

Don't just mill around ...

Get X-Stream on Mill Creek

High in south-central Wyoming's Sierra Madres, Mill Creek begins as a trickle through a boulder-strewn channel.

As it follows gravity's pull, it then winds through a broad meadow, slowly gathering additional water from seeps and springs before it pitches down a steep-sided canyon to its confluence with Big Sandstone Creek. The meadow section of the stream is easily accessible by vehicle, but few people are compelled to frequent the distal ends of this pristine stream.

The Fishery

Though relatively small, this stream provides important habitat to native Colorado River cutthroat trout. Though the genetic purity of this species has been compromised by hybridization with non-native rainbow trout in some streams, the fish in Mill Creek exhibit nearly pure genetic characteristics.

Flow in this stream is especially prone to the effects of drought, and several years ago, it was feared that low flows might have seriously depleted the population.

However, recent investigations documented the resiliency of these fish that have come back strong in recent years. This ability to persist in

the face of severe drought is due entirely to the presence of beavers that provide critical refuge for "seed stock" fish in their ponds.

Though abundant, cutthroats here seldom reach more than 10 inches in length. But true to their reputation, they are among the most eager of all trout species to bite about any fly or bait you want to fish with.

Brook trout are also present, and in the event you wish to harvest any trout, bear in mind you may harvest up to six fish, but only one may be a cutthroat trout.

How to get there

From the town of Encampment, go approximately 23 miles west on Wyoming Highway 70 to the junction of Forest Service road 801 (the Deep Creek Road). Turn north and go about 6 miles to the junction of Forest Service road 871.

This road is not clearly numbered or marked, so you need to pay close attention. Turn right on this graded road (heading northeast) and go about 3 miles. When you come to a "T," turn left and you'll cross the stream in about a quarter of a mile. A bit further on this road is a gate that marks the beginning of a small parcel of private land where public access is not allowed.

The Instream Flow

Permit Number: 58 I.F.

Priority Date: June 27, 1996

Quantity: Variable flow between 0.65 and 1.2 cubic feet per second (cfs) from Oct 1 to May 14; 6.8 cfs from May 15 to June 30; and 1.7 cfs in July; 1.2 cfs in August; 0.81 cfs in September.

Location and length: The instream flow segment is about 20 miles due west from Encampment in the Sierra Madres. The segment begins at the stream's confluence with Big Sandstone Creek and extends 3.1 miles upstream.

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

Rationale: The primary purpose of the filing was to maintain adequate base flows for native Colorado River cutthroat trout. The purpose of any water right is not so much to change the amount of water in the stream today as it is to protect an interest in existing flow patterns for future use. The various flow levels filed for are intended to address habitat needs for spawning in the spring, maintain growth rates in the summer, and minimize winter mortality. Channel maintenance and flushing flows that provide long-term habitat by cleaning riffles, scouring deep pools and keeping the stream banks from encroaching (narrowing) were not filed for. The state engineer has ruled that the state's instream flow law does not allow flows for these habitat needs.

Status of the filing: A public hearing was held in Baggs on March 10, 1997. The state engineer approved the water right on April 28, 2006. The Board of Control has not adjudicated the water right.



Beaver ponds provide excellent angling opportunities, as well as critical habitat for native Colorado River cutthroat trout during drought periods. *Photo by Tom Annear*

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>