumerate fish migration in rivers since the early 1960's. Similar technology is still being used to measure escapement in numerous commercial fisheries in Alaska (Westerman and Willette 2003; Dunbar and Pfisterer 2004; Dunbar 2001, 2003; McKinley 2002) and Canada (Levy et al. 1991, Cronkite et al. 2006). More recently, SONAR technology has greatly improved counting accuracy by incorporating multiple high frequency beams, producing "movie" quality images while also providing detailed data on several other fish characteristics including direction of travel, range, length, and swimming speed (Belcher et al. 2001, 2002). The main unit in use for fisheries applications today is the **D**ual-frequency **I**Dentification **S**ONar (DIDSON) and its newer version, the **A**ddaptive **R**esolution **I**maging **S**onar (ARIS).

Several studies have compared SONAR counts of adult salmon derived from DIDSON imaging systems to other enumeration methods such as weir passage (Holmes et al. 2006), visual counts (Enzenhofer et al. 1998), and mark-recapture (Cronkite et al. 2006, Holmes et al. 2006). These studies have shown that SONAR counts were more accurate (insignificant error calculations) when compared to more traditional methods. It is important to note; however, that almost all of the fisheries applications of SONAR are focused on large salmon runs that transpire over the course of only a few weeks, which requires large technical staffs and operating budgets (e.g. Lilja et al. 2008, Enzenhofer et al. 2010). In this study, we enumerate a small, protracted run of steelhead using multi-beam imaging SONAR.

SONAR has been used to enumerate winter-timed steelhead (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) since 2013 and summer/fall Chinook salmon (*O. tshawytscha*) since 2008 in the Elwha River from early late January/early February through late September. SONAR has also been used to enumerate coho salmon (*O. kisutch*) since 2019 from early September through late November. This report covers winter timed steelhead enumeration from late January through early June (see Denton et al., 2010-2024 for reports and data on Chinook and coho salmon). It should be noted that historically the Elwha River had different life histories of steelhead that entered the river throughout the year (Personal Communication, Dick Goin, 2014). Following dam construction and subsequent development of hatchery steelhead programs, the diversity of entry timings and life histories of steelhead were simplified over time (Pess et al., 2008). At the time of dam removal, steelhead populations consisted of an early timed non-native hatchery run (Chambers Creek) and a remnant winter population with a later run timing, although the two overlapped from late December through March (Winter, 1989). The Chambers Creek program was terminated (2010) and a native captive broodstock program was

conducted between 2006-2011 with a goal of providing native steelhead to accelerate the recovery of steelhead following dam removal. Since 2011 the LEKT hatchery steelhead program has converted to a supplementation program producing on station smolt releases using a combination of HOR and NOR adults, although very few NOR adults had been incorporated in the program until 2019. The annual release goal of this program has been approximately 175,000 2-year-old smolts. Data collected through this project and the proportion of hatchery fish on the spawning grounds project (Peters et al. 2021-2023) resulted in the decision to reduce the annual release to approximately 40,000 2-year-old smolts. The first year of this reduced release will be 2025 with the first adult returns occurring in 2026 and 2027.

In addition to winter run steelhead populations, monitoring efforts following dam removal, specifically utilizing snorkel surveys, have identified a growing summer steelhead run with adults being identified in the lower, middle and upper river during the summer months (Duda et. al., 2021, Pess et al., 2024). Prior to dam removal, the summer run steelhead population in the Elwha was at a very low abundance. Small (~20,000 fish/year) outplants of Skamania stock summer timed steelhead were made during the last few decades of the 20st century, but they were discontinued in 2005, well before dam removal. Summer steelhead generally migrate through the lower Elwha from June through October, which is mostly outside the operational period covered in this report, although they are discussed in the project's Chinook reports.

The Elwha River, located on the north Olympic Peninsula in Washington State, provides a unique opportunity for fish enumeration using a multi-beam sonar system. Two dams had blocked fish passage to nearly 146 KM of main stem and tributary habitat since 1911, but removal of both dams began in September 2011 (Elwha River Fisheries and Ecosystem Restoration Act, 1992). The lower dam (Elwha) was completely removed by the spring of 2012. Large scale removal operations were completed at the upper dam (Glines) in August of 2014, but a subsequent rockfall in the fall of 2014 impeded passage at that site. Systematic blasting of the in-stream boulders resulting from the rockfall occurred in the summers of 2015 and 2016 and passage conditions appear to be improving, with multiple observations of a variety of fish species, including steelhead, upstream of the former dam site. In the summer of 2022, another rockfall was discovered near the top of Rica Canyon (~RKM 27) that may be a seasonal barrier for some species (Conner, 2022).

Annual adult abundance estimates are critical for evaluating the success and rate of recolonization by anadromous fish during and after dam removal (Peters et al. 2014). While the major goal of the Elwha and Glines dam removals is to eventually increase salmon and steelhead populations, the act of removing the dams released large amounts of trapped sediment. The resultant turbidity severely limited visibility and made the use of traditional enumeration methods (i.e., redd surveys) for specific species and time periods nearly impossible during peak sediment transport (Magirl et al. 2014). In addition, the removal of both dams provided access to approximately 90% of the watershed that was previously inaccessible to anadromous fish (Pess et al. 2008). Much of this area is located in a roadless wilderness area that is difficult to access. Finally, snowmelt during peak spawning periods can preclude the effectiveness of steelhead spawning ground surveys in the main stem Elwha River. Therefore, SONAR is the best technique for producing basin-wide escapement estimates for

anadromous salmon and winter steelhead populations during and after dam removal.

Due to their ESA listing status of “threatened” and chronically low adult abundance prior to and immediately following dam removal, Elwha River steelhead recovery is important to multiple stakeholders including the LEKT and sport fishers and is also a strong indicator of the health of the overall ecosystem (Brenkman et al. 2008). Estimating adult steelhead returns on the Elwha River presents both a unique and common set of challenges. First, and unique to the Elwha River, was maintaining in-stream infrastructure in a constantly shifting environment during dam removal operations. While sediment levels are now back to background levels (Ritchie et al. 2018), maintenance still routinely occurs on the SONAR. Second, due to highly variable streamflows during the steelhead migration, the SONAR sites require constant attention, including removal and re-installation to avoid loss or damage to the equipment. Lastly, like other Puget Sound rivers, the Elwha River mainstem has an anastomosing or forested island morphology resulting in multiple channels for fish to migrate through (Beechie et al. 2006). However, beginning in 2023, due to multiple factors including stream channel changes, only one channel on the east side of the valley was hydrologically active during the steelhead migration season.

The objectives of this study are to: 1) provide an estimate of winter run steelhead escapement to the Elwha River; 2) provide run timing distribution information; 3) incorporate and describe various sources of error in the winter steelhead estimate; 4) determine the proportion of steelhead and other species of salmon in the river during the course of the run; 5) provide an estimate of the proportion of natural to hatchery-origin steelhead in the river; and 6) make recommendations on how to improve the use of SONAR to enumerate adult salmon and steelhead in the Elwha River in the future.

Methods

Data Collection

Continually changing river conditions and two distinct stream channels (migratory pathways), the Hunt Road Channel (HRC) and the Mainstem, in the lower Elwha River have necessitated two separate SONAR installations to accurately detect steelhead passage through 2022 (Fig. 1). However, in 2023, stream channel changes and the effects of numerous ELJ’s consolidated almost all of the flow in the east channel Mainstem. Therefore, SONAR monitoring has only occurred in the Mainstem since 2023 (at the “New OM Site”, Fig. 1). Flow data collected during the 2023 steelhead season between 1,500 cfs and 3,300 cfs, indicated that only ~4% of the total river flow was transported down the HRC. Based on visual assessments, even less flow was transported down the HRC channel in 2025. An ARIS 1800 (Sound Metrics, Bellevue, WA) was used to monitor the OM during this study (1.1/1.8 Mhz, provided by the National Park Service – Olympic National Park). The SONAR was powered by a 24-volt, 200-amp hour battery bank that was continually charged by an array of solar panels.

SONAR site selection was based on four criteria: 1) almost all fish would pass the site; 2) the location was downstream of the majority of steelhead spawning habitat; 3) the river channel was sufficiently narrow to accommodate the effective range of the SONAR; 4) fish movement was primarily

directed upstream with little milling in the location of the SONAR; and 5) site bathymetry would deter fish from migrating within 3 meters of the SONAR head. Depending on stream flow, the OM site was 30-36 meters wide and 2.2 meters deep in the thalweg.

The SONAR was attached to a pole mount (Enzenhofer and Cronkite 2005) that was mounted on a reinforced aluminum step-ladder. The SONAR was positioned just under the water surface with a downward angle of approximately 4-6° (Fig. 2). The goal of this placement was to ensonify the bottom of the river across the entire width of the channel in addition to clearly identifying the far bank (see Enzenhofer et al. 2010 for details on aiming the beam).

In previous years we have utilized a picket weir to move fish far enough in front of the SONAR units to accurately ensonify them. The new Mainstem site has a shallow gravel bar gently sloping across to the thalweg on the far bank, so the picket weir was deemed unnecessary. Data review also revealed no “fish shadows” moving close by the SONAR head indicating that fish were not moving too close to the SONAR to accurately detect.

Winter steelhead passage was recorded from January 22 through June 16, 2025. There were two data gaps totaling 8 days, mostly during the first month of operations due to high flow events (Fig 3).

The SONAR was also in operation after June 16, 2025 to record Chinook and coho salmon passage. Data, analysis and an estimate of Chinook and coho passage for this time period are available in the project’s Chinook and coho reports (Denton et al., in prep). It should be noted that most summer steelhead migrate through the lower Elwha from June through October and this report does not attempt to enumerate that run timing of steelhead. See the projects Chinook report for more details on summer steelhead, whose run timing overlaps with Chinook.

Species Composition

We conducted twenty-one tangle net surveys between January 22 and June 16, 2025, to capture live adult salmonids at seven different sites in the lower five kilometers of the river. We did this to differentiate species of salmonids over the course of the run timing, determine the end of the steelhead run, and to estimate hatchery:natural proportions (or p_{HOS}, the percentage of hatchery origin spawners). Captured fish were measured to fork length and qualitatively categorized as “new” if they appeared to have entered the river within the previous 2 weeks, “holding” if they appeared to have been in the river for more than 2 weeks, or “spawned out” if they appeared to have initiated or completed spawning. The tangle-net snares fish from the jaw and not the gills to reduce negative encounter effects, and to eliminate the size and/or sex bias of captured fish. The net was approximately 18 m long and 3 m deep with loosely hung 10 cm stretch mesh.

We also used the in-stream netting data to determine a minimal threshold for SONAR measured targets to be included in the final escapement estimation by comparing the lengths of steelhead to bull trout, Chinook salmon and SONAR measured fish (Fig 4). Additionally, species composition data was used to determine the sex ratio of steelhead. Fish captured during species composition netting in conjunction with fish captured during additional sampling at supplemental upstream sites were used to

determine hatchery and native origin proportions for the entire run and to describe spatial and temporal variability in pHOS. PHOS has been shown to vary significantly both temporally and spatially, with natural origin fish returning over a longer temporal period and also utilizing a larger portion of the watershed. To combat this, additional sampling has occurred since 2019 to correct for biases introduced in pre-2019 sampling that relied on significant sampling near the LEKT hatchery during the peak of the hatchery return. Additional sampling occurred in both the middle and upper river on 12 different dates using both tangle nets and angling to better characterize variability in pHOS, and to provide a more accurate measure of the percentage of natural origin fish. Not all sites were sampled on all days.

To determine pHOS of the entire run, daily pHOS estimates were constructed using fish captured at both the lower most and presumably least biased sampling site below the channel split and also from all samples in the lower river. These daily pHOS estimates were multiplied by the daily steelhead passage estimates and summed over the entire run to produce a pHOS estimate for the entire steelhead escapement.

Data Analysis

Post Processing

All ARIS data was processed using ARISfish proprietary software (V2.8). There were 24 one-hour long files for each day of operation. The first 20 minutes of each file were reviewed. Raw data was reviewed in a manner that enabled empty periods of time to be efficiently moved through, while still highlighting fish passage events for closer inspection. Files were background subtracted, using the default parameters, to remove rocks and make it easier to discern moving objects, such as migrating fish. Subsequently, each file was transformed into an echogram using the default parameters, with the exception that all 96 beams were included rather than only the center beam. This dramatically increases the probability that any fish entering the ensonified area was detected in the echogram.

An echogram is a graph of the data with distance from the SONAR head on the y-axis and time on the x-axis. If no targets are present, the echogram is blank. If a fish swims through the ensonified area, the echogram has a series of targets connected along the x-axis, whose overall length correlates with the length of time it took the fish to pass through the ensonified area. The string of targets along the x-axis may trend up or down along the y-axis if the fish was swimming diagonally away or towards the SONAR head during its passage. To count fish passage events, target echograms were simultaneously reviewed along with the raw video file. This enabled the reviewer to quickly scan through an echogram until a target pattern that could potentially represent a fish was encountered. The raw video imagery was then reviewed to ensure identified targets were indeed fish.

After determining that a pattern on the echogram was indeed a fish, we noted several variables, including the date, time, direction (upstream or downstream), distance from SONAR head, and length (cm). Length was measured in centimeters using software specific procedures.

Escapement Estimation and Uncertainty Tabulation

Basic fish passage is tabulated by simply subtracting downstream passage events from upstream

passage events (Xie et al. 2005):

$$N = U - D$$

Where N is the net upstream movement of fish for a given time period, U is the sum of upstream fish for that time period and D is the sum of downstream moving fish for that time period. Although see below for discussion about accounting for kelts (post spawn, downstream migrants).

To sum the upstream and downstream passage events for 20 minutes of each hour-long file, we first had to determine which passage events to include in our analysis, namely the minimum length threshold and which observer confidence categories. A length frequency histogram of the 41 steelhead captured from the species composition sites revealed that all steelhead except for one measured between 520 mm and 780 mm (Fig. 4). The one smaller steelhead measured 430 mm. Twenty-eight bull trout were captured at the species composition sampling sites and measured between 230 mm and 620 mm. However, six of the nine bulltrout that measured larger than the second smallest steelhead (520 mm) were caught on a single date (February 19) at the sampling site immediately below the WDFW hatchery outlet and were visibly full of sub-yearling Chinook released from the WDFW hatchery. This site is ~2 KM upstream of the SONAR site and it was assumed that these bulltrout were simply feeding on an artificial food source and never migrated downstream (or came from below) the SONAR site and were therefore not included in the length frequency analysis. Based on this data, only SONAR targets recorded as 500 mm or greater were included in the final escapement analysis. Additionally, one Chinook salmon was sampled at the site near WDFW hatchery on May 7 and subsequently recaptured at the same location on May 14 and May 20. Another Chinook was not captured in the system until June 11 and was quickly followed by several other unique Chinook captures. Therefore, this first Chinook was not included in the species apportionment.

Net sampling in 2025 indicated the presence of spawned out steelhead in the lower river which had the potential to be heading back out to the ocean, in which case they would be known as kelts. In 2024, 30% (11/36, 7 female, 3 male, 1 unknown) of categorized steelhead sampled during the run from the species composition sites were categorized as “spawned”. The first “spawned” fish of both sexes was sampled on April 23. It is important to note that not all steelhead categorized as “spawned” were necessarily kelts, particularly the males, they could simply have been caught near their spawning site in a condition that would not be conducive to a successful migration back to sea. When only considering the lowest sampling location below the river split, 14% (2/14) steelhead were categorized as “spawned”. To account for downstream migrating steelhead that had already spawned we did not subtract downstream moving targets for any 24-hour period after April 23 that had a net total downstream passage. This adjustment strikes a balance between accounting for kelts leaving the system that should not be subtracted from the total escapement estimate versus subtracting downstream passage events that are likely due to milling or spawning behavior in the vicinity of the SONAR site. This adjustment resulted in not subtracting (effectively adding) 120 fish (~8% of the total run size) to the final escapement estimate.

Raw targets meeting the above criteria were then aggregated into six-hour chunks, four per day.

Each six-hour chunk was then put through a four-step adjustment simulation to determine the final escapement estimate. This simulation used collected data to correct raw counts for the four major adjustments that make up the total escapement estimate: 1) expanding the twenty minute counts to reflect passage for a full hour; 2) down weighting the expanded counts to reflect the proportion of SONAR targets that were steelhead; 3) adjusting the expanded steelhead counts to account for observer error; and 4) filling in passage data for gaps in the expanded adjusted steelhead data.

We used a simulation-based approach and replicated this simulation procedure 10,000 times. We initialized the values in each cell (592 rows, representing each of the 6-hour chunks and 10,000 columns, representing the iterations) to the net passage based on the raw counts from the files. During each of the four steps in the adjustment procedure described below, we were able to generate updated estimates of escapement, and at varying temporal scales (6-hour estimates, daily estimates, and annual estimates). Each step of this process was completed and then the data was summed to provide total estimates and a coefficient of variation (CV). To determine the coefficient of variation for the final escapement, the standard deviation of all 10,000 estimates was divided by the mean of all 10,000 estimates. To generate CV estimates for each of the four individual adjustment procedures, we also applied each step of the procedure individually to the raw six-hour chunk counts.

20 Minute Count Expansion

Although counting 20 minutes of each hour is on the upper end of recommended sub-sampling regimes (Lilja et al. 2008), it requires treating two thirds of the total passage data as unknown. In order to expand our 20-minute counts and encompass the uncertainty inherent in the process we counted the full 60 minutes of 67 six-hour chunks (Fig 5). We regressed these 60-minute counts against those predicted from the first 20-minutes of the same six-hour chunks to create a vector of residuals. Each raw 20-minute count was then adjusted by multiplying by 3 and adding a randomly sampled value from the residual vector. The CV for escapement for this step was calculated by summing all 6-hour chunks for each iteration, yielding 10,000 estimates. Then, the standard deviation of all 10,000 estimates was divided by the mean of all 10,000 estimates.

Species Composition

Calculation of the 2025 winter steelhead escapement included SONAR targets recorded through June 16 based on findings of the species composition sampling. The last “new” steelhead was captured on June 16. No additional steelhead were captured at the species composition sites after June 16. One Chinook salmon was sampled on June 11, two were sampled on June 16 and four were sampled on June 25. It was assumed that new entry of steelhead likely ended by June 16. Increasing Chinook catches throughout June indicated that most large-bodied salmonids migrating passed the SONAR sites after June 16 were Chinook salmon.

In-river netting also provided the necessary data to adjust the raw counts to reflect just the number of steelhead moving past the SONAR sites (Table 1). Because of the low numbers of fish caught during some of the sampling events, we summed fish between adjacent events to arrive at daily totals of

“all fish” versus steelhead caught. We simulated the proportion of steelhead for a given iteration and day as:

$$p_{i,j,k} = \text{Binomial}\left(\frac{N_{i,j}^{\text{steelhead}}}{N_{i,j}^{\text{total}}}, N_{i,j}^{\text{total}}\right) / N_{i,j}^{\text{total}}$$

where i represents the iteration (1 – 10,000) and j indexes the 6-hour chunk (1 – 592). The total number of fish, $N_{i,j}^{\text{total}}$, and total number of steelhead, $N_{i,j}^{\text{steelhead}}$, were available on a daily basis, so the four six-hour chunks from each day were assumed to have the same species composition.

We then adjusted each of the raw counts for the proportion that were steelhead as a random draw from a Binomial distribution:

$$X_{i,j}^{\text{steelhead}} \sim \text{Binomial}(p_{i,j}, X_{i,j}^{\text{total}})$$

where X is the number of steelhead and total number of fish for each six-hour chunk.

The CV for escapement for this step was calculated by performing the correction directly on the net passage data. Then the counts of all 6-hour chunks were summed for each iteration, yielding 10,000 estimates. Finally, the standard deviation of all 10,000 estimates was divided by the mean of all 10,000 estimates.

Observer Error

We quantified observation error by comparing counts for 10 six-hour chunks between the primary technician and a more experienced, “expert” counter. Six-hour total passage counts by the expert counter were considered a measure of “actual” passage and were compared to the technicians “predicted” counts (Fig. 6). A trend line was fit to the data with an intercept of 0 and then a vector of observer error residuals was generated. Each cell of the steelhead matrix was then adjusted by multiplying it by the coefficient from the regression trend line and adding a random residual. The CV for escapement for this step was calculated by performing the correction directly on the net passage data as opposed to the species composition adjusted data used by the simulation. Then the counts of each 6-hour chunks were summed for each iteration, yielding 10,000 estimates. Then the standard deviation of all 10,000 estimates was divided by the mean of all 10,000 estimates.

Filling Data Gaps

As stated above, after initial deployment, there were two data gaps totaling 8 days. To fill in these gaps, we used a generalized additive modeling (GAM) approach to fill in missing values, because this approach also allowed us to include uncertainty estimates (gam in the ‘mgcv’ package in R). We fit a spline over time (days), which allowed both a flexible shape of return timing, and uncertainty to increase as the spline moved further away from data. For each iteration of the simulation, we first fit the GAM to fill in the data gaps, then for each day drew a random number from a normal distribution centered on

the fitted value estimated from the GAM, with corresponding standard error. This approach ignores autocorrelation in missing values, but also represents upper bounds of uncertainty estimates.

Results

Between January 22 and June 16, 2025, 3,284 hours (~138 days) were recorded, which represented 95% of the total possible hours in this year's steelhead run. During this time period, one third of the recorded data was reviewed and 979 fish passage events were recorded and analyzed. The best estimate for steelhead passage upstream of the SONAR sites was 1,414 fish with a coefficient of variation (CV) of 6.1% (95% CI 1,255 – 1,601) (Fig. 7, Tables 2 and 3). In order of decreasing variance, the sources of measured error were (1) the 20-minute expansion (5.4%), (2) the observer error correction (5.2%), (3) uncertainty associated with species composition (2.1%), and (4) filling in data for missing time periods (0.8%) (Table 3).

The nature of the SONAR data in combination with in-stream species composition netting provides detailed information on run timing during the period of operation. Fish passage was detected passed the site on the first day of deployment. We initiated species composition sampling on January 22 and captured three steelhead. Weekly species composition sampling through June indicated that winter steelhead ceased migrating past the SONAR sites on about June 16. Twenty-five, 50 and 75% of the run had passed the SONAR sites on March 9, April 11, and May 7, respectively (Figs. 8 and 9).

In general, daily passage seemed to be independent of flow, although the two largest pulses of entry, in mid-March and mid-April, occurred roughly one week after high flow events (Fig. 10). The hydrograph was variable over the course of the study, reaching an instantaneous high of 5,720 cfs on March 27 (~4,810 cfs daily mean) but generally remaining below 2,000 cfs for most of the season including during snowmelt in May and early June.

Sampling at the species composition sites and additional upstream sites captured 98 (6.9% of total run size) unique (non-recaps) winter run steelhead. Twenty-four of these fish were adipose clipped (hatchery origin) while the other 74 were unclipped (natural origin). There were differences in pHOS both spatially and temporally (Table 4a and 4b). Most of the spatial variability in pHOS can be attributed to sampling in the lower river (pHOS 48%, 20/42) compared to sampling the middle and upper river (pHOS 0%, 0/43). There were fewer sites in the lower river in 2025 among which to compare spatially variability in pHOS because of the lack of water and therefore fish in the HRC. Nevertheless, pHOS below the split was lower (31% 4/13) as compared to all the samples in the lower river (48% 20/42). PHOS in the lower river also varied by month with a low of 0% in January and June (0/3) to a high of 46% (6/13) in May. The trend of more NOR fish early in the season with pHOS slowly increasing until May is consistent with previous years although the lack of HOR fish in June is atypical (Table 4b). Using either HOR:NOR proportions through time from just the below the channel split sampling site or the entire lower river to apportion daily steelhead passage into daily HOR and NOR passage and then summing over the entire run yielded similar total run pHOS estimates. Using just the below channel split fish yielded a pHOS estimate 25% (357 HOR fish, 1057 NOR fish). Using all the fish from the lower river

yielded a pHOS estimate of 27% (388 HOR fish, 1,026 NOR fish).

Net sampling from lower river sites indicated a male:female sex ratio of approximately 1:1.4 (16 male, 23 female). The sex ratio of the middle and upper river sites was even 1:1 (20 male, 20 female). Additionally, the sex ratio of NOR fish was skewed towards females at 1:1.4 (25 male, 35 female) while it was skewed towards males for HOR fish (1:0.7; 11 male, 8 female).

Discussion

Our estimate of 1,414 winter steelhead represents a robust measure of steelhead escapement to the Elwha River for several reasons. Most importantly, we collected data over what was likely the majority of the temporal period of the run. Although it is likely some steelhead moved past the SONAR sites before installation on January 22 based on the observance of fish passage on the first day of recording, the capture of three steelhead in tangle net sampling that same day and the capture of one steelhead in the upper river on January 15. However, daily passage at the beginning of the run was relatively small (~5 fish/day) for the first few days after installation. Species composition netting throughout the months of May and June confirmed that we accurately identified the end of the winter steelhead run. We were able to encompass the major sources of uncertainty in our final estimate and thereby provided a robust range of possible escapement totals, giving managers and stakeholders reliable information upon which to base management decisions. This uncertainty comes from four main sources, (1) the 20-minute expansion (5.4%), (2) the observer error correction (5.2%), (3) uncertainty associated with species composition (2.1%), and (4) filling in data for missing time periods (0.8%) (Table 3).

The greatest source of uncertainty was associated with the 20-minute to full hour expansion (5.4%). This was the second year the steelhead project used a subsampling regime for data review, although it has been incorporated in both the Chinook and coho salmon portions of the project since their inception. In 2025, the predicted counts from the 67 six-hour chunks where the whole hour was counted, estimated a count of roughly 18% lower than the actual 60 minute counts. This is evident in Table 2, whereby a strict tripling of the raw passage counts would equal 1,221 fish but the model predicted 1,444 fish after the expansion correction. Because the steelhead project has been counting the complete hour for the last 10 years of the project, we can compare the actual difference between predicted counts (20-minute*3) and actual counts for a very large number of hours. When comparing the predicted (20-minute *3) counts to the actual counts for each year of the project, the percent error ranges from an overestimate of 16.8% to an underestimate of 11.4% with an average percent error of a 3.1% overestimate (Table 6). For unknown reasons, the four greatest percent errors were the first four years of the project. We also plotted each year's predicted versus actual counts and fit a trendline through the data with the intercept fixed to zero (Figure 12). The results of this analysis, as shown by the coefficient of the regression (the predicted counts overestimated the actual counts by 4.1%), were remarkably similar to the average percent error from Table 6 (an overestimate of 3.1%). The counts used for this exercise were raw passage counts that met the year specific length and quality requirements

The second greatest source of uncertainty was the observer error correction (CV 5.2%). The regression coefficient indicated a 0.96:1 relationship between technician and expert counts and the r^2 (0.89) indicated a good fit of the regression. The project has employed the same reviewer for over 10 years, resulting in reliable and accurate data review and consistently low CV's associated with this correction. While it is possible that some portions of the SONAR imagery, at certain flows, allow fish to pass through the site undetected by both observers, the observers agree closely on observable fish passage events. Also, during steelhead season, fish generally pass one at a time with little milling making them relatively easy to count.

The third greatest source of uncertainty was species composition adjustment (CV 2.1%). The low level of uncertainty associated with this source is attributed to the fact that net sampling indicated that almost all fish passing by the SONAR sites during the bulk of fish passage were steelhead. However, as stated in the methods section, six bulltrout that were sampled on a single date at a site ~2 KM upstream of the SONAR site were not included in the species apportionment correction. Additionally, one Chinook salmon that was captured three times in the same location weeks before any other Chinook salmon were sampled was also not used in the species apportionment correction. Including these fish, particularly the bull trout, would have reduced the steelhead estimate and increased the uncertainty associated with apportioning species. Even without those six bull trout, the project sampled more bull trout this year than in any previous year. While there is no bull trout population estimate for the Elwha nor detailed understanding of the rates of anadromy, their population does appear to be increasing with a likely increase in life history diversity (anadromy) which could complicate teasing them out of the steelhead data in future years (Brenkman et al. 2019). Low catch rates of small bull trout in the vicinity of the SONAR in previous years has led to the conclusion that larger bull trout do not inhabit the lower reaches of the river during the steelhead run. This assumption was further supported by the high number of recaps of the few bull trout that were sampled in the lower river. However, in 2025 many more and larger bull trout were captured near the SONAR and ~2 KM upstream of it. If some portion of these fish are anadromous and represent a growing population of large bodied fish (overlapping lengths with steelhead) that are moving both downstream and upstream past the SONAR site, they will need to be accounted for in the species apportionment.

The final and smallest source of uncertainty (CV 0.8%) was associated with filling the data gaps that occurred over the course of the study. Once the SONAR was installed there were only 2 data gaps totaling 8 days. It is important to note that since 2019, fish passage has been detected on the first day of installation, indicating that steelhead almost certainly moved passed the SONAR before installation. The gap filling procedure makes no attempt to account for fish that passed by before SONAR installation. Given that 32 steelhead passed by the SONAR during the first week of operation, three were sampled on the day of install and one was sampled in the upper river a week before SONAR installation, it is plausible that ~100 steelhead passed by before installation that were not part of our 1,414 fish estimate. Historically, winter steelhead entered the Elwha River in significant numbers throughout December and January and then entry slowed down during the month of February until the run built again in March and April (Dick Goin, personal communication, 7/16/05). These observations are further supported by sport catch records from 1961 to 1966 (a period of time prior to any hatchery releases) which indicate

that ~42% of the run had entered the river by the end of January (PNPTC, WDFW, Makah, 1999). While it is unknown if the historical run timing of winter steelhead in the Elwha will recover in the near future, it is worth noting that it is difficult to predict the number of fish entering the Elwha before SONAR installation based solely on passage shortly after installation.

Although there is no other independent estimate of steelhead escapement on the Elwha, our estimate can be put into context with redd surveys conducted in several tributaries and the main stem channel during the 2025 season. 233 redds were observed in the entire basin with 110 recorded in the mainstem and tributaries in Olympic National Park from the park boundary upstream through Geyser Valley (ONP, LEKT unpublished data). This was the second lowest number of redds counted in 7 years of surveys in Olympic National Park (2020:108 redds) and below the average over that time period (150 redds). Using a redd to fish multiplier of 1.8, gives a redd based estimate of 420 fish. The total of 420 fish only amounts to about 30% of the SONAR based escapement. This disagreement is not unexpected for multiple reasons. First, due to visibility issues, limited main stem surveys were conducted in 2025, as in most other years. Secondly, survey effort was opportunistic, not all areas were surveyed and some surveyed areas were not visited consistently, particularly the mainstem. Taken together, there is a high likelihood that numerous redds were uncounted during these surveys. Spawning may also be occurring in areas upstream of Geyser Valley which are seldom surveyed. This large area was surveyed by helicopter once in 2025, with ten redds recorded. However, ground-based surveys in the former Mills reservoir that coincided with the flight recorded twice as many redds as the flight surveys (ONP, unpublished data). So, a low number of observable redds from the helicopter flights should be used with caution. Perhaps the most important consideration when comparing the SONAR counts to the redd surveys is the fact that the redd surveys are essentially only counting natural origin spawning as they occur almost exclusively above the former Elwha Dam site and this area is almost exclusively used by NOR fish. Therefore, it may be more illustrative to compare redds to NOR returns (not total returns) on an annual basis. Regardless, across all years of the SONAR project, redd surveys have never accounted for more than 30% of the SONAR based escapement estimate so any attempt to use redd surveys for escapement estimation should be used with extreme caution.

We also put this year's steelhead escapement estimate in context with the last ten years' SONAR derived estimates (Denton et al. 2013 through 2023) (Fig. 11). In previous years, the escapement estimate has varied from a low of 385 (2013) to a high of 2,519 (2022) while the proportion of natural origin (NOR) fish has ranged from a low of 13% (2015) to a high of 58-91% (2020) although pHOS estimates pre-2019 should be used with caution because the majority of sampled fish were captured within 1KM of the LEKT hatchery facility (Table 5). Our escapement estimate of 1,414 steelhead this year marks the lowest return of steelhead to the Elwha since 2017 and below the 12-year average (excluding 2013) of 1,684. However, the estimate of NOR steelhead in 2025 (1,042) falls in the middle of NOR returns over the last 12 years and is higher than the average of ~900 fish (Table 5).

Similar to 2019 through 2024, extensive effort was made this year to produce an unbiased estimate of the proportion of hatchery fish (pHOS). Since 2019, we have attempted to sample over both a longer spatial distance (mouth of the river to former Lake Mills) and a longer temporal scale (January

through June). In 2024, 98 steelhead were captured ranging from RKM 1 to ~RKM 16. Again, it is important to note that the species composition sampling protocol from before 2019 was not designed to provide an unbiased sample of natural vs. hatchery-origin ratios, so numbers prior to 2019 should be used with caution and comparisons of previous years to 2019-2024 are not advisable. This is particularly true of the 2015 data. In 2015, most of the sampled steelhead were captured within 500 m of the LEKT hatchery and therefore the proportion of natural origin fish is almost certainly biased low. See Peters et al. (2022) for a description of the more nuanced methodology of estimating pHOS.

The increased sampling from 2019-2024 has shown significant variability in the proportion of hatchery fish both temporally and spatially (Table 4a and 4b). As in previous years, HOR:NOR proportions were highest in the lower river (48%) and lowest at sites in the middle and upper river (0%). Temporal variability was also apparent in pHOS, as in all previous years (although less so in 2023). The early part of the run was once again dominated by NOR fish in 2025 and then the proportion was predominately HOR fish by May. Although no HOR fish were sampled in June. In 2025, the month with the highest pHOS was May (46%, 6 of 13) and the lowest were January and June (both 0% and 0/3).

Male to female ratios followed a similar pattern to previous years whereas a higher proportion of the NOR fish (1:1.4) were female as compared to skewed towards males for the HOR fish (1:0.7). 2025 continued the trend of NOR fish showing a male:female ratio similar to 1:1.5. It is possible that some of this trend is driven by the possibility that we are sampling some summer run steelhead, particularly in the upper river. Based on snorkel surveys in the upper river in September, the sex ratio of the summer run steelhead population is heavily skewed towards females.

The date at which 50% of the run had passed the SONAR sites in 2025, April 11, was within one day of the 12 year average for the project (April 12) (Fig. 9). In 2013 very few native broodstock hatchery fish returned which are concentrated in late April and there were still early timed Chamber's creek fish returning to the hatchery. Run timing data in 2025 appears to indicate a trend in run timing becoming slowly earlier for steelhead in the Elwha River. Previous to 2024, the run timing of Elwha steelhead appeared to be slowly shifting earlier but it was two weeks later in 2024. Besides 2024, the two latest 50% entry years from this trend, 2018 and 2020 had later SONAR install dates than all other years. If the SONAR had been installed a few weeks earlier on these years it is likely they would have recorded dozens if not a hundred fish moving past in January which would have shifted the run timing earlier. Additionally, from 2014-2018 we did not detect the first fish moving passed the SONARs until a few days after installation. In every year since then we have detected multiple fish migrating immediately after install. The 50% entry data in 2025, April 11, appears to continue a slow shift towards earlier entry timing for steelhead in the Elwha River. It is important to note that the overall run timing of a specific year will be highly dependent on the proportion of hatchery fish in the run that year as hatchery fish return timing is generally concentrated later than NOR fish (Table 4b). Therefore, any attempt to track steelhead run timing through time needs to take annual variations in pHOS into account. It is interesting to note the approximate 50% entry date from the 1961-1964 catch record data was early February, two full months earlier than the current run timing (PNPTC, WDFW, Makah, 1999). Species composition netting indicated an end of the winter steelhead run (June 16) a week later than

the 2014-2024 average of June 10. Net sampling occurred throughout June in conjunction with the Chinook project and no additional winter steelhead were captured after June 16.

The increased life history diversity of steelhead as evidenced by protracting run timing, resurgence of summer steelhead, and the increasing number of kelts bodes well for recovery in the Elwha but does provide challenges to monitoring activities (Peters et al, in prep. While we miss some portion of the total run by installing the SONAR in late January (or even early February, as happened in 2020), low passage in the days immediately after installation for year's 2014-2018 gave us confidence that we were not missing many early fish. This year was similar to 2019 through 2024 with passage evident soon after installation (Fig 8). If this trend continues, we may want to consider installing the SONAR earlier in January or even December, although high flows during that time of year would make it difficult and inconsistent on a year-to-year basis. Historically the most abundant portion of the run was thought to enter the river in December and January (Dick Goin, pers. comm. 7/16/05). Finally, net sampling again showed the presence of outmigrating kelts across several months of the steelhead season. The current method of estimating kelts, removing all downstream migrants from any day with net negative passage, accounted for a total of 120 kelts this year or 8.4% of the run. However, in 2024, this method only estimated 12 kelts, so it is not always a reliable estimator. To further complicate matters, some of the kelts could be summer run fish which migrated upstream the previous summer and fall (before steelhead SONAR operations) and then spawned and were returning out to sea during SONAR operations. The project recently gained access to scale data that provides the number and proportion of repeat spawners which could be a better proxy for kelt estimation than raw SONAR data. This data indicates that, post dam removal, HOR fish had a repeat spawning rate of 3.8% while NOR fish had a repeat spawning rate of 10.7% (peters et al., in prep). These rates would be the lowest possible estimate of kelt percentages since kelts would need to survive at least one year at sea before they could repeat spawn. Therefore, our estimate of 120 kelts, or 8% of the escapement estimate, is reasonable but perhaps a bit low, based on average repeat spawner rates from scale data. In conclusion, it is important for managers to note that while our current escapement estimation techniques and official number are based on the best available data, there are compelling reasons to consider this estimate to be conservatively low based on the high probability that fish are migrating passed the SONARs before installation and our kelt estimate is likely underestimating these downstream migrants.

Recommendations

We are pleased to report that last year's recommendation of including scale data to estimate kelts was incorporated in this year's report.

This year's major recommendation is to consult with USFWS concerning the impact that an increasing bull trout population in the Elwha River could have on enumerating steelhead, namely rates of anadromy.

The year 2025 marked the third year of operations after long term funding from the Park Service expired. While the Lower Elwha tribe had been able to fund the project with relatively small grants in a stop gap manner, a long-term funding need remains. It seems unlikely that redd surveys can serve as a viable proxy for run size and that existing redd surveys mostly occur only in the portion of the watershed occupied by NOR fish so would yield almost no information on the HOR run size. Any attempt to manage future harvest of steelhead on the Elwha River will require basic information on run size and HOR:NOR proportions.

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Table 1. Total number of “new” and “holding” steelhead, Chinook and bull trout measuring greater than the steelhead length cut off of 500 mm captured by date at ten species composition sites during in-river netting and angling sampling.

Date	Steelhead	Chinook	Bulltrout	% Steelhead
1/22/2025	3	0	0	100%
2/12/2025	0	0	0	NA
2/19/2025	1	0	0	100%
2/19/2025	0	0	0	NA
3/5/2025	0	0	0	NA
3/12/2025	2	0	0	100%
3/19/2025	3	0	0	100%
4/10/2025	1	0	0	100%
4/14/2025	1	0	0	100%
4/16/2025	2	0	0	100%
4/23/2025	0	0	0	NA
4/28/2025	4	0	1	80%
4/30/2025	1	0	0	100%
5/7/2025	2	0	0	100%
5/14/2025	1	0	1	50%
5/20/2025	1	0	0	100%
5/21/2025	0	0	0	NA
5/28/2025	1	0	1	50%
6/2/2025	0	0	0	NA
6/11/2025	0	1	0	0%
6/16/2025	1	2	0	33%

Table 2. Total estimates of steelhead passage on the Elwha River in 2025. Each step is an adjustment of the previous step, they are not stand-alone estimates other than the final step, gap filling, which represents the final steelhead escapement estimate.

Type of Count (Adjustment)	Estimate
Raw Passage	407
Expansion	1,444
Species Composition	1,260
Observer Error	1,314
Gap Fill (Final)	1,414

Table 3. Source specific coefficients of variation (CV) for the four sources of uncertainty individually and for all of them combined. The individual source CV's are the result of applying each correction to the raw data while the total CV reflects the total CV from all sources.

Source	CV
Expansion	5.4%
Species Comp	2.1%
Observer Error	5.2%
Gap Fill	0.8%
Total	6.1%

Table 4a. Number and proportion of natural and hatchery origin steelhead in different sampling areas of the Elwha River in 2025. “Below split” is the lowest section of the lower river and presumably has the least influence from the LEKT hatchery which is located at RKM 2.5

Sites	Natural	Hatchery	% Hatchery
All	74	24	24%
Below Split	9	4	31%
Lower River	22	20	48%
Middle River	29	0	0%
Upper River	14	0	0%

Table 4b. Number and proportion of natural and hatchery origin winter run steelhead caught by month in the lower Elwha River in 2025. This table includes all fish from table 4a except for the 43 fish captured in the middle river sites.

Month	Natural	Hatchery	% Hatchery
January	3	0	0%
February	0	0	NA
March	4	3	43%
April	11	5	31%
May	7	6	46%
June	3	0	0%

Table 5. Yearly escapement estimates for Elwha River steelhead with 95% confidence intervals and number of natural-origin recruits (NOR) and hatchery-origin recruits (HOR) based on species composition sampling, except for 2019 through 2025 which was based on a more robust sampling protocol intended to estimate %NOR fish. %NOR estimates prior to 2019 should be used with caution and likely do not accurately represent true NOR:HOR proportions.

Year	Estimate	95% CI	NOR	HOR	% NOR
2013	385	NA	NA	NA	NA
2014	1,200	1,140 - 1,250	400	800	33%
2015	1,450	1,220 - 1,675	190	1,260	13%
2016	890	810 - 976	320	570	36%
2017	1,130	1,060 - 1,226	375	755	33%
2018	1,625	1,489 - 1,768	731	894	45%
2019	1,458	1,260 - 1,666	875 - 1,020	437 - 583	60 - 70%
2020	1,985	1,765 - 2,231	1,151 - 1,806	175 - 834	58 - 91%
2021	2,293	2,074 - 2,523	803 - 1,560	733 - 1,490	35 - 68%
2022	2,519	2,409 - 2,639	1,500 - 2,230	199 - 1,029	59 - 93%
2023	1,948	1,905 - 1,991	682 - 1,597	350 - 1,266	35 - 82%
2024	2,300	1,941 - 2,630	690 - 1,840	460 - 1,610	30 - 80%
2025	1,414	1,255 - 1,601	1,042	372	74%

Table 6. Predicted total counts (20 minute counts * 3) versus actual total counts for each year of the steelhead project including percent error between the two methods. A negative percent error value indicates that the predicted counts were higher than the actual counts. This exercise only used net passage of raw SONAR targets for each year, not the corrected expanded steelhead counts.

Year	Predicted Total Count	Actual Total Count	% Error
2023	1,842	1,848	0.3%
2022	2,805	2,578	-8.8%
2021	2,190	2,072	-5.7%
2020	1,917	1,782	-7.6%
2019	1,164	1,123	-3.7%
2018	1,386	1,428	2.9%
2017	867	970	10.6%
2016	966	827	-16.8%
2015	1,218	1,066	-14.3%
2014	1,131	1,277	11.4%
Average			-3.1%

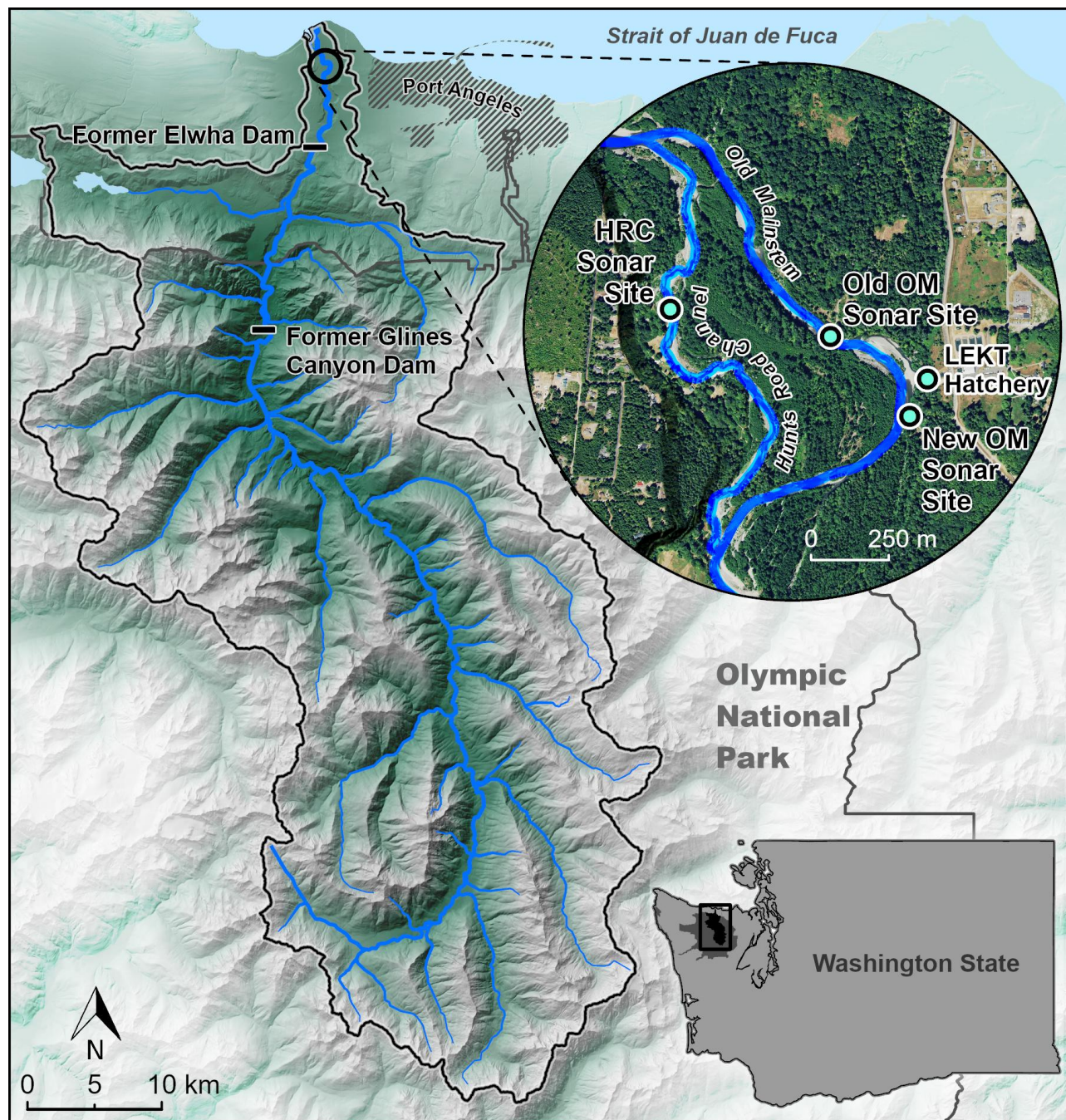


Figure 1. Map of the Elwha River, depicting the former dam sites, SONAR sites, Elwha Tribal Hatchery, and the two distinct migratory pathways that existed prior to 2022. Only the New OM SONAR, also known as the Mainstem site was operated in 2025.



Figure 2. New Old Mainstem SONAR site looking upstream. The SONAR itself is attached to the pole mount which is in turn attached to the ladder. The solar panels and top side box are just out of sight on the logjam in the upper left-hand corner of the picture.

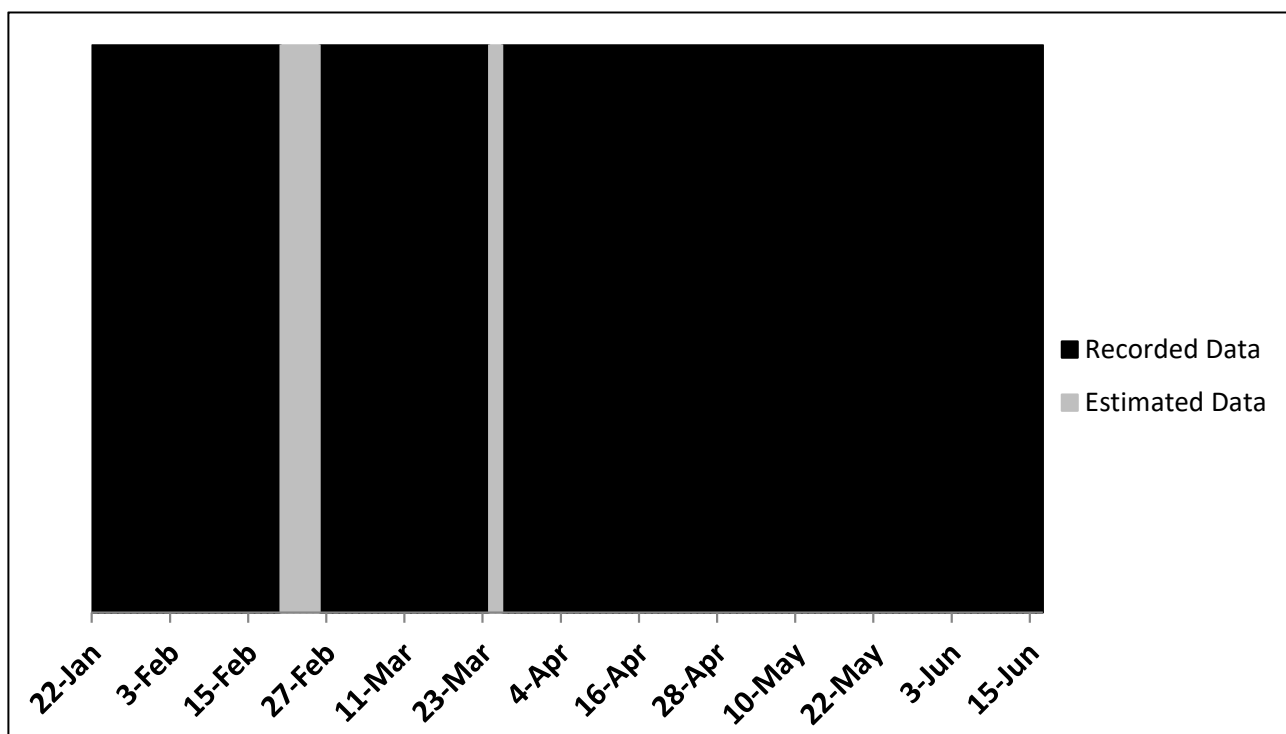


Figure 3. Dates which had data recorded, black bars, or estimated, grey bars, for the Old Mainstem of the Elwha River in 2025.

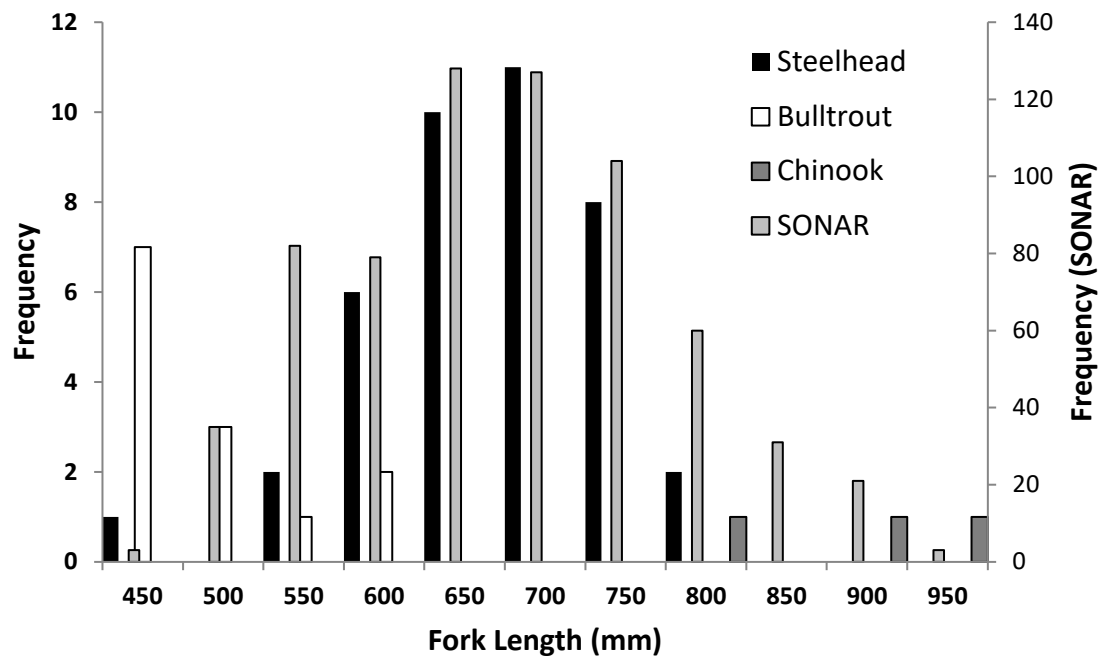


Figure 4. Length frequency histogram of all fish captured during netting operations at 10 locations in the Elwha River between January 22 and June 16, 2025 (left hand y-axis). Length frequency histogram of all upstream SONAR measured targets counted during the same time span (right hand y-axis).

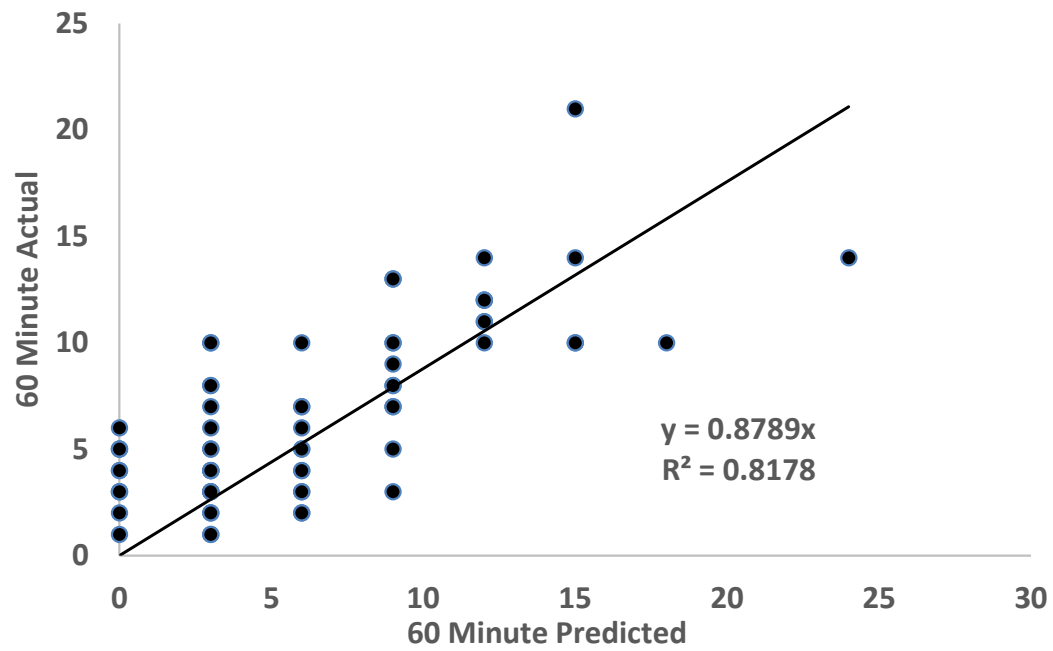


Figure 5. Predicted (20 minutes * 3) vs. observed (actual 60-minute counts) for 67 six-hour chunks of full hour counts for the Mainstem.

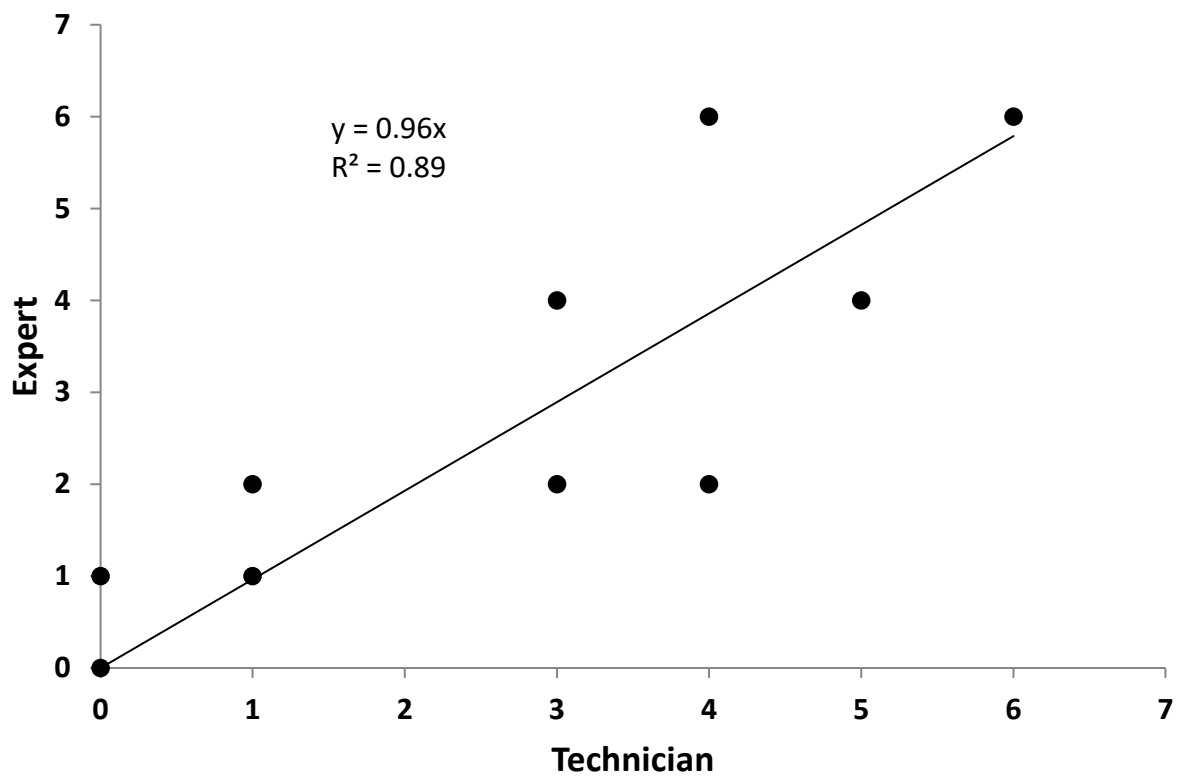


Figure 6. Total upstream passage counted by a technician and an expert for 10 six-hour chunks.

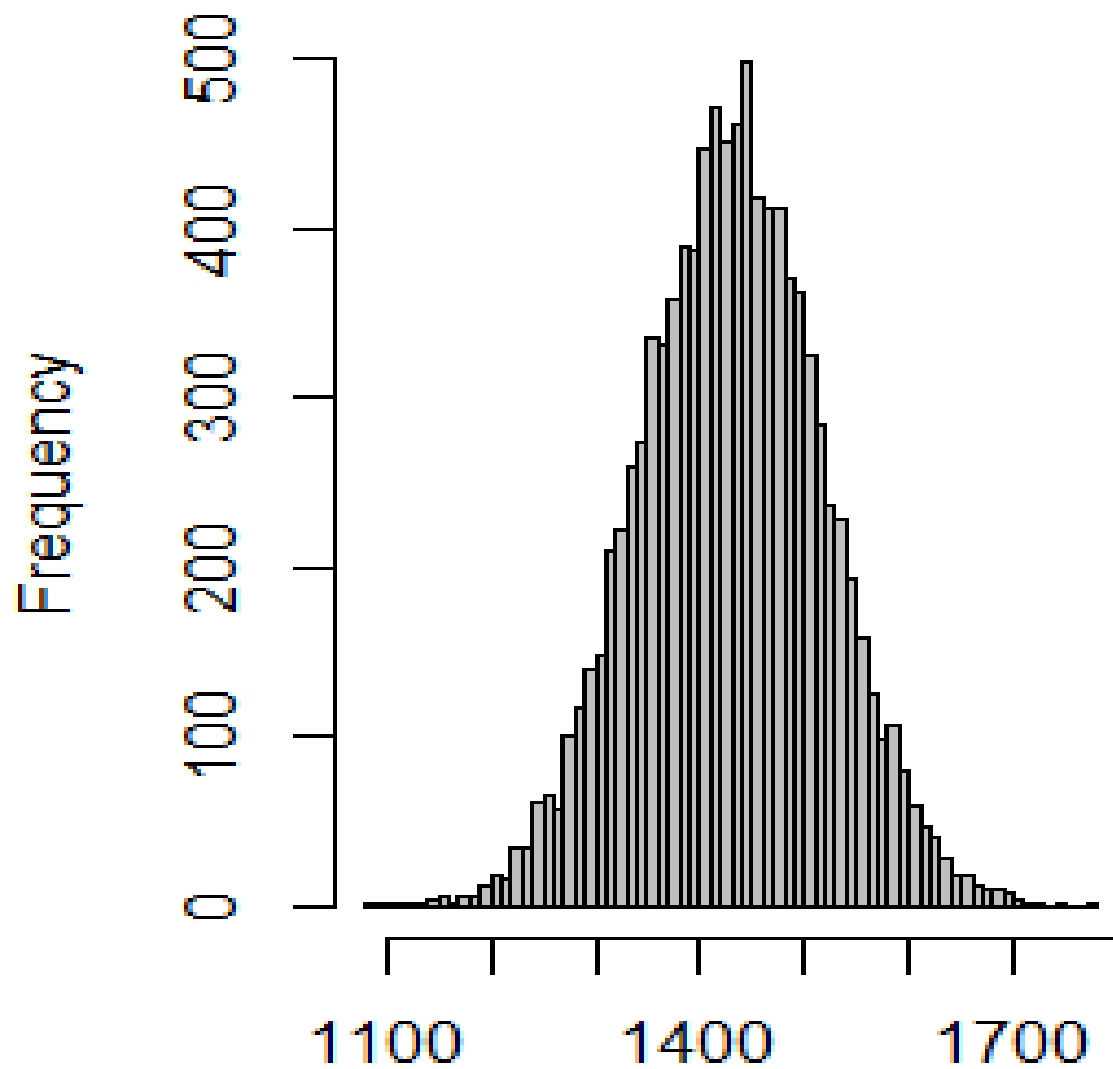


Figure 7. Run size frequency histogram for steelhead escapement to the Elwha River in 2025 based on 10,000 model runs.

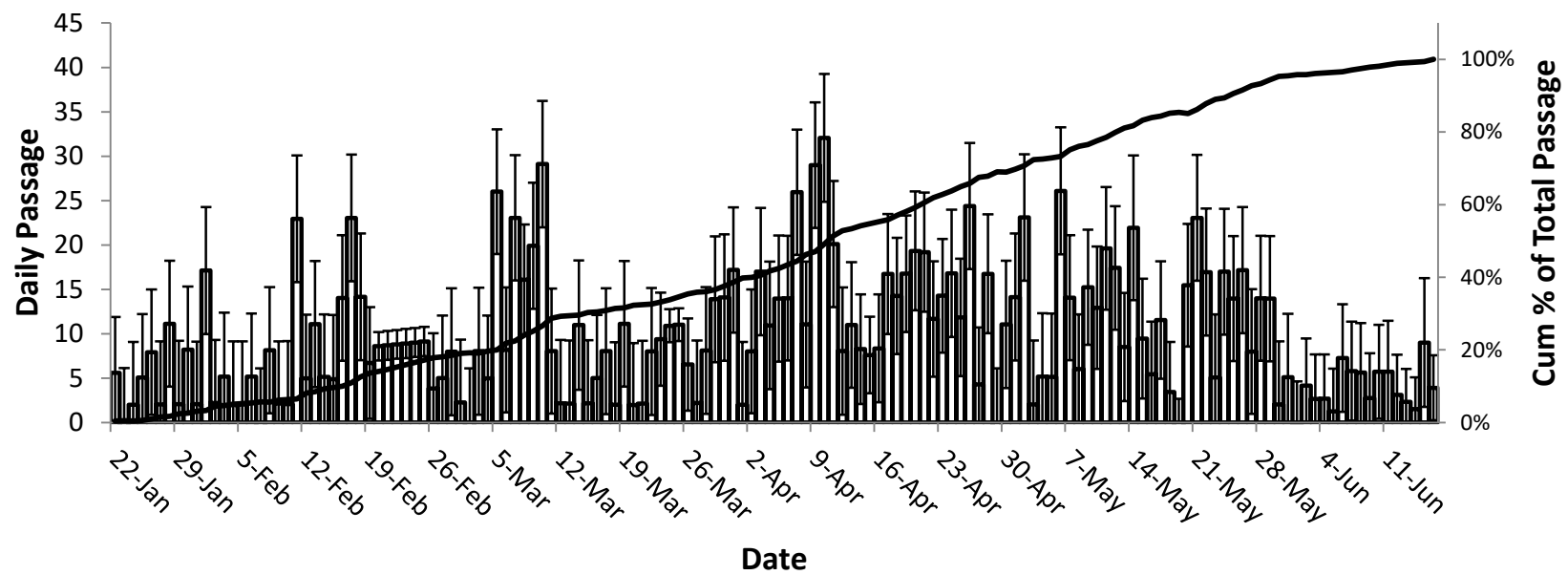


Figure 8. Daily passage estimates for steelhead, with standard deviations, and cumulative percent of run for the Elwha River in 2025. The total escapement estimate was 1,414 steelhead.

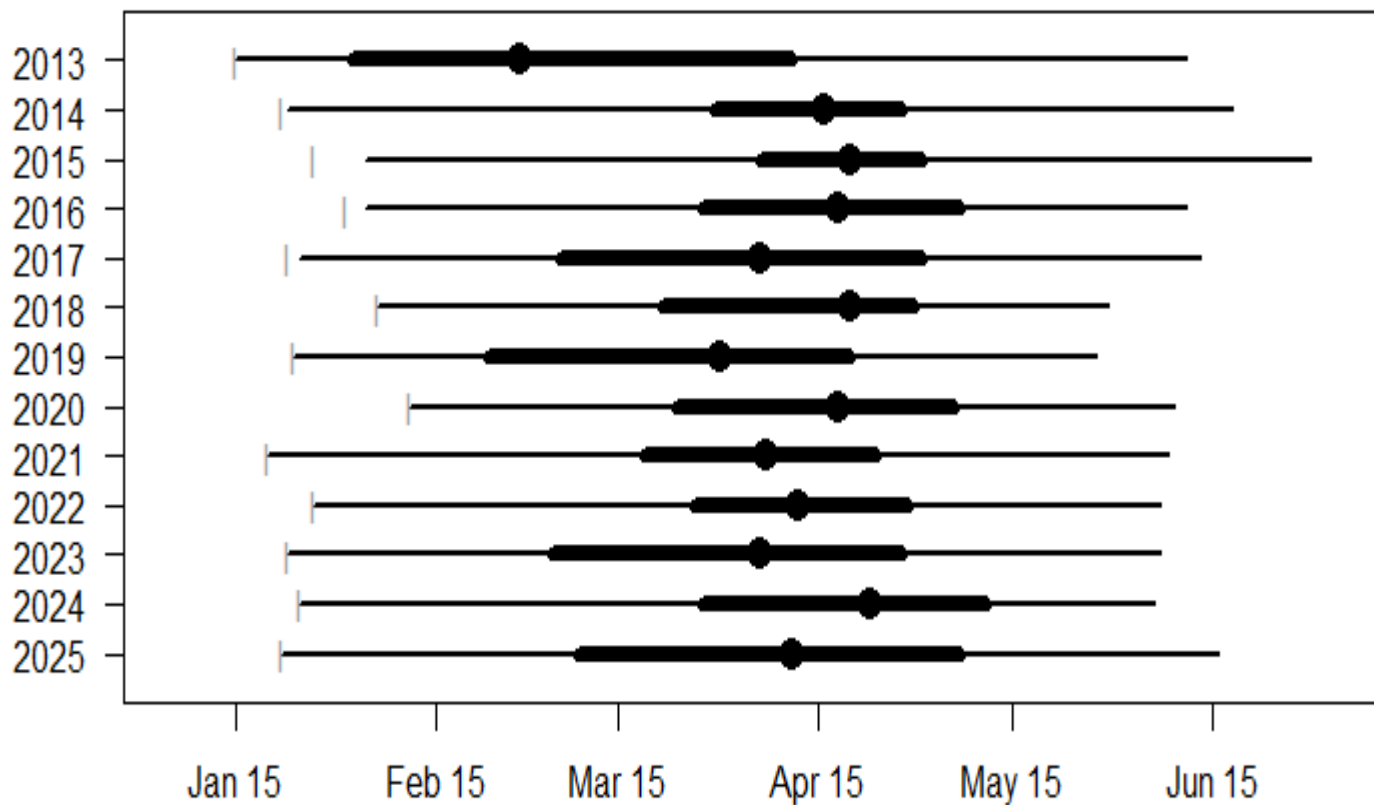


Figure 9. Run timing of steelhead in the Elwha River from 2013 to 2025. For each year the small vertical gray line shows the install date, the long thin black line encompasses the first fish detection until the end of the run. The thick black line shows the time period during which 25% to 75% of the run passed the SONAR sites. The black dot shows when 50% of the run had passed.

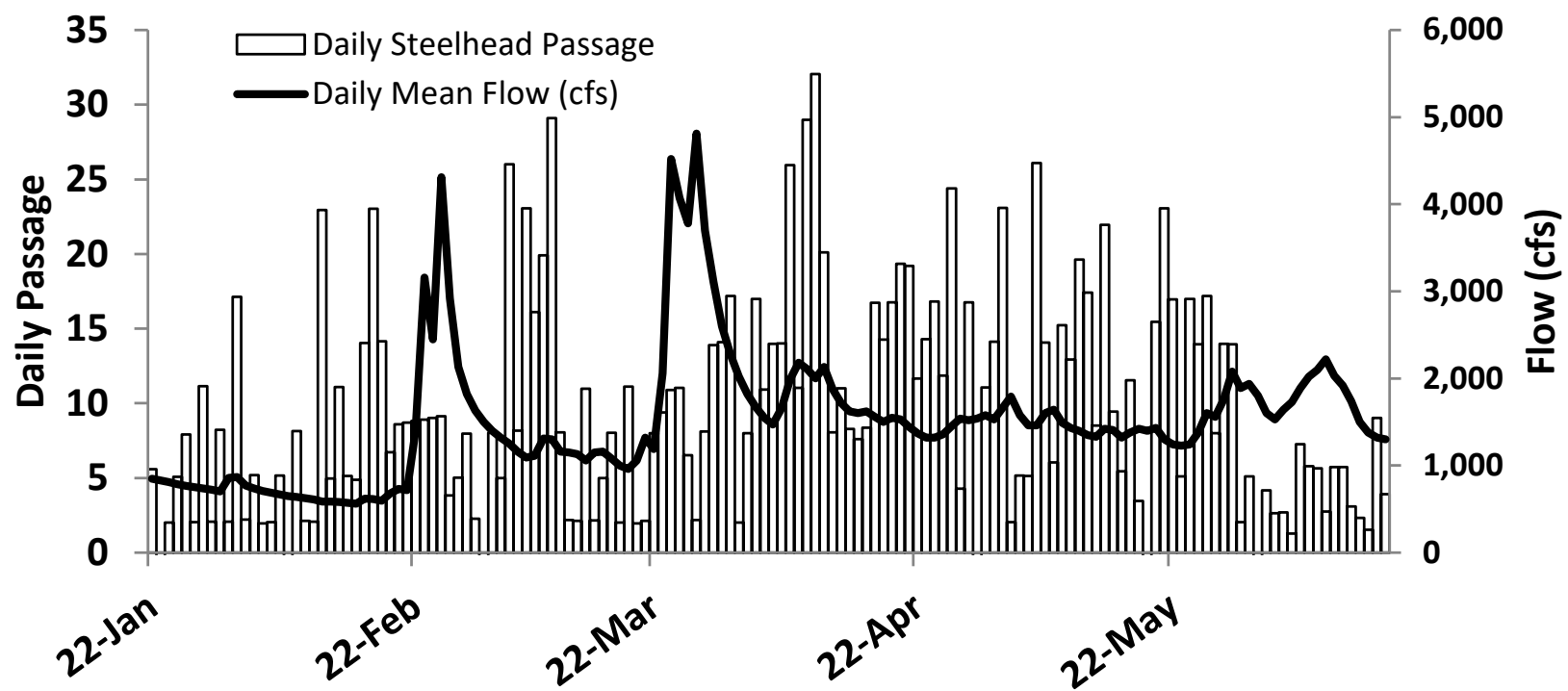


Figure 10. Daily passage of steelhead and mean daily flow (cfs) in the Elwha River in 2025.

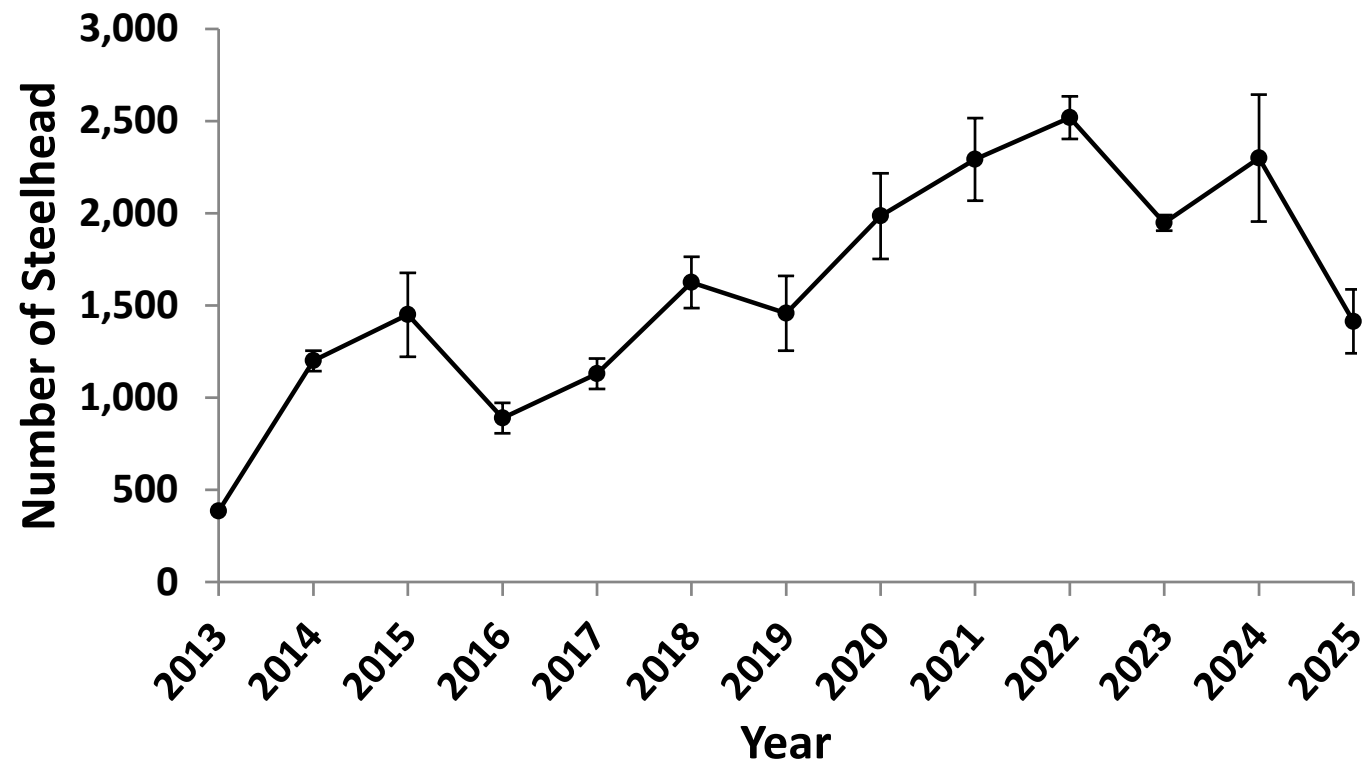


Figure 11. Yearly escapement estimates and 95% confidence intervals for steelhead in the Elwha River from 2013 through 2025. No confidence interval was calculated for 2013.

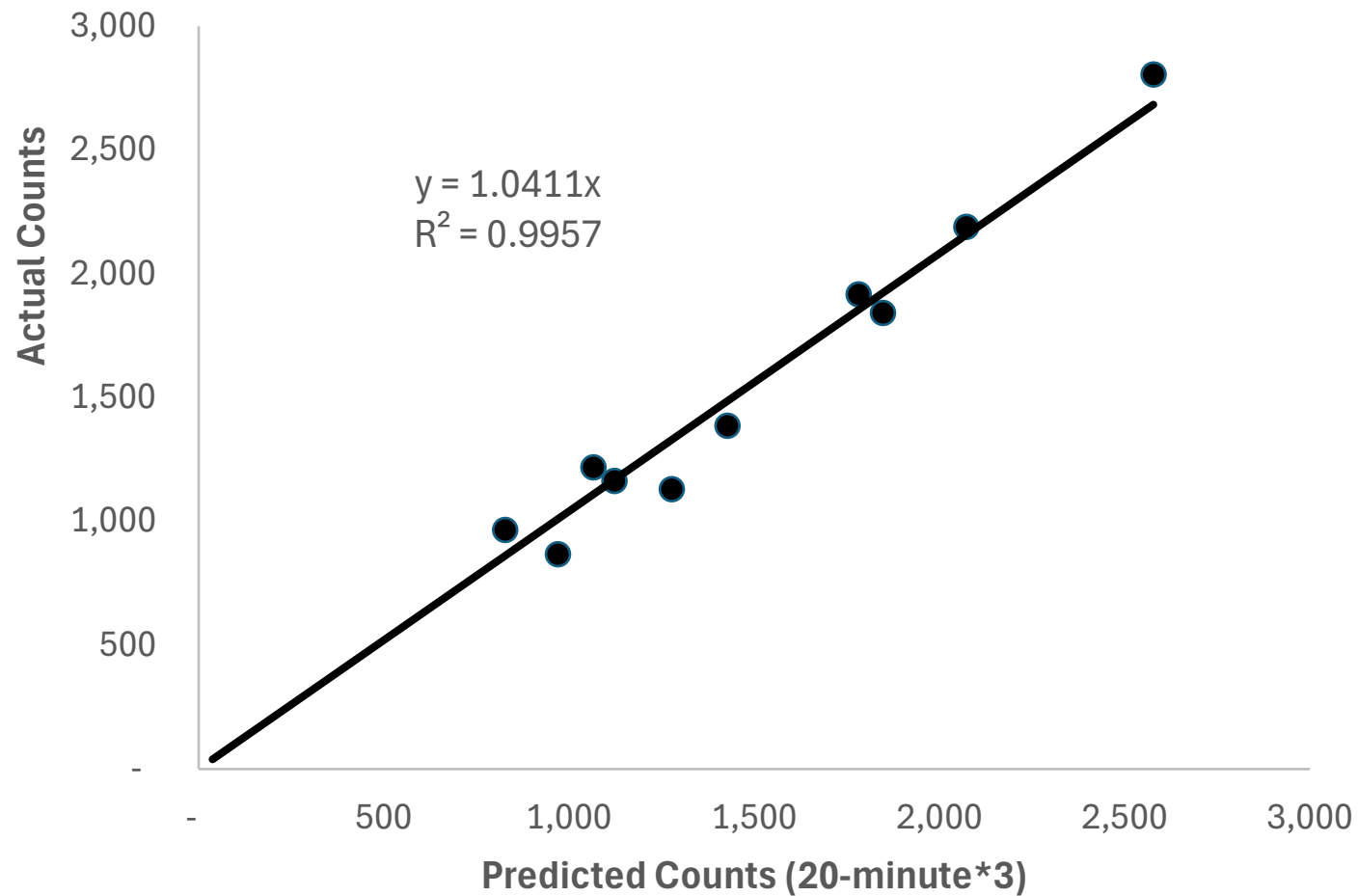


Figure 12. Predicted vs. actual counts for each year of the steelhead project (2013 – 2023). Each point represents one entire year of data with a total raw net upstream target count based on multiplying the first 20 minutes of each hour by three as the x coordinate and the actual raw net upstream target count as the y coordinate.