By Tom Annear

# X-Stream Fishing . . . on Coantag Creek

*An up-close look at Wyoming's instream flow water rights and what they mean to fishermen*

## THE SETTING

You'd think that of all the fishermen in the state, the most successful anglers might be the ones who spend long days standing in all sorts of streams all over the state measuring habitat. Surely, you'd think an instream flow biologist would know all the angles of where the fish are and how to catch 'em because they have jobs that require them to spend long days standing in all sorts of streams all over the state measuring habitat. But what may not seem quite so obvious is that, at the end of the day, the last thing those folks want to do is put their cold, soggy waders back on and charge off with fly rod in hand for a couple more hours of sneaking around the stream.

Granted there are exceptions to that rule. There are times when the hatch is so strong and trout are rising so fast that even the most weary field worker can't resist the call to spend a little more time in the water. But considering the 100-plus top quality trout streams I've worked in over the past quarter century, I confess that I've taken the time to sample the fishing in way too few of them. And when I have taken the time to flip out a fly or two the results have been much less than you'd expect from a person who's spent that much time in some of the state's and nation's best trout streams.

Coantag Creek, though, is the kind of stream that can change at least some of that frustration. Late in the summer of 2009 I made a swing by the stream with the newest addition to the crew to introduce him to streams where we'd filed instream flow rights and discuss the finer points of data collection and water law. The day was one of those classic crisp, cool autumn spectacles that demanded we dally just a little to experience firsthand the reason for filing an instream flow water right there.

We soon found ourselves a fair ways up the creek, catching the kind of trout we knew should be there based on past electro-fishing studies. Ten to 12-inch Bonneville cutts were all too eager to try stealing the hopper imitations we offered for their consideration. On about the tenth "one more cast and we'll go" we rounded a bend to find a pool that my decades of habitat modeling screamed "big trout water!"

The trout gods showed a moment of weakness just then and sent Mike's fly into a willow along the bank on his first cast. Not wanting to offend them, I had little choice but to honor the window of opportunity they had so graciously placed in front of me. Mike had no sooner finished cursing his bad luck when I shoved him aside and dropped my hopper at the head of the pool. On cue, the classic grey translucent shape drifted up from the depths, grabbed my fly, and proceeded to drag me downstream at top speed, seemingly oblivious that I might break an ankle on the boulder strewn stream bottom. I don't have much experience playing such fish but was finally able to halt his downstream flight just before he entered a steep chute that plunged into a substantial log jam. A few more less dedicated runs and the 17-inch beast was in-hand posing for pictures.

It would probably have been nice if I'd had that kind of success just a little more often over the past couple decades, but it wouldn't have changed the enjoyment I had that day. Nor would it have changed my appreciation for the value of state-owned instream flow rights that will let other folks experience a similar thrill. That fine specimen, along with a lot of his buddies, is still in Coantag Creek – and he or his off-spring will be there for a long time ready to reward others who take the time to discover this great little stream.

## THE FISHERY

The majority of trout are native Bear River cutthroat trout, but you may find an occasional brown trout. We don't' stock any fish here so every fish you catch will have been born and raised here. Mountain whitefish are also found in relatively small numbers and can be just as fun to catch as the cutts. Expect most of the cutts to range between 8 and 14 inches but also know that there are a few exceptional specimens that grow a little bigger.

Area 4 flowing water fishery regulations apply here. That means beginning in 2010 there will be a limit of three trout per day or in possession, only one trout can exceed 16 inches, and only one cutthroat trout can exceed 12 inches. Statewide brook trout regulations also apply. Anglers may only use artificial flies and lures here.

## HOW TO GET THERE

The road into Coantag Creek is a relatively good one that can be traveled in a sedan in good weather on dry roads sometimes. Stop by a Forest Service office in Jackson, Big Piney or Kemmerer and get a Forest Service map of the Bridger-Teton National Forest that has the Big Piney, Greys River and Kemmerer ranger districts. With this in hand head to Cokeville, take highway 232 east out of town, and drive north and east through the Smiths Fork valley for about 12 miles. The blacktop ends at the mouth of Coal Creek and the road forks. Here you'll turn away from the Smiths Fork River (right or east) and start the gradual climb up Forest Service Road 10062. In about 9 miles look for signs to Lake Alice or Forest Service road 10066. Take that road back to the north again. After going another 5 miles or so, you'll find Forest Service road 10193 and more signage to Lake Alice. Follow that road down into the Coantag Creek/Hobble Creek drainage. When you finally drop off the hill you'll cross the stream and find an open meadow where you can park and start walking. If you want to spend a few days here, there's a Forest Service campground just ahead along the banks of Hobble Creek.

## The Instream Flow

**Permit Number:** Permit Number IF
**Priority Date:** June 27, 1996
**Quantity:** 7.2 cubic feet per second (cfs) from October 1 through April 30. 24 cfs from May 1 through June 30, and 21 cfs from July 1 through September 30.
Location and length: 4.9 miles
**Land ownership:** The entire segment is located on lands administered by the U.S. government (Forest Service).
**Rationale:** Bear River cutthroat trout is a native species that has been proposed for listing as an endangered species by some environmental groups. The Fish and Wildlife Service is charged with making that determination and has ruled that the decision is not warranted at this time because populations of this fish are stable or increasing. Maintaining or improving habitat for this species is of critical importance to the state's interest primarily to prevent it from becoming listed as threatened or endangered. But it's also important to maintain and improve habitat and populations of native species simply because that's the right thing to do for today's citizens and future generations. The quantities of flow recommended at different times are based on detailed field studies. These flows are recommended to ensure adequate survival in the winter (October through March), protect habitat for spawning and egg incubation (April 1 through June 30), and foster good growth of trout in the summer (July 1 through September 30). Angling opportunities are outstanding and the protection of at least base flows with an instream flow water right will help ensure that future anglers can enjoy the same privilege to fish here as current day anglers.
**Status of the filing:** A public hearing was held in Cokeville on April 27, 1999. Some of the comments provided at the hearing were supportive of the filing though others questioned how the proposed instream flow right would affect other water rights and the potential for future water development. No evidence was provided of how issuance of the right would harm or otherwise affect any other water rights or interests. In light of these findings, the State Engineer issued this instream flow right on January 2, 2002. The final step in the process of securing this, or any other water right, is called adjudication. The Board of Control has not yet adjudicated this water right.