

Trout on the rise; new law protects fish

For local anglers, it's been three long years since the 2013 flood waiting for the St. Vrain River trout fishery to return. But the wait is almost over and the trout are coming back thanks not only to the new fish-friendly river restoration work but also because of the commitment of the town, state and some dedicated local residents.

And ensuring the success of the fish recovery there's a new state law that enforces the catch-and-release, fly-and-artificial lure only regulations.

Beginning this April, the Colorado Parks & Wildlife will strictly enforce the regulations that allow only flies and artificial lures and requires that all trout be "immediately" returned to the water within town limits. The use of bait and the keeping of any trout are strictly forbidden.

The town limits of the river are roughly from just above Planet Bluegrass to about 150 yards below the Highland Dam, and to the west boundary of Bohn Park.

Restoration key to fish health

The river down through town has been substantially changed this year as result of extensive restoration work. A deeper center channel and in-stream structures to create riffles and pools should promote higher fish populations.

The St. Vrain has been primarily a brown trout fishery, as browns are more adaptable to periods of warm water and low flows. The "new" river should be more accommodating to rainbow trout which require cooler, faster water.

According to Colorado Parks & Wildlife fisheries biologist Ben Swigle, the plan to repopulate the river after the flood relied on natural propagation of brown trout from the North St. Vrain, which had less in-river mitigation work following the 2013 flood. And while this natural restocking is occurring, some saw the opportunity to also establish a rainbow trout fishery.

Mike Clark of South Creek Limited in downtown Lyons said that more than 1400 rainbow trout have been stocked in the river. This effort was a collaboration of individuals, businesses, the town and state. The CPW stocked 300 fish, and the funds for the remaining fish came from Clark himself, Mike Kruse of the Laughing Grizzly fly shop in Longmont, the Town of Lyons Parks & Recreation Department and three local residents, who each contributed 500 dollars.

"These stockings represent three age classes of fish," said Clark. "Out of these stockings we hope will come 15-20 breeding pairs."

But the only way this stocking will rejuvenate the river's fish population is if they live long enough to breed. And that's where the enhanced enforcement aspect comes in.

Catch 'em, let 'em go

Before 2008, trout could be caught by any legal means in Lyons and up to four could be kept daily. Combined with fish-unfriendly kayak structures in Meadow and Bohn Parks, the result was a meager population of fish.

A 2008 effort by Clark and CPW's Swigle and supported by local anglers led the town to adopt a catch-and-release law which, while helpful, was weak because it could only be enforced by the town not CPW.

Following the decimation of St. Vrain trout by the September 2013 flood and subsequent flood mitigation work that winter, it was obvious that a more-enforceable law was needed to help the fishery rebound. A joint effort by the local St. Vrain Anglers Trout Unlimited chapter, the CPW and local residents led to the new state law.

The law, effective April 2016 (found on page 30 of the CPW fishing regulations), states fishing on St. Vrain Creek (north and south) "within the town limits of Lyons ..." shall be by "Artificial flies and lures only" and "Trout must be returned to water immediately."

John Koehler, the CPW district wildlife manager who covers the Lyons area, said, "It's the angler's responsibility to know the regulations," and ignorance of the law is no excuse.

Koehler and other CPW officers will patrol the river within town limits, including LaVern Johnson and Bohn Parks, for possible violations.

"These fish belong to the people of Lyons and are a key part of the restoration," said Clark. "Once you remove them, you can't catch them again."

Anyone witnessing a violation of the regulations should call Operation Game Thief at 1-877-265-6648, or Colorado State Patrol dispatch at 303-239-4501, who will notify the on-call CPW officer. The Boulder County Sheriff's office (303-444-4441) also has legal authority to address violators.

Greg Lowell

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