New Fork River: Great fishing on an historic stream

In 1858, travelers heading west on the Oregon Trail couldn't wait to get to the New Fork River near Pinedale. The crossing there was about halfway along their journey to the West Coast, but more importantly offered a needed respite on the heels of an 18-mile waterless stretch of trail from South Pass. The crossing was one of the more difficult ones along the entire trail but well worth the risk considering this new route along the Oregon Trail shaved a week’s travel across daisy desert and bypassed expensive ferry fees at the Green River crossing to the south. The new shortcut, known as the Lander cutoff, had just been built by Frederick Lander and was the first federally funded road in the western U.S. The cutoff improved travel for more than 2,456 miles of trail from Burnt Ranch near South Pass, Wyo., to Fort Hall, Idaho.

Today, the land along this portion of the Oregon Trail and the New Fork River is far from the barren, uninhabited expanse it was in the mid-1800s. Extensive oil and gas resources have been discovered here that lead to development of drilling platforms, pipelines and roads. In some areas, development has compromised the visual and physical remnants of the Oregon Trail.

To mitigate the impacts of development, the Sublette County Historical Society, major oil companies and others recently joined to preserve a portion of Lander’s legacy trail by acquiring and developing an 82-acre site known as the Lander cutoff's historic site. This is a special area to preserve a portion of Lander's legacy trail by acquiring and developing an 82-acre site near the historic New Fork River crossing for public use. The site was opened in 2011.

Much like their emigrant predecessors, fishermen today experience a special excitement when reaching the New Fork. Modern visitors’ sentiments aren’t grounded in survival, but the solitude and world-class fishing provide valuable respite from the pressures and demands of busy schedules and heavy workloads. There are lots of streams that offer excellent fishing in Wyoming but new Fork is near the top of streams that are easy to get to, easy to fish from bank or boat, and played an important role in the settling of the American West.

THE FISHERY

The New Fork is one of the more productive trout streams in the state with a reputation for yielding large brown trout up to 7 pounds and good numbers of hefty rainbow trout. Though trout over 4 pounds are rare, it’s not uncommon to catch a number of fish over 20 inches long in a good day. The best way to fish the New Fork is by boat, although the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD) has recently acquired public walking access to over more than a mile of the stream near Pinedale (see below).

Fishing regulations allow anglers to keep three trout (any species), no more than one of which may be longer than 16 inches. Artificial flies and lures are required downstream from Mesa Road (outside of the instream flow segment). Check current fishing regulations before fishing any water.

HOW TO GET THERE:

WGFD has recently developed public access at three locations on the New Fork River consisting of the Airport Public Access Area (PAA), the East Fork Confluence PAA south of Boulder, and the Remnick PAA upstream from the Wyoming Route 351 bridge. The Airport PAA provides direct access to the instream flow segment. To visit this area, take U.S. Highway 191 approximately four miles south of Pinedale, turn right on Runway Lane and follow the signs through the gravel operation to the parking lot. Drivers are asked to please drive slowly through the gravel pit area being respectful to those working at the site. Walking access is available throughout this segment.

To visit the New Fork River Crossing, go 11 miles west on Wyoming Route 351 from its intersection with U.S. Highway 191. A quarter mile after crossing the New Fork River, turn right onto Sublette County Road 136 (Paradise Road) and head north. In about a mile on your right (east) you’ll come to Lander Wagon Road and the New Fork River Crossing.