X-Stream Fishing

In terms of fishing, Greys has it all

Hidden away deep in the Wyoming Range of western Wyoming, the Greys River is the epitome of a Western trout stream. Pine and aspen-covered mountains rise high above the willow-lined river as it courses seaward. Originating at the Tri-Basin Divide (where LaBarge Creek and the Smiths Fork also arise), the river passes through a high valley before entering a narrow, boulder-strewn canyon near its confluence with the Snake River. The landscape and waters of the Greys have changed little since the river was first viewed by trapper John Day, a member of John Jacob Astor's party, in the summer of 1811 (in fact, the river was called John Day's River until about 1902). A developed road parallels the river all the way from its origin at the Tri-Basin Divide to the town of Alpine. Although it is possible to drive a sedan the whole way when it's dry, the road is rough enough that most rank-and-file tourists bypass the area on their way to more popular venues like Jackson Hole and Yellowstone. The remoteness of the river allows near-wilderness type opportunities for a wide range of outdoor recreation throughout its entire length.

The Greys River is still dominated by wild, native cutthroats as it was in John Jacob Astor's day.

The Fishery

Just as it did nearly 200 years ago when European-Americans first visited it, the Greys River holds good numbers of native Snake River cutthroat trout, mountain whitefish and mottled sculpins. In the early 1900s, fishery managers stocked the lower parts of the river with various non-native trout species like rainbow, brown and brook trout to address their fear that over-fishing might harm the native fishery. By the end of the last century, though, biologists found that stocking was not needed, and the natives were quite able to maintain themselves without any help. Despite the early stocking of non-natives, the river is dominated by wild, native cutthroat trout and mountain whitefish.

In spite of the road right along the stream, crowding is seldom a problem on the Greys. And because you have access to the entire river, you can select about any kind of fishing that strikes you. It's just a matter of where you stop the truck or car to determine whether you'll be fishing small, slow moving pools or fast, deep runs. A wide range of attractor dry flies on a lightweight fly rod will provide plenty of action in late summer in the middle and upper portions of the river. Try a heavier line and streamers or spinners in the lower portions. Be sure to check the latest Game and Fish regulations for special regulations that limit the kind of tackle you can use and number of fish you can keep in different parts of the river.

How to Get There

Find your way to the town of Alpine, located at the confluence of the Snake and Greys rivers in the far western part of the state. Turn east on the Greys River Road that joins with Highway 89 just south of the bridge over the Snake River. This road parallels the Greys River all the way to its headwaters at the Tri-Basin Divide. The road forks there and goes to either LaBarge or Cokeville. Once you reach the Forest Service boundary just east of Alpine, there are lots of places to pull over and enjoy some fine fishing on this classic Western trout stream.

The Instream Flow

Permit Number: 11 I.F.
Priority Date: October 8, 1993
Status of the filing: As required by instream flow statute (W.S. 41-3-1006 (d)), a public hearing was held on April 29, 1997. The State Engineer issued the water right on November 1, 1998. Approved for adjudication in August 2004, but not formally adjudicated as of March 2006.
Quantity: 204 cubic feet per second (cfs) from July 1 to March 31; 350 cfs from April 1 to June 30.
Location and length: Extends 10.1 miles upstream from the mouth of Lake Creek in section 7, township 36 north, range 117 west to the north boundary of section 33, township 37 north, range 119 west about a mile upstream from the mouth of Mill Creek. All in Lincoln County.
Land ownership: All lands crossed by the segment are federally owned and administered by the U. S. Forest Service.
Rationale: Recommended flows are based on detailed field studies that identified the amount of water needed to maintain 1) spawning habitat for native cutthroat trout in the spring and early summer, 2) habitat for growth and survival of adult and juvenile trout in the summer and 3) over-winter survival of all ages of trout.

Clearing the Air on Water

Before rejecting instream flow, take a closer look

Whether you're an angler or a water right holder, there's plenty to like about instream flow. When there's water flowing in a creek, there's a good chance you'll find a fish or two lurking somewhere. And if you've got a water right, you like to see water flowing to your head gate. In spite of these shared values, most of the debate over instream flow has been that you can either have one use or the other, but not both. That's too bad, because instream flow offers more potential than any other water right for benefiting ranchers, recreationists, municipalities and others.

The line in the sand is drawn to reflect the belief that if water is left in the stream for fisheries, somebody will somehow have water taken away or be deprived of using that water for anything else. You hear lots of seemingly valid arguments against instream flow in support of these fears: instream flow water will soak into the ground and be lost from the stream, get sucked up by trees along the banks, or simply pass all the way to the state line and be lost to downstream states. There's also a real concern that we'll have to leave way too much water in the creek just for the fish … and the water won't get used for anything else.

But while there's a thread of logic to all of these claims, they don't stand up under scrutiny. Sure, some water does soak into the ground from most streams. But there are lots of other places where the reverse happens and the stream gains flow as it goes downstream. The Wind River is a lot bigger near Dubois than it is at Togwotee Pass.

Trees and shrubs along streams do use some water, but it's not very common where water use by trees and shrubs can legitimately shoulder all the blame for sucking streams dry. Many streams like Libby Creek in the Snowies, Sourdough Creek in the Bighorns and LaBarge Creek in the Wyoming Range are choked with trees but flow continuously all year and support healthy trout populations.

And what about instream flows making it across the state line without being used for traditional consumptive purposes? We have interstate compacts or Supreme Court decrees on all our major rivers that guarantee the state the right to consumptively use a specific amount of water in each of them. The law also allows any instream flow right to be diverted within one mile of the state line. Instream flow water rights can't change any of those legal requirements.

The most important part of any instream flow right that's usually overlooked is that, regardless of how much water is used for instream flow, and whether that use occurs on public or private land, the entire amount is available for any other use once it leaves the part of the stream where it's used for instream flow. That's a claim that almost no other water right can make.

It's important for anglers and other water users to know the facts and work together to make sure we get the most value we can from every drop of water in the state. The waters that fall on the mountains and plains of Wyoming belong to all of us. Fishermen have as much right under our laws as anyone to use available water to maintain or improve fish habitat and angling opportunities. There really is common ground with instream flow water rights that can let us keep water in some streams for fisheries and then use it again for traditional consumptive uses further downstream without harming anyone's existing water right. Instream flow water rights are a key tool to help achieve win-win strategies for both sides of this debate— without giving up a thing.

To get more information about instream flow, visit the Wyoming Game and Fish Department's Web site at http://gf.state.wy.us/fish/instreamflow