

X-Stream Angling ... on Bear Creek

Instream flows are key to restoring habitat and improving angling opportunities

Since long before recorded history, the East Fork Wind River drainage near Dubois has provided winter range for large numbers of big game—elk and deer as well as a few moose. In 1941, the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission purchased 1,300 acres of the Dennison Ranch from Emil and Susie Swanson for \$10,000 to protect and manage this important habitat for big game. Commission holdings slowly expanded over the next 30 years until a total of 16,857 acres were under department management. The area was renamed the Inberg/Roy Wildlife Habitat Management Area in memory of department employees Kirk Inberg and Kevin Roy who died in an airplane accident on October 16, 1991 while performing grizzly bear monitoring.

That same year, the Commission acquired the final piece of property for the current habitat management area by purchasing 41,155 acres of the adjacent Thunderhead Ranch from Gerry Spence and Ed Moriarity. The additional acreage, now known as the Spence/Moriarity unit, not only provided additional acreage for big game, but also greatly expanded public fishing access to significant portions of the East Fork Wind River, Wiggins Fork, and Bear Creek.

At the time, fisheries in portions of all three streams, including Bear Creek, had been suppressed largely as a result of heavy use of riparian areas and uplands by big game, domestic livestock, and irrigation diversions. Riparian habitat showed signs of overuse: eroded banks and little new growth of willows and riparian vegetation. Runoff from rain and snowmelt flowing across adjacent lands clouded the streams with silt, limiting spawning success as well as the survival and growth of adult fish.

Numerous irrigation diversions compounded fishery limitations by creating barriers between stream segments and diverting fish from the streams to irrigated meadows. Fish-trapping studies done in 2006 through 2008 documented the problem. At the Bear



Creek (Fosher) diversion, over 100 Yellowstone cutthroats were collected in traps in just 600 hours of sampling during the 2008 irrigation season including many trout over 8 inches long. Considering that this represents about one-third of the irrigation season and there are two other irrigation ditches on Commission lands along Bear Creek, a lot of fish and their spawning potential are lost every year and unavailable to anglers.

As part of the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission's commitment to improving the lands and streams of the Thunderhead Ranch section, department personnel have implemented effective grazing practices to restore riparian areas and stream health. Existing meadows and pastures are still irrigated to provide critically important big game winter forage, but today, department managers voluntarily quit irrigating hay meadows in late summer when natural stream flow reaches a level that instream flow studies show is needed to sustain fish in the stream.

Department personnel also rebuilt the Bear Creek diversion to stabilize the structure while allowing fish passage up and downstream of the diversion. The new structure incorporates a screen to prevent fish from entering the irrigation ditch. With all the watershed and instream flow enhancements, the fishery is approaching its biological potential. Ongoing planning and management will continue this trend. Adventurous anglers who take the time to visit Bear Creek will find a blue-ribbon

experience and some extremely good fishing.

THE FISHERY

The most abundant trout species in Bear Creek is native Yellowstone cutthroat trout. Brook trout are more abundant at higher elevations while brown trout and mountain whitefish numbers increase at lower elevations. Rainbow trout are rare throughout all three of the instream flow segments located on the stream. Historically both Yellowstone and Snake River cutthroat trout, as well as brook and brown trout, were stocked throughout the East Fork Wind River drainage. Since 1995, the entire drainage has been managed as a wild native trout fishery.

HOW TO GET THERE

From Dubois, go about 10 miles east on Highway 26/287. Look for signs on your left next to a good gravel road indicating the East Fork Road and the Wyoming Game and Fish Department Spence/Moriarity and Inberg/Roy Wildlife Habitat Management Area. Turn left here and go about 6.5 miles to the bridge over the Wiggins Fork (enters from the north). Continue on the East Fork Road about another 3.5 miles. Take the road that forks off to the left (north) just before Bear Creek and go about 2 miles to the Bear Creek Diversion located right next to the road. The instream flow segment extends upstream from here another 3.5 miles. You can park alongside the road about anywhere along this stretch.

For more information about this or other

Permit Number: TF35 3/020

Priority Date: December 29, 2009

Quantity: Flows of 14 cubic feet per second (cfs) from October 1 to November 15, 10 cfs for November 16 to March 31, 35 cfs for April 1 to 30, 20 cfs from May 1 to June 30, and 29 cfs from July 1 to September 30 were recommended.

Land ownership: All of the lands through which this instream flow segment flow are publicly held consisting of State trust lands and other land owned by the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission.

Location and length: This segment is 3.5 miles long, extending from the Bear Creek irrigation diversion upstream to the Troxell diversion.

Rationale: Three separate filings were submitted that cover the entire length of Bear Creek on commission-managed lands. The instream flow information presented here only pertains to the middle segment.

Flows recommended from October 1 to November are based on studies that address flow needs for fall-spawning fish like mountain whitefish. January through April flows

are based on studies that show this amount of water is needed to maintain survival of trout and mountain whitefish eggs over the winter at existing levels. Spring flows (April 1 to 30) reflect flows that will maximize Yellowstone cutthroat juvenile and adult habitat. Flows from May 1 to June 30 are needed to maintain cutthroat trout spawning needs, July 1 to September 30 flows are needed maintain adequate growth. Status of the filing: The statutorily required public hearing for this stream has been scheduled by the State Engineer's Office for Friday, Nov. 9, 2012.