Fish a classic trout stream

Big Sandstone holds cutts, brookies and rainbows

In Wyoming, we sometimes go to fairly extreme lengths to get water. For example, most citizens of the state, including many Cheyenne residents, don't know that the city gets between 50 and 60 percent of the water it needs from a complex system of surface water collectors, dams and pipelines that originate on the west slope of the Sierra Madres south of Rawlins— more than 100 miles away. Getting the water to Cheyenne involves more than just physically capturing and piping it almost a quarter of the way across the state. The process must also negotiate an equally complex maze of complicated interstate compacts, Supreme Court decrees and state water right requirements.

Cheyenne's most recent work to get water from the Sierra Madres was done in the 1980s under what is referred to as the Stage II project. That project collects water from a number of streams that flow into the Colorado River Basin and transports it to Hog Park Reservoir, located on the east slope of the mountain. This process is called a trans-basin diversion, because water is taken from the Colorado River basin and moved to the North Platte River basin. Water from Hog Park Reservoir doesn't actually get to Cheyenne; it's just used by the city to "pay back" water to the North Platte system that the city collects in the Snowy Range further upstream.

As Stage II was being built, the city began looking at yet another phase of water collection in the Sierra Madres called Stage III. Under one of several scenarios for this plan, water would have been collected from streams in the northern end of those mountains, stored temporarily in a reservoir on Fish Creek, and then pumped over a low divide into the North Platte River basin as payback for additional use of water by the city from Snowy Range streams.

Stage III was never built for several reasons, including its high price tag and lack of need at the time. Although Stage III is tabled for now and there are no plans to pursue that project again in the foreseeable future, it remains a potential issue that could someday affect fish and fishing in a number of trout streams on the north end of the Sierra Madres. One of those streams is Big Sandstone Creek.

The Fishery

Big Sandstone Creek isn't a big stream, but it is one of the larger streams that roll off the side of the Sierra Madres on its way to the Colorado River. It's the kind of stream that might be featured in a tourist brochure showing a classic western trout stream. Big Sandstone originates in dense alpine timber and grows quickly from the inflow of springs and tributaries. Throughout the instream flow reach, the stream is a pleasant mix of pools, runs and riffles that harbor relatively high numbers of non-native brook trout that range up to about 12 inches long. Native Colorado River cutthroat trout are also present in small numbers in isolated parts of the stream. Rainbow trout and mountain whitefish can be encountered, too, but are more abundant near the stream's confluence with Savery Creek. Native non-game fish, including mottled sculpins and mountain suckers also inhabit the stream.

Access is reasonably good along much of the stream, but large portions can only be reached by hiking up or down from one of several road access points. You'll seldom encounter another angler on the stream, but if you take the time to explore very far from the road, you'll find some great fishing and pristine solitude. Area 4 flowing water fishery regulations apply here. That means there's a limit of three trout per day or in possession and only one can be more than 16 inches long.

How to get there

Take Wyoming Highway 71 south from Rawlins about 48 miles until you reach the Medicine Bow National Forest boundary. The pavement ends at Sage Creek, but it's a well-maintained gravel road the rest of the way to the forest boundary. There the road turns into Forest Service Road 801. Big Sandstone Creek flows under this good gravel road in another 3.5 miles.

An angler can find cutthroat, brook and rainbow trout in Big Sandstone Creek's instream flow segment, and mountain whitefish can be caught there, as well. *Photo by Tom Annear*

The Instream Flow

Permit Number: Instream Flow Segment 1, Permit Number 60 IF.

Priority Date: June 27, 1996

Location and length: The instream flow segment is three miles long and extends from its confluence with Douglas Creek downstream to the mouth of Mill Creek.

Land ownership: The entire segment is located on lands administered by the U.S. Forest Service.

Rationale: Studies and recommendations for this instream flow water right were designed to identify and protect base flow habitat for brook trout. Brook trout spawn in riffle areas in October and November Their eggs hatch in mid-winter and the young fish (larvae) remain in the gravels until ice-out in the spring. Flows from October through May 14 were designed to ensure there is enough water flowing over and through riffle areas so eggs and larvae can survive the winter. These flows also provide adequate base flows for adult trout survival. Rainbow trout spawn in the spring so flows from May 15 to June 30 were recommended to maintain spawning habitat for this species. The flows recommended from July 1 through September were based on studies that showed those amounts of water were needed to maintain habitat for trout growth. Channel maintenance and flushing flows that maintain long-term habitat by cleaning riffles and scouring deep pools were not filed for.

Status of the filing: The state engineer issued this instream flow right on April 28, 2006. The Board of Control has not yet adjudicated this water right.

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