

Conservation

Clear Creek Colorado Trout Restoration Project/By Fred Fraikor



PHOTO BY FRED FRAIKOR

Given the history of stream abuse in Colorado, the Mayhem Gulch section along Clear Creek sounds like an unlikely site to begin a trout habitat restoration project. When gold was discovered in the stream in 1859, prospectors quickly traced the placer gold to its origin in the surrounding hills, igniting a gold rush far larger than the earlier one in California. Mercury amalgamation mills flourished in the boom towns of Idaho Springs, Central City, and Georgetown, followed by sprawling smelters at Blackhawk. The creek banks were blasted with high-pressure water hoses, and five different railroads constructed tracks on the creek banks to carry traffic to Golden and Denver. The final mining mayhem came in 1910, when the 4-mile Argo Tunnel was completed to connect all the major mines between Central City and Idaho Springs.

Even after the mining operations were closed in 1943, the tunnel continued to drain acid water and heavy-metal contamination into Clear Creek until the Environmental Protection Agency designated it as part of the Central City/Clear Creek Superfund Site. Treatment operations began in 1998 and although the water was free of contamination, much of the altered stream channel was marginal trout habitat.

In 2010, the West Denver Chapter of Trout Unlimited (WDTU) organized a Canyon Reach Project and raised approximately \$264,000 to engage engineers to stabilize about 0.75 mile of the stream channel in three sections, beginning at Mayhem Gulch. A hydraulic excavator meticulously placed logs to create structures that provide a good home for aquatic insects. A local quarry donated more than \$60,000 of granite boulders and transportation to install cross vanes and J-hook boulder structures that created deep pools for trout cover. Jefferson County expanded the project in to a recreation area, constructing

a pedestrian tunnel under the adjacent highway to provide safe passage to the stream banks from the parking lot. The project was successfully completed and dedicated in October 2011.

Recently, my wife, Judy, and I fished the restored sections with WDTU project leaders Miles Williams and Glenn and Jackie Edwards. Although the June runoff was still very evident, Glenn and Miles quickly hooked into wild brown trout below some boulder structures. Moving upstream, we saw with satisfaction a high school fly-fishing class taking educational advantage of a second section of restoration, thus

fulfilling another objective of the project.

As evidence that the trout were recovering nicely, Glenn laughingly held up a rainbow fingerling he'd hooked and "fought" in the rapids below a J-hook. In fact, Miles noted that state biologists have determined from electroshocking that statistically, this section of Clear Creek has the quantity of trout to be designated as prized "Gold Medal" water. It just needs more of them to grow longer than 14 inches, which, it is hoped, will happen in the near future.

Unfortunately, some mayhem still continues. Vandals have ripped up willows and stakes planted by chapter volunteers, and 21st-century gold seekers with portable dredges have undermined some of the carefully placed boulders and breached dams. County authorities finally posted warning signs that prospectors must stay 100 feet away from all fishing structures.

Aside from such problems, this restored section of Clear Creek is worth the easy jaunt west of Denver for a day of good fly fishing. Catch US Highway 6 at its intersection with State Routes 93 and 58 and drive 9.5 miles up the canyon to the parking lot at Mayhem Gulch. You can also find two other restored sections with parking adjacent to the stream about 0.7 mile upstream from Mayhem.

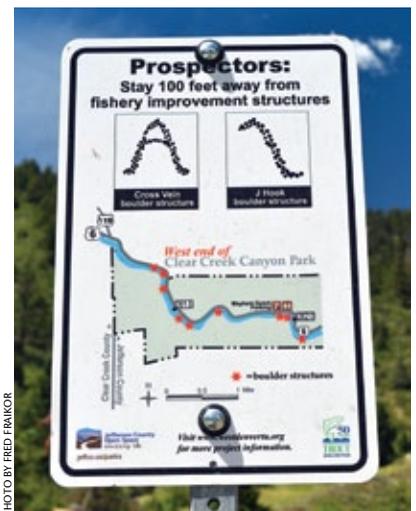


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