



The Humble Hams

Anglers seek out a 'sleeper' tributary to the Green River



Kemmerer, Wyo., touts itself as the “fossil fish capital of the world,” a nod to its proximity to Fossil Butte National Monument and the aquatic lifeforms preserved there. Not far away on the Hams Fork River, anglers seek fish of another form—very much alive and perhaps just a tad less elusive than their ossified brethren.

A relic population of one Wyoming’s four native cutthroat species, the Colorado River cutthroat, can be found at the river’s headwaters in the Bridger-Teton National Forest. And in the tailwaters below the Viva Naughton and Kemmerer City reservoirs, fly anglers pursue rainbow and brown trout, even in the coldest conditions.

Story by
Amber Leberman
Photos by Corey
Kruitbosch

Opposite: Pat Murphy, of Salt Lake City, and Mike Doughty, of Layton, Utah, work their way along the Hams Fork river streambed. For photographer Corey Kruitbosch, walking is part of the river’s attraction. “It’s easily accessible to wade fishing,” Kruitbosch said. “You don’t need to have a driftboat or anything.”

Left: A diversion canal from the Kemmerer City Reservoir.



he river was named during a 1824 expedition for Zacharias Ham, a trapper under William H. Ashley.

A history by Jacob V. and Alice Antilla suggests that trappers sought marten, mink, muskrat and beaver in the area, and anglers pursued wild Colorado River cutthroat trout in the river. The U.S. Forest Service has documented efforts that, in the early 1900s, it promoted the harvest of trees for railroad ties in the Hams Fork area, and that the river was used for transport of ties.

The river's aficionados today may prefer that it stay a bit undiscovered, but Craig Amadio, fish biologist for the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD)'s Green River Region, said that despite being a popular fly-fishing destination, it's rare for the Hams Fork to feel crowded.

"It's not super well-known, I've seen a number of anglers in a given day, but I've never seen an

issue where it was crowded and people were trying to get away from the crowds," Amadio said. "I think people really appreciate that."

Amadio's colleague Robb Keith, the region's fisheries supervisor, refers to the Hams Fork as a "sleeper", but that's not a reflection of the quality of the fishery. Folks just don't necessarily know that it's there and available for use."

Fly angler and photographer Corey Kruitbosch grew up fishing the Greys River with his father and grandfather. As an adult, he began exploring other fishing opportunities slightly further afield. His ventures eventually brought him to the Hams Fork.

"I don't even remember how I discovered it," Kruitbosch said, but he makes it a regular desti-

Above: angler Pat Murphy makes his way to the Hams Fork River. Murphy fishes areas of the river accessible from both private and public land.





Mike Doughty clears the ice from the guides on his fly rod.

nation from his home in Utah.

He's one of the anglers that finds the Hams Fork River's undiscovered quality appealing.

"That's the way I feel about most of Wyoming, generally," Kruitbosch said. "There's a lot of times I'm on a really nice stretch of river and I won't see someone all day long."

Below the Kemmerer City Reservoir, much of the Hams Fork River meanders along private land. That may be the reason it's not more popular with anglers—they don't know they can fish there.

"It's a little deceiving," Amadio said. "When you look at a map, such as a Bureau of Land Management map, a lot of it's private, but we have numerous public walk-in areas." (See wgfd.wyo.gov/accessto/access/hamsfork.asp for a map of the Hams Fork River below Kemmerer City Reservoir.)

"The biggest thing that makes the Hams Fork unique is the amount of access we have in that

stretch below Kemmerer City Reservoir," Keith said. Thanks to easements established into perpetuity in 1990 and a piece of state land, there are nine miles of walkable access from parking areas to "an enormous part of the stream on private land."

In addition to the prospect of a day alone on the water, "there's big fish, and that's a big attraction," Kruitbosch said. "I don't ever think I've been up to the Hams and had a horrible day and gotten skunked."

Amadio said he often hears from anglers who catch five- to six-pound trout on the Hams Fork, "which is pretty exceptional for the size of the river."

Between the Viva Naughton and Kemmerer City Reservoirs, fishing is permitted by artificial flies and lures only. "We tend to try to manage that little section for more trophy-quality fish," Amadio said. Both Kemmerer City and Viva Naughton also have conservative special regula-



tions. WGFD stocks both reservoirs. "Particularly after we've stocked the reservoirs there's a fair bit of escapement out of the reservoir and into the river below," Amadio said.

Completed decades ago, WGFD habitat work along the Hams Fork River (especially embankments formed by strategically placed logs and boulders) provides bank stability and overhead cover for trout populations.

"It's really helped provide some additional habitat," Amadio said. "A lot of those structures are still performing well today."

Above: Angler Tone Lacefield, of Roy, Utah, works his way along the Hams Fork River near Kemmerer, Wyo. Much of the river along private land is fishable via public fishing areas. Robb Keith of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department urges anglers using such areas to respect the landowner and stay within the bounds of the designated easement.

Right: Angler Pat Murphy warms his hands during a cold December day on the Hams Fork. "It's not too bad if you dress warm," photographer Kruitbosch said. "If you're prepared, it's not that bad at all. For me it's just that I can't quit fishing."

