

Silver Bow begins bouncing back

Thanks to state and federal remediation, this Butte-area stream is showing hints of its cutthroat trout fishing potential. **BY TOM DICKSON**

For decades, no fish could survive in Silver Bow Creek, one of Montana's most toxic streams. Today westslope cutthroat trout numbers in this tributary of the upper Clark Fork River near Butte have grown to where Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks recently imposed a catch-and-release regulation with the goal of restoring a healthy cutthroat fishery.

It is the first time FWP has assigned special fishing regulations to the creek and its tributaries, part of a major Superfund cleanup ongoing since 1999. Previously, Silver Bow was so polluted with heavy metals in century-

old tailings from early silver and copper mines that fish entering the creek from tributary streams quickly died.

"There's no better barometer of the health of Silver Bow Creek than trout returning to their natural habitat," says Governor Brian Schweitzer, who celebrated the milestone earlier this year by casting flies into the stream with legendary trout angler Bud Lilly. "Fishing this creek is something no one has done since our great-great-grandparents."

Jason Lindstrom, FWP fisheries biologist for the upper Clark Fork drainage, says the trout are responding to 23 years of remedia-

tion by the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) and the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), along with restoration work by the Montana Department of Justice's Natural Resource Damage (NRD) Program. "They've gone in and removed pretty much all of the floodplain, which was contaminated by mine tailings, and rebuilt the entire creek channel," he says. "The heavy metals pollution has declined significantly, allowing the cutthroats to use the new habitat."

Lindstrom notes that the Silver Bow cutthroat population is by no means recovered. "Densities are still extremely low, probably less than 100 trout per mile," he says. "On other trout streams this size, we usually see more than 1,000 fish per mile." He explains that ammonia and excess nutrients discharged into Silver Bow from the Butte wastewater treatment plant are limiting further recovery. Plans are under way to limit effluent flows into the stream.

FWP's new special regulations require anglers to release all cutthroat trout they catch. "Because trout densities in Silver Bow are still so low, it is growing some very big trout right now," says Lindstrom. "And because cutthroat are fairly easy to catch, we figured we should get in there now with regulations to protect those large fish." Anglers can keep brook and rainbow trout under regional FWP regulations and are encouraged to do so, to reduce competition with the native cutthroat.

Decades of mining in the late 1800s near Butte and Anaconda, and subsequent floods that washed toxic mine tailings downstream, resulted in such extensive environmental degradation that in 1983 the EPA designated the area as a Superfund site. That same year Montana filed a lawsuit against the existing owner of the properties, Atlantic Richfield Company (ARCO), to recover damages for harming water, soil, veg-

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etation, fish, and wildlife in the Upper Clark Fork River Basin. As part of a 1999 settlement, the state received roughly \$130 million in damages to restore or replace the degraded natural resources.

Since 1999, a \$120 million project has been under way to clean up 22 miles of Silver Bow Creek from Butte to the Warm Springs Ponds. The DEQ, with oversight from the EPA, is coordinating cleanup of the creek with the NRD Program. The heavy metal removal is scheduled to be done by 2014.

The remediation and restoration of Silver Bow Creek is the largest project of its type in the United States and has won local, national, and international awards for environmental excellence, say state officials.

Schweitzer notes that federal Superfund activities at Silver Bow Creek and other sites have brought hundreds of millions of remedial construction dollars and thou-



SILVER LINING Silver Bow Creek contains deep pools, like in the Durant Canyon reach (top). Governor Schweitzer celebrates the return of trout to the creek with trout angling legend Bud Lilly (above). New regulations will protect the stream's big cutthroats, like this 18-incher (right).

sands of jobs to Montana's economy.

"In a few years, the project should be complete, under budget, and in the hands of the people of Montana," Schweitzer says. "Silver Bow Creek could become a blue ribbon trout stream for our children and our children's children to enjoy." 🐟



GRIM TIMES FOR TROUT By the early 1900s a dozen concentrators, smelters, and precipitation plants operated along Silver Bow Creek. William Clark's Butte Reduction Works (above, along a settling pond) was one of the largest facilities. High volumes of mine tailings, factory effluent, and city sewage led to extensive acid rock drainage and water pollution in the once-pristine stream.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: BUTTE-SILVER BOW PUBLIC LIBRARY; PAT MUNDAY; MT DEQ; MT DEQ