By Tom Annear

X-Stream Fishing . . . on Roaring Fork Little Snake

An Up Close Look at Wyoming's Instream Flow Water Rights and What They Mean to Fishermen

The Setting

Ten thousand feet above sea level is a tough place to do business of any kind. When coupled with the remote and rugged setting of the Sierra Madre Range in south-central Wyoming along the Colorado border it's quite remarkable to think that any industry or business could get established and hang on.

But in the late 1800s there were nearly 300 documented mines in the area yielding mostly copper to miners who'd come West in search of gold. Today, the only evidence of this former industry is some scattered rail cars, rusting machinery, and remnants of old buildings slowly melting away under the wear of weather.

The native Colorado River cutthroat trout found in the Roaring Fork Little Snake don't grow very big and the stream's not easy to get to, but flow protection plays a critical role in conserving this important species.

At least four of these old mines, including the Itmay mine, are located adjacent to or near the Roaring Fork Little Snake River. Aside from big game hunters in the fall, a handful of curious hikers during the summer, and the occasional government scientist, the area has reverted to the peaceful, pristine wilderness that welcomed the 19th century entrepreneurs. This special character was an important reason for establishing the Huston Park Wilderness Area here in 1984.

Though the miners have long since departed, Colorado River cutthroat trout, one of Wyoming's four native trout species, still do a good business in the Roaring Fork in spite of the harsh elements and remote location. The Roaring Fork isn't very big and definitely isn't a classic destination trout water for well-heeled anglers; but it's one of several such streams that plays a critically important role in maintaining this unique Wyoming treasure. Anglers who test the waters of this stream may redefine their definition of a trophy trout after negotiating their way up to this extremely pristine and historic setting.

The Fishery

Department fishery biologists first sampled the Roaring Fork in 1955. By then brook trout had become well established in the stream and the consensus was that the native cutthroat had been totally displaced by the introduced, non-native brookies. Thirty-one years later, the stream was sampled again at 10,800 feet and resulted in the capture of 20 cutthroats. Subsequent surveys have found cutthroat throughout the very upper reaches of the stream. Trout don't get very big in the short growing season and relatively low flows of the stream. Few fish reach much over 8 inches long, but there are a lot of 3 to 4 inch trout which affirm that the species is able to reproduce regularly and maintain a viable population here.

Genetics studies of Colorado River cutthroat trout populations found throughout their native range in the Colorado River drainage show that the cutthroat in the Roaring Fork aren't just another cutthroat. Statewide, this species shows substantial genetic variation among the streams where this species still persists, but a relatively low level of genetic divergence within each stream. Cutthroats in the Roaring Fork are one of two populations that show an especially unique level of genetic variation that is reflective of their adaptation to the distinctive habitat where they've developed.

In light of this finding, it is important to maintain the genetic purity of existing pure populations of this species. Securing instream flow water rights on the Roaring Fork is one of several management strategies the department has pursued to conserve Colorado River cutthroats.

The current fishing regulations for the area allow anglers to catch 3 trout daily (or in possession) but only one cutthroat may be greater than 12 inches.

How to Get There

This isn't an easy segment to reach. Grab a U.S. Geological Survey quad map for Fletcher Peak (and a GPS unit) and drive to the trailhead 12 miles west of Riverside on Highway 70. Park at the Battle Pass pull out and take the Continental Divide Trail (CDT) south from the parking area. The trail is marked with CDT posts and is relatively easy to follow. Stay on the main trail past Red Mountain to Huston Park via Long Park.

From Long Park the trail crosses the headwaters of the North Fork of the Encampment River before reaching Standard Park and the junction of the Roaring Fork Little Snake River trail – about 4 ½ miles from the trailhead. It's another 3 miles along this trail to the upper end of the instream flow segment. You can also reach the segment from the south and west via Forest Service Road 807 and the Savery Stock Driveway, but access involves crossing small sections of private land and permission to cross them may prove difficult. Consult a Medicine Bow National Forest Map to see where those roads and private lands are – and check with Forest Service personnel in Saratoga for information on how to contact private landowners.

For more information about this or other instream flow segments, visit the Department's website at: http://gf.state.wy.us. For more information about the Huston Park Wilderness and the Roaring Fork in general, visit http://www.awayfromthegrind.com/blog/hiking/wyoming/huston-park-continental-divide-trail/

The Instream Flow

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Permit Number: Permit Number 541F.

Priority Date: June 27, 1996.

Quantity: 1.6 cfs from July 1 through May 14 and 4.4 cfs from May 15 to June 30.

Location and length: This segment is 3.2 miles long, extending from where the stream crosses the north side of Section 13 in Range 86 West, Township 13 North downstream to where it crosses the west side of Section 22, Range 86 West, Township 13 North.

Land ownership: All lands through which the segment passes are under the administrative control of the U.S. Forest Service. The upper half of the segment lies within the Huston Park Wilderness Area.

Rationale: The flows recommended from July through May 14 are obtained from detailed studies by department biologists to maintain growth of adult and juvenile fish in the summer and ensure their survival during harsh winter months. The flows recommended from May 15 to June 30 are based on studies that show this flow is needed to provide adequate habitat for spawning and incubation of trout.

Status of the filing: A public hearing was held in Baggs on March 10, 1997. The hearing was advertised for two weeks immediately prior to the hearing, but no members of the public appeared or offered any comments during the subsequent 30 day comment period provided following the hearing. The State Engineer approved the instream flow water right permits on 4/18/2006 in compliance with all legal and regulatory requirements.

This water right has not yet been adjudicated.