

Fisheries on the rise in infamous Bitter Creek



The Bitter Creek meanders through downtown Rock Springs during the summer of 2007 in this file photo. Game and Fish biologists found an array of fish species in the creek during a fish trapping project this spring. (Jeff Gearino/Star-Tribune)

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ROCK SPRINGS -- Locals may want to sit down before they read this, because it may be hard to believe. Ready?

The Bitter Creek has come alive with a surprising array of native aquatic species, including game fish, according to the Wyoming Game and Fish Department.

Yes, the infamous, muddy Bitter Creek that meanders across southwest Wyoming and through downtown Rock Springs is proving to be a "gem of sorts" as a fishery, said Game and Fish spokeswoman Lucy Wold.

The dirty brown creek has turned into something of an eyesore in spots, though city officials have been working on a cleanup plan in recent years. But for a lot of residents, it's hard to imagine a fishery in the Bitter.

Area residents often refer to sections of the Bitter Creek as "Shopping Cart Falls" because it's not unusual to see an overturned, half-buried shopping cart in the brown waters of the shallow creek bed.

But Green River Fisheries biologist Bobby Compton and other agency personnel have been increasing their efforts in recent years to conserve native aquatic species in Bitter Creek.

"When we are working on the Bitter Creek (fish traps) a lot of people stop and ask us why we are trying to catch fish ... when it is a polluted, warm stream," Compton said.

"I just smile and tell them how we have caught trout, burbot (ling) and even kokanee in the Bitter Creek," he said. "It truly is a local gem that requires more people to take notice and help with its protection."

Wold said fisheries crews have been focusing their most recent sampling efforts on the Bitter Creek on three native

species, including the flannelmouth sucker, the bluehead sucker and the roundtail chub.

Wold said biologists recently constructed fish weirs, or traps in Bitter Creek, Muddy Creek in the Little Snake River drainage, and in the Upper Big Sandy River. Weirs are fence-like structures set in the waterway that catch fish moving up and down the stream.

Agency personnel captured all three fish species and some other, non-native invasive species such as white suckers, creek chubs and burbot that were removed.

Compton said the current protection efforts on the creek are spurred by declining numbers of various fish species and a general lack of data on native aquatic species, including freshwater mussels, herptiles and mountain whitefish.

Additionally, there is a petition for listing the northern leatherside chub for federal protections under the Endangered Species Act.

Muddy and historic

Not very wide and not very deep, the roughly 80-mile-long Bitter Creek comes out of the Delaney Rim on the north end of Adobe Town in Sweetwater and Carbon counties, meandering along the western side of southwest Wyoming's Red Desert.

For most of its westward course, Bitter Creek parallels the path of the Union Pacific Railroad and Interstate 80.

The creek enters Rock Springs from the east, flows through the downtown area and empties into the Green River just east of the city of Green River.

Flows in the muddy-brown creek range from trickles during the late summer to swift-moving waters after heavy rains in the spring.

The Bitter Creek was the site of the infamous "Rock Springs Massacre" in 1885 that left 28 Chinese dead after a mob of local citizens crossed the creek, stormed a nearby railroad camp and burned it to the ground.

The historic creek has become something of an eyesore over the years, however, in part because the creek provides an easy dumping spot for old car parts, tires, shopping carts and other trash.

Several years ago, city officials -- under the auspices of the Urban Renewal Agency/Main Street program -- developed a master plan for Bitter Creek, with an eye toward transforming the stream into a recreation greenbelt through downtown.

Large pulses

Wold said agency biologists trapped fish during April and May in Bitter Creek.

During high flows in mid-April, biologists documented juvenile brown, rainbow and cutthroat trout, flannelmouth suckers, Utah chubs, white suckers and burbot -- mainly moving downstream.

"We are seeing large pulses of fish movement when rains increase flow and turbidity" in the creek, Compton said in a release. "We know that 150 fish moved downstream (the Tuesday) after the Memorial weekend rain event," including 40 to 50 small flannelmouth suckers.

"This downstream movement pattern of juvenile fish has been a very interesting find," he said.

Wold said biologists will maintain the fish traps throughout the summer to monitor fish movements in the creek.

Biologists will also be sampling sections of Bitter Creek between Rock Springs and Green River to determine if there is a resident population of flannelmouth suckers in the segment.

Funding for the project was provided through Gov. Dave Freudenthal's endangered species office. Area landowners including the Rock Springs Grazing Association, Anadarko, Inc., and the Union Pacific Railroad are participating in the project.

Compton said Bitter Creek has the potential to provide important habitat for a variety of aquatic species.

"Bitter Creek needs a little more respect and assistance from everyone," he said.

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