

X-Stream Angling . . . on Sand Creek

An Up Close Look at Wyoming's Instream Flow Water Rights and What They Mean to Fishermen

The Setting

Public access is sometimes synonymous with “lots of company,” especially when it involves productive streams, scenic landscapes, and historic points of interest along major roadways.

The Sand Creek instream flow segment has all those features, but you won't find lots of company here. This isn't just a recent pattern. The Black Hills of Wyoming and South Dakota were sacred to the Sioux and were circumvented by European-American settlers until the U.S. government sent an expedition there under the direction of George Armstrong Custer in 1874 to explore for minerals. Discovery of small quantities of gold brought lots of visitors (and some notable Indian battles); but crowds thinned as westward expansion found more glamorous areas to make headlines.

Sand Creek drew outside interest again in 1927 when prominent publisher Moses Annenberg purchased a section of land along the creek on a whim while traveling to Yellowstone in 1927. He soon commissioned a vacation lodge called Ranch A, but like many great ideas, his family didn't share his affection for the area and only vacationed there one time. The property subsequently found favor with the likes of former governor Nels Smith, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and later the Game and Fish Department for production of trout and walleyes in the old federal fish hatchery. Today Ranch A is owned by the state and operated as an educational center.

Permanent public fishing access to a portion of Sand Creek was established in 1939 when the Game and Fish purchased 1,335 acres along the stream at a sheriff's sale for \$8 an acre. Over the ensuing 20 years much of the property was sold off but the commission retained fee title to 284 acres along this highly productive stream. Still, the situation on Sand Creek isn't much different today than it's ever been. This out-of-the-way stream is a prime example that great access to a great stream doesn't always mean great crowds.

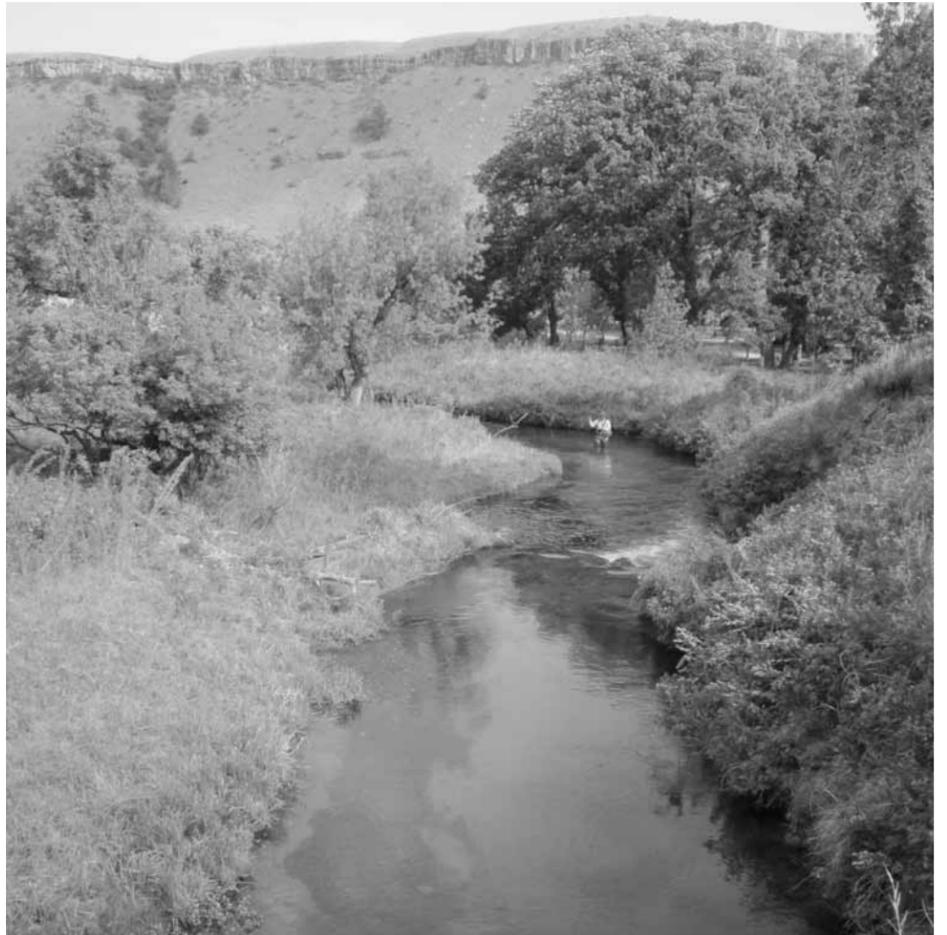
The Fishery

Sand Creek isn't your normal trout stream. Most Wyoming streams run high and muddy with water from snowmelt and rainfall during spring and early summer. Fishing doesn't get very good until flows drop to the lower base flows of summer and fall. Sand Creek is fed by springs near its headwaters that yield relatively constant flow year round. Spring creeks, as these waters are called, typically exhibit high populations of trout. The stable flows allow aquatic vegetation to develop, which supports high densities of aquatic insects – the stuff trout thrive on.

Department fishery biologists have studied Sand Creek as much as almost any other stream in Wyoming. They've found an exceptionally high density of brown trout that varies little from year to year. Most streams in the state have less than 60 pounds of trout per mile. Sand Creek boasts an average of 600 pounds per mile; and in some years almost 900 pounds per mile.

Unfortunately, such high density doesn't directly mean high catch rates. Brown trout are among the most wary trout to catch, and in the crystal clear, glassy waters of this spring creek, the slightest shadow or false cast can send them scurrying for cover.

Fish this creek like you'd hunt a big bull elk. Slip quietly along the stream margins. Cast small flies with light tackle cautiously upstream. Or slip a grasshopper and a bubble over the bank (except on the Ranch A section where live bait is not allowed). Though there are bigger fish in the stream, you'll find most of its inhabitants to be less than 12 inches long. The current fishing regulations allow the harvest of 12 brown trout (only one can be over 12 inches) and all other trout must be immediately released.



How to Get There

Sand Creek is located near the South Dakota border in northeast Wyoming. Take Interstate-90 to the small town of Beulah and turn south at exit 205. It's a short mile and a half on this good gravel road to the north end of the segment. You'll see signs indicating public access and Game and Fish ownership to help you know you're in the right spot.

For more information about this or other instream flow segments, visit the Game and Fish Department's web page at: gf.state.wy.us/fish/instreamflow/index.asp.

For more information about Ranch A, visit rancha.com/index.asp.

The Instream Flow

Permit Number: 5IF

Priority Date: December 7, 1987

Quantity: 16 cfs from January 1 through April 30, 18 cfs from May 1 through October 31, 20 cfs from November 1 through December 31.

Land ownership: All of the lands through which this instream flow segment flows are owned by the Game and Fish Commission.

Location and length: This segment is 2.5 miles long, extending from where the stream flows off commission land in Section 5 in Range 60 West, Township 52 North downstream to where it enters commission property in the middle of Section 7, Range 60 West, Township 52 North.

Rationale: The flows recommended from January through April are based on detailed studies that show this amount of water is needed to maintain survival of brown trout eggs over the winter at existing levels. Flows recommended from May through October are needed to maintain existing growth rates of adult and juvenile trout. Flow recommendations in November and December are needed to maintain brown trout spawning at current levels.

Status of the filing: A public hearing was held by the State Engineer's Office in Sundance on September 14, 1989. Most comments at the meeting were related to concerns about the impact of groundwater pumping in South Dakota on flow in the creek. Adjacent homeowners were also concerned about their ability to use water from domestic wells along the stream.

The State Engineer assured participants that their use of wells would not be affected and ultimately approved the instream flow right on August 22, 1991. This water right was adjudicated on November 7, 1997 – the first instream flow water right ever to be adjudicated by the Board of Control.