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Canal trout returned to Shoshone River

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Dave Sweet (left) of the East Yellowstone chapter of Trout Unlimited, and Tanner Rosenbaum, both of Cody, search for trout trapped in the Garland Canal. The group had a good day, with the help of at least a dozen volunteers, 487 trout were captured and safely released in the Shoshone River Monday. Tribune photo by Gib Mathers

A second chance to swim

With water draining from canals for the winter, the East Yellowstone chapter of Trout Unlimited once again is pursuing trout in draining irrigation canals.

As of Monday, around 2,200 trout had been captured in canals and released into the Shoshone River.

Members are off to an auspicious start, as the group averages about 2,000 to 3,000 trout each year.

Every fall, the canals around Cody and Powell close, leaving thousands of fish stranded in the depleting water courses. For the past 20-plus years, Bob Capron, chapter conservation chair of the local Trout Unlimited, has led the charge to rescue as many trout as possible.

"Field and Stream" magazine has recognized Capron's effort, making him one of six finalists in its annual Heros of Conservation. The article is in the October issue of the magazine.

Rescuing trout is a mission of mercy, and though less than 10 percent of the trout trapped in the canals are caught and returned to the Shoshone River by the group, those are the ones that will survive rather than die due to evaporating pools or from predation.

Around four years ago, a formal study determined 50,000 fish were lost in the Cody Canal. That equates to seven miles of the Shoshone River being devoid of fish, said Trout Unlimited Council President Dave Sweet.

The only real solution is to install screens in head gates to prevent fish from entering while simultaneously not interrupting the flow of irrigation water, Sweet said.

But that is expensive.

Sweet said it would cost approximately \$1.25 million to screen the Cody Canal.

Trout Unlimited is not at odds with the irrigation districts. Rather, the fish rescue is a cooperative effort with the districts. The districts want to save trout from entering the canal systems too, Sweet said.

There are around 12 self-cleaning screens around the state that don't interrupt the flow of water — five or six in the Big Horn Basin and three that are very effective on Trout Creek above Buffalo Bill Reservoir, Sweet said.

With the temperature in the low 40s and a steady wind nipping at wet, exposed skin, members of the group donned waders and trudged down the Garland Canal, just southwest of U.S. 14-A Monday morning. They were armed with nets and two electro-shockers that stun the trout making retrieval easier. Other volunteers followed, sloshing along behind with 5 gallon buckets.

Each shocker is attached to 45 pound pack that powers the device and a big ring on the end of the rod. The user swings the rod in the water, and the stunned trout rise near the surface. Then a volunteer slips a net beneath the trout, and — whoosh — captures it for transfer to a bucket.

Sounds easy, right? But the trout aren't that dazed, and they dart to and fro in the knee- or hip-deep, murky water.

"There's one!" says a netter.

Suddenly the water seems to surge with trout, catching just enough of the gloomy overcast light to sparkle like jewels within the greenish water.

Like the Three Musketeers, three netters stand shoulder to shoulder as though fencing with their gilled antagonists, thrusting their nets beneath twisting fins and raising their webbing in triumph to ease their sparkling prizes into buckets.

Many trout are fingerlings, but many are whoppers, too.

"They're making a run," Sweet shouts.

Like glimmering slivers of colored glass, a school makes a break. The net operators again dip their nets in a offbeat rendition of water polo. One net goes deep, another skims the surface. Up come sagging nets with three and four flopping trout each.

The rescuers are having a blast, but it is grueling work tromping through miles of canals.

Some of the Unlimited members have been trawling the canals every fall for years, saving trout. They make it look effortless, but it is hard work and demands finesse. Maintaining footing when the water is hip-deep and with bottom muck sucking at feet is a challenge unto itself.

Tanner Rosenbaum, 11, of Cody, spots a few trout. He glides his net through the grainy water and comes up with a feisty trout slapping its tail.

This is Tanner's third year helping rescue the trout from the canal, Sweet said, proud of the boy's skill and endurance.

Robin McClure of Cody eases a nice rainbow back into the Shoshone, holding its snout upstream. The trout undulates its body, flaunting its beauty for a heartening instant before vanishing in the river's channel.

McClure is a Trout Unlimited member.

"I just love seeing them swim away," McClure said watching a freed trout beat a hasty retreat. "They're back home where they belong."

One trout is not faring so well. Despite efforts to "resuscitate" the fish, it fails to revive and finally rolls belly up.

McClure is heartbroken, but Sweet reminds her that many more fish survived the capture and transport in the tank to once again swim the river.

Trout Unlimited will continue netting fish. Those wishing to volunteer can meet in the parking lot of Rocky Mountain Sports in Cody at 8 a.m. every morning through Nov. 2.

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