Get hooked on North Cottonwood

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

On December 30, 1908, entrepreneur J. Whitney of Cheyenne envisioned great potential to divert water from North Cottonwood Creek and other streams to irrigate more than 11,000 acres of desert and provide water for livestock and domestic uses. So he applied for permits to establish the Cottonwood Canal under the name of the Uinta County (now Sublette County) Irrigation Company. By the spring of 1911 the canal was able to carry water and irrigate crops. Within the next two years, more than five miles of canal were completed and water was being diverted from North and South Cottonwood creeks and other nearby streams.

On August 20, 1913, the irrigation company advertised that it was opening 4,600 acres of land for settlement. The company's officials posted an advertisement saying the Cottonwood Canal had been completed, and water rights had been acquired from North and South Cottonwood creeks, South Horse Creek, Muddy Creek, North Piney Creek and the Green River. In reality, the Cottonwood Canal was not even half done and would never be completed.

As was done for other large-scale settlement projects, farmers were recruited from other parts of the country to settle the area with promises of rich lands and near-certain prosperity.

However, without a dependable source of water, the newly recruited settlers soon realized they could not make a living on the poor soil and the growing season in the area at the foot of the Wyoming Range. By 1915, most of them had left to seek their fortunes elsewhere. In 1927 the irrigation company filed for bankruptcy, and in 1929 the company was dissolved.

Little has changed on the landscape since then, though local interests still retain visions of past efforts to use water in North Cottonwood and other tributaries for irrigation. In recent years the state has begun studying options for a large-scale diversion project again, though that effort is still in the planning stages. One thing that hasn't changed is the vibrant, world-class trout fishing in North Cottonwood Creek. This stream and others on the Wyoming Range never fail to provide excellent angling for those who take the time to visit the area.

The fishery

North Cottonwood is a relatively low-gradient stream that meanders through a wide valley of willows, which provide ample material for beavers to construct dams and lodges. Colorado River cutthroat trout are common throughout the instream flow segment, but brook and rainbow trout also share the stream. Mountain whitefish are present, though in relatively low numbers. Mosted sculpins and mountain suckers are native non-game fish that have been reported in the stream and are an important component of this biologically diverse mountain stream. This is one of the state’s finest fly-fishing streams, and a wide range of dry fly and nymph patterns work well depending on conditions. Area 4 flowing water fishery regulations apply here. That means there’s a limit of three trout per day or in possession; only one can be a cutthroat trout; only one can be more than 16 inches; and anglers may only use artificial flies and lures.

How to get there

From Pinedale, go north on Highway 191 about 11 miles to the junction of Highway 189. Turn south on 189 and go 3 miles to County Road 23-117 (Rock Grass Road) and turn right (West). There is a sign at this junction that says, “Bridge-Teton National Forest, South Horse, Cottonwoods.” Travel west on 23-117 for about 13 miles. While on 23-117 the road turns to gravel. When it does, stay to the left. Continue to the Horsetooth Road and then turn south at this junction. Continue on 23-117 for about 2 miles. Turn right (west) onto the North Cottonwood Road. (There is a Forest Service sign at this junction that says “North Cottonwood and South Cottonwoods.”) Continue on this road until you reach the junction of North Cottonwood Road and South Cottonwood Road. Continue straight (west) on this road for about 1.5 miles to the Forest Service boundary, where the road changes to FS 10125. North Cottonwood Creek is on your right and parallels the road most of the way to McDougall Gap (another 8 miles). You can go all the way to Alpine if you wish, though that’s another 30 miles.

North Cottonwood Creek is a prime fly-fishing stream along which you can catch Colorado River cutthroat, brook and rainbow trout, as well as the occasional mountain whitefish.

Photo by Andrew Anness

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

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