

Brook trout haven may see cutthroats again

Severed from the Snake for decades, Game Creek native fish restoration is being considered.

By Mike Koshmrl

For a stream that's so small it can almost invariably be hopped across, there are an astonishing number of brook trout in Game Creek.

It's not great news for fisheries managers hoping to uphold the Upper Snake River watershed as a stronghold for native Snake River fine-spotted cutthroat trout into this century and beyond.

The proof of Game Creek's native-non-native imbalance is in the numbers. Sampling the small species of char last week, Wyoming Game and Fish Department fisheries crews detected an estimated 720 brook trout longer than 3.8 inches in every mile of the stream. The estimate for young-of-the-year fish — those 3.8 inches or less — was 1,451 fish per mile.

Notably, not a single cutthroat, the only local native species of trout, was discovered upstream of South Highway 89.

Starting in a couple of years, however, cutthroat might stand a better chance to compete with the exotic species that now swarm Game Creek's willow-choked riffles, runs and pools.

A redesign and expansion of South Highway 89 is in the works, and when it's done a passable 207-foot-long ribbed box culvert will underlie the widened five-lane highway. It will be specifically designed to allow fish and other wildlife to get through, thereby opening 5 miles of spawning and rearing habitat that has been inaccessible to the Snake's



COURTESY PHOTO

Wyoming Game and Fish began sampling Game Creek earlier this year, finding healthy populations of brook trout above the South Highway 89 culverts but no native Snake River cutthroat.

cutthroat for decades.

"The best part about the project is it's right here in our backyard," Greater Yellowstone Coalition staffer Chris Colligan said last week on an outing up Game Creek.

"We all live here and recreate here," Colligan said, "and it would be very much an opportunity to expose the public to importance of the native fish and these nursery areas."

Today there are two culverts that take Game Creek's modest flows under the highway, one 60 and one 90 feet long. Both are steep and wide,

creating a shallow chute of water that fish cannot navigate.

As recently as the 1990s Game and Fish stocked the perennial stream that drains the backside of the eastern Snow King Mountain ridgeline with both brook and cutthroat trout, fisheries biologist Tracy Stephens said.

Since then there's been a big change in thinking on the wisdom of aiding the spread of the non-native brook trout, which is a fall-spawning species that has a leg up on spring-spawning cutthroat. Under the right



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Game and Fish technician Cory Abrams hikes into Game Creek drainage to sample trout populations by electrofishing the stream.

conditions, brookies can altogether displace cutties.

Game Creek, apparently, has the right conditions. After the stocking stopped the brook trout began dominating the watershed. Since 2002 Game and Fish has only found brook trout above the culvert.

"I've been trying to figure that out: why brook trout have done so well," Stephens said. "They seem to do really well in systems that have beaver pond complexes, so that might be part of it."

About 3 miles up Game Creek last week Stephens was trying to capture brook trout from one of the ponds with a gill net. There was aquatic life around, with more than one tiger salamander surfacing to snack on insects, but the brook trout proved elusive.

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