

X-Stream fishing

Clark's Fork offers history mixed with great fishing

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It's been almost 20 years since the Wyoming Game and Fish Department filed the first instream flow water right application. We've filed nearly 100 since then. Our goal initially was to make sure we reserved enough water to protect fishing opportunities for today's anglers and future generations in the best trout streams in the state. In the past decade or so, we've shifted our emphasis a little to streams that provide habitat for our four native cutthroat trout species (Bear River, Yellowstone, Colorado River and Bonneville)—three of which have been petitioned by concerned groups to be listed as endangered or threatened species. So far none of these species has been listed, but having instream flow protections in place will definitely play a role in preventing their listing in the future.

Interest in water management and instream flow water rights remains as high as it has ever been. It seems likely that this focus will continue as demand for water from all sectors continues to grow. Although most folks know that the state now has instream flow water rights, most don't know precisely where the segments are, why we filed where we did, how much we recommended or what the status of the filing is today.

Because instream flow rights are important uses of water and are in fact owned by you and all the other citizens of the state, we thought it was a good idea to let you know where these water rights are and encourage you to go enjoy these special places. The following article profiles the Clark's Fork of the Yellowstone—the first instream flow filing we ever made—and is the first in a series of articles that will highlight many of the filings around the state. We've titled the series "X-Stream Fishing" to let us substitute a different stream for the "X" in each profile and also to emphasize the unique experience of fishing these very special waters.

The Setting

The Clark's Fork of the Yellowstone was the first stream where an instream flow water right was filed. Of the many spectacular rivers and streams in the state, few if any strike as awesome a pose as this river and the canyon it carved through the rugged Absaroka Mountains just east of Yellowstone National Park. Hundreds of Native American teepee rings flanking the river serve as mute testimony to the lure this special place has had on people for countless centuries.

People seeking this destination today are usually in search of recreational adventures, but in the late summer of 1877, the river and canyon served as a backdrop



Two young girls give the Clark's Fork a try with their fishing gear. The Clark's Fork is one of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department's instream flow filings. Photo by WGFD staff

for one of the epic stories of the West's settlement.

On the evening of September 8 of that year, Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce Council faced a tough choice. U.S. Cavalry troops were chasing them eastward from the Yellowstone area. More troops were poised to intercept them at the mouth of the Clark's Fork Canyon, and they appeared trapped at last.

But in one of the great stories of human will to survive, the entire tribe of 700 men, women and children; all their possessions; and more than 2,500 ponies did the impossible—they slipped up the side of the canyon and out of the trap.

Today, there's a very rough jeep trail up a part of their likely escape route that tests the fortitude of even the stoutest souls—or soles, for that matter. The river, though, remains much the same.

In fact, its rugged, natural essence was given the ultimate distinction as Wyoming's first and only nationally recognized Wild and Scenic River on November 28, 1990.

The Fishery

Anglers of all ages can experience the thrill of fishing in the first instream flow segment ever filed in the state.

Yellowstone cutthroat trout is the species managed for here, but other native fishes include mountain whitefish; white, longnose and mountain suckers; and longnose dace. You'll also find brown, rainbow and Snake River cutthroat trout, as well as an occasional grayling.

This is a free-flowing stream with no dams up-

stream from the instream flow segment. The river is relatively wide, with deep pools and fairly strong current most of the summer; though when flows drop you can cross at most of the riffles. Large boulders and cobbles line the banks and deeper pools of this geologically young river. Though the water is incredibly clear most of the year, afternoon showers in the high country can occasionally leave it a bit off-color after most of the snowmelt has run off in the summer.

The trout and whitefish hit a wide range of flies, both dry and wet, that change with the seasons so it's best to check with the local sporting goods shops in Cody to see what's working when you're there. Small spinners also work well, and there are no regulations that prevent the use of garden hackle if that's your preference. The daily limit downstream from the U.S. Forest Service boundary is the statewide standard of six trout, only one of which may be over 20 inches long. Upstream from the Forest Service boundary to Reef Creek the limit is three trout per day, only one of which may exceed 12 inches in length.

How to Get There

Take Wyoming Highway 120 north out of Cody for 29 miles. Turn left (west) on Wyoming Highway 292 about three-quarter mile after you cross the Clarks Fork. This road is paved all the way to the Shoshone National Forest boundary (about 12 miles). At the boundary it turns into a bumpy two-track road. You'll want a higher clearance pickup or SUV or a really old beater car to go the next several miles on the two-track to where it dead-ends.

The Instream Flow—Clark's Fork

Permit number: 1 IF

Priority date: November 18, 1986

Status of the filing: A public hearing was held on August 13, 1987, and the water right was issued by the state engineer on May 6, 1988. The right has not yet been adjudicated.

Quantity: 200 cfs year round

Location and length: The segment extends 5.85 miles downstream from the mouth of Sunlight Creek to the north boundary of Section 13, Township 56 North, Range 104 West.

Land ownership: The majority of the instream flow segment is located on lands administered by the Shoshone

National Forest. A short section is on Bureau of Land Management property just downstream from the Forest boundary.

Rationale: The recommendation protects base flows for native Yellowstone cutthroat trout. At the time of the filing the Clark's Fork was a highly popular and valuable fishery to the state and it remains one today.

Related details: The average monthly flow ranges from just under 200 cfs in the winter to almost 4,000 cfs in early summer. There are numerous senior water rights upstream from the segment that total 55 cfs, though not all of them are actively used. Only 4.6 cfs may be diverted in the winter, mostly for domestic purposes.

