Yampa River, CO
A River Revival
By Ken Proper

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It was a morning at the end of December and after the revelry of New Year’s Eve, the gate would close, signaling no vehicles on the access road until after the spring thaw.

Paul Russell, a long-time guide with Steamboat FlyFishers, set up two-fly rigs for his clients. A size 20 Pale Morning Dun and black RS2 dangled below a white Thingamabob strike indicator on 6X tippet.

“The rainbows are deep in the pools. Keep your nymphs as close to the bottom as possible,” he advised. Ten months later, he recalled, “Boy, we caught a lot of fish that day.”

The size and deep bold colors of the rainbows dimmed the memory of cold, wet hands.

A likely Lake Catamount resident migrating for spawning comes to hand on a private reach section just below the BLM reach and Hubbard Summer Camp. All the local fly shops offer winter-time guided fly-fishing adventures (above). Wally Center fishes below the 5th Street Bridge in Steamboat. Hungry trout start to lose the deep overwintering runs in February, and head for riffles and seams. Fishing is best at midday (right).
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"The fishery responded favorably," Atkinson reports. "CPW staff, along with volunteers, have been working diligently to renovate the newly created streambanks with riparian vegetation."

Atkinson is still supplementing the small trout population by stocking German-strain, WD-resistant, 2- to 3-inch fingerlings to offset predation from an expanded brown trout population. In an effort to develop a brood stock of this unique rainbow strain, which exhibits a higher level of resistance to WD, the CPW closely monitors and manages the brown trout population in the 7-mile reach between Stagecoach Reservoir and Lake Caramount. Part of the management of brown trout has involved low-level redistribution of fish from upstream stretches within this section.

Sarvis Creek Confluence
In 1988, the Yampa Valley Fly Fishers (YVFF) received a co-funding grant from the CPW's Fishing is Fun Program for rehabilitation work on Sarvis Creek (aka Service Creek), which joins the Yampa river between Stagecoach Reservoir and Lake Caramount at the western edge of the Sarvis Creek Wilderness Area (created by Congress in 1993). Guide Paul Russell says, "I like that part of the Yampa. It fishes more like a river and not a tailwater." I like it too, year-round. I volunteered for that flyfishers club project with my toddler son in a child pack on my back. That experience spawned a lifelong love affair with the area for both of us. During winter, I ski along the Pleasant Valley Road, County Road 18, to fish the river. When I take my dog along, I need to curb his enthusiasm as snowmobiles pass.

For angling during January and February, red, black, olive, or gray midge patterns are best. I change colors often and it seems to help. Try small eggs and San Juan Worms, too.

By March, rainbows are approaching their spawning time; they depart Lake Caramount and become very active in the river. Nymphing the deep runs is still the best bet, but the tail end of riffles and seams hold fish, too. Small black stoneflies or a black Drake may work well with a worm or a midge pattern work well. Some huge fish swim by Sarvis Creek in the spring, and a slowly-retrieved streamer can produce the fish of a lifetime. Be gentle, release them to make more little rainbow, and avoid wading in their spawning redds.

Steve Henderson guides fly-fishing clients on private ranch water a couple of miles downstream from Sarvis Creek, as well as on the public Bureau of Land Management (BLM) reach. During the winter, he confirms, "Stay aware of the midge hatch. You'll see them as black dots on the snow. The emerging nymphs may not be black. Try throwing color, like something red, and if it doesn't work, change the color."

He continues, "It's the only winter hatch and if it isn't happening, use larger flies of different colors near the bottom to entice the trout. They are lazy and take the easiest meal." A Conehead Muddler Minnow or a sculpin pattern, dead drifted along the bottom and then swung down and across can live up a slow day, year-round. Work the well-oxygenated water from bank to bank. The trout stay deeper for protection on blue sky days. On cloudy days, Henderson likes charrreuse patterns.

Blue-Winged Olives start hatching in April and May, but even when not hatching, the nymphs abound. By June, Pale Morning Duns, Little Yellow Sallies, and Olive Stoneflies start hatching. Dry-fly angling can be excellent. Match the prevailing insects or fish sub-surface with an attractor stonefly pattern, such as a~ Mercer's Stonefly Nymph, as the lead fly trailed by a PMD emerger pattern. From July to late fall, the rainwater attracts more angling pressure and I try to go fishing during the evening or morning hours. My children are adult now, but I have fond memories of picnics and them with Dad, splash, and playing in shallow, sandy Sarvis Creek near the Yampa River confluence.

The BLM Reach
In 2013, Western Rivers Conservancy (www.westernrivers.org), a nonprofit dedicated to protecting outstanding river ecosystems, purchased a formerly private 45-acre property at the confluence of Sarvis Creek and the Yampa River called Hubbard's Summer Camp. The acquisition provided new public access to a covered stretch of trophy trout water and conserved the only unprotected land within an area that is otherwise safeguarded by wilderness, national forest, parks, and wildlife areas. In addition to creating angler and hunter access to a prime destination on 13 miles from Steamboat Springs, the project enhances ongoing conservation efforts to restore habitat for wild fish.
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In December 2014, Western Rivers Conservancy conveyed Hubbard’s Summer Camp to the BLM and U.S. Forest Service, which can now manage the land for the sake of conservation and public access. Later, at the summer opening ceremony, forested Dennis Jaeger announced, “This is for the children of the United States.”

Most of the land surrounding Hubbard’s Summer Camp is already protected. The property is bordered by the Sarris Creek Wilderness Area, Sarvis Creek State Wildlife Area, and BLM lands. Now that Hubbard’s Summer Camp is publicly owned, the convenor of Sarvis Creek and the Yampa River is in public hands as well—and forever protected.

Immediately below Sarvis Creek, the Yampa squeezes between a steep hillside and a rocky cliff to form this now-public section. The morning of the ceremony, the debris-choked cross-river fence was removed by volunteers, including me. Later, with a canoehead Muddler Minnow, I hooked and landed a brook trout that filled my net. It was a lovely introduction to new fishing waters.

The BLM public-access reach continues downstream until just before the Yampa flows onto the private ranches of Pleasant Valley. Several ranchers lease angling access to the fly shops in Steamboat Springs and to regional fly-fishing clubs. I hopped on a snowmobile and followed Henderson across snow-covered catch meadows to a private stretch of the river.

Crisp morning air, blue skies, and blinding bright snow greeted us. Majestic cottonwoods, stripped of leaves, stood bare in the splendid late-March morning sun. A bald eagle perched on a high branch watched us. Henderson suggested taking two rods, one for dry flies and another for streamers or large nymphs. The early runoff from Morrison Creek had dirtied the water a bit, but Henderson assured me, “No worries. I know we’re in the deep parts.”

He started with the dry-fly rod and then quickly changed to the nymphing rod. He landed a deep-bodied, brightly colored rainbow and implied it was a Lake Catamount resident moving up for the spawn. In two hours, with neon-like calm, he caught and released several rainbows and a few brown trout. The smallest fish was about 16 inches.

Chuck Lewis State Wildlife Area

The next public section below Lake Catamount is the Chuck Lewis State Wildlife Area (SWA). It’s named in memory of a skier, rancher, and chairman of the Colorado Wildlife Commission, Colorado Parks & Wildlife manages SWA to protect wildlife habitat and provide recreational opportunities. Most were purchased using sportmen’s dollars. In 2002, the Yampa Valley Fly Fishers and its 501(c)(3) Yampa Valley Stream Improvement Charitable Trust (YVSICT) committed to partnering in the Chuck Lewis (CL) Project with the then Colorado Division of Wildlife.

The previous owner of the ranching parcel had armored the Yampa’s banks with derelict automobile bodies in an attempt to control erosion of the surrounding bay meadows. This “Detroit riprap,” common in the West before the 1970s, was both ineffective and an eyesore. The YVFF Golf-Trot Tournament, a yearly fund-raising event, provided $33,000 for the removal of approximately 71 car bodies plus installation of six Roegen-type “j” holes in the CL project. Phase I during 2006. The large boulder vanes conditioned the thalweg, the natural riverine meanders, decreased the width-to-depth ratios, and allowed a smooth transfer of bed load. Subsurface rock clusters installed in riffles improved trout habitat; heavy equipment removed and placed riparian root wads to the river for streamside rehabilitation. Phases II and III continued with more vanes installed, and the planting of riparian vegetation (trees, shrubs, and grasses), creating a stabilized channel flowing through a currently terrific trout fishery. Attorney Drew Johnson, a member of the project staff, said, “We felt it would be a legacy project and it was our total focus at the time.”

Indeed, it was a successful. Turn west onto Colorado State Route 131 from US 40 a few miles south of Steamboat Springs. Just as the road curves around the Hayman Golf Course, take the first right and drive straight to the Hayman Golf Bridge. A paved parking lot is adjacent to bridge, and both up- and downstream, the Yampa flows through the Chuck Lewis SWA.

I fish there frequently and the hardest decision is whether to go upstream or down. Upstream features deeper water flowing through boulder vanes. The Trico hatches in August and early September can be epic. I’ve seen blizzards of the bugs flying upriver. For the best results, fish “drowned” Trico patterns along deep seams below the vanes. Caddisflies are active in the evenings and afternoons on cloudy days. Doubled dropper combinations produce well, too. I usually land more rainbows than brown trout above the bridge.

Downstream from the bridge, I like the Platte River Special, slabs, and other streamers. Predatory vegetation is present on the right side of the river. Heavy brush blocks the way, so leave your canoe or rubber boat at home. The Hayden Valley is a crowded area, and you may want to plan your trip around this stretch.

M and M

By Steve Henderson

Hook: TMC 208R, sizes 12–18
Thread: 6/0 Uni-Weave
Abdomen: Chartreuse turkey herl (or color to match natural)
Thorax: Pale brown herl
Wing case: Light dun Darlon or Z-lon

Downtown Steamboat Springs

The first stream-improvement project in the 30-year success story of the Yampa River occurred in downtown Steamboat Springs. Stewardship, volunteers, and grants to support habitat improvement have combined to produce an exceptional fishery. In 1985, a Colorado Division of Wildlife (now the CPW) electroshocking study produced just 17 trout in the river flowing through town. The same year, the Yampa Valley Fly Fishers club received a grant from the Steamboat Ski & Resort Corporation to improve trout habitat in that section from what is now Doctor Rich Weiss Park to 5th Street. Additional grants from the Steamboat Springs Chamber of Commerce and Summer Marketing provided funds for trout stocking and for educational signage and brochures. The state imposed a two-fish limit to protect the resource, the first special-limit regulation in the area. In 1990, an electroshocking study in the same location produced 165 trout, nearly a tenfold increase in five years. Today, this stretch is catch-and-release only, and while practically a stone’s throw from US Highway 40, the Yampa in Steamboat still feels remote and secluded.

The city created and maintains a paved bike/foot trail that provides excellent angler access to the river. Be sure to wade in the river and use the trail; don’t trample the banks. Within town, tubing, stand-up paddleboarding, and swimming in the Yampa are very popular midday activities during summer. All users need to share the resource with previous and etiquette.

With fewer users in the evening, I like to fish the downtown reach. Fifth Street Bridge to 9th Street is my favorite section because it’s close to the office. Steamboat Fly Fisher shop is steps away, and it holds plenty of big trout. In the summer, I enjoy fishing an Adams wet fly around structures, hooking trout as the sun sets behind the mountains. My buddy; Larry Frey, is easy to find somewhere between 6th and 1st Streets, year-round, with his Tenkara rod, fishing midges and small emeritus. The river can freeze during very cold Januarys. Bruce Lee, co-owner of Straightline Spots, suggests, "When in doubt, use a Prince Nymph."
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Mark Darlington raises rainbow trout with dry fly during a September evening spin from Chuck Lewis SWA. Caddisfly activity and Mahogany Dun hatches can be especially prevalent in the fall. Brown trout follow the spinners down-feeding, active rainbows approaching spooking. The Sarvis Creek SWA and the Hubbard Summer Camp sections fish more like a freestone river than a tailwater (right).

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Indeed, it was a successful. Turn west onto Colorado State Route 131 from US 40 a few miles south of Steamboat Springs. Just as the road curves around the Haymaker Golf Course, take the right turn and drive straight to the Gilly Brook Bridge. A paved parking lot on the right leads to the river and bridge, and both up- and downstream, the Yampa Flows through the Chuck Lewis SWA.

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Downstream from the bridge, I like the Platte River Special, sculptures, and other streamers. Predatory brown trout lie in 2 to 3 feet of water looking for an easy meal. Dead drift the streamer to the bottom and lift it on a swing with the current. The idea is to surprise trout into a reflexive feeding reaction. Keep moving to cover new water or fish the same area again with a pattern of a different color.

A second parking lot is located on the opposite side of the river. Cross Gilly Brook Bridge, turn right on County Road 14, and the parking area is on your right about 0.25 mile up the road (just past Elk Lane on the left). From this parking area, an easy, short walk through a sloping hayfield takes you to the river. In winter, watch for red foxes and in spring, look for sandhill cranes in the fields.

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Today, this stretch is catch-and-release only, and while practically a stone’s throw from US Highway 40, the Yampa in Steamboat still feels remote and secluded. The city created and maintains a paved bike/foot trail that provides excellent angler access to the river. Be sure to wade in the river and use the trail; don’t trample the banks. Within town, tubing, stand-up paddleboarding, and swimming in the Yampa are very popular midday activities during summer. All users need to share the resource with patience and etiquette. With fewer users in the evening, I like to fish the downtown reach. Fifth Street Bridge to 9th Street is my favorite section because it’s close to the office, Steamboat Fly Fishers shop is steps away, and it holds plenty of big trout. In the summer, I enjoy fishing an Adams wet fly around structure, hooking trout as the sun sets behind the mountains. My buddy, Larry Freet, is easy to find somewhere between 6th and 1st Streets, year-round, with his Tenkara rod, fishing midges and small emergers. The river can freeze during very cold Januarys. Bruce Lee, co-owner of Straightline Sports, suggests, “When in doubt, use a Prince Nymph.”
Yampa River NOTEBOOK


Where: Northwest CO, near Steamboat Springs.


Access: Walk-and-wade river with excellent access, including a city-maintained bike/walking trail, and various other sites.

Appropriate gear: 4- to 6-wt. rod, floating lines, 3X-6X tippets.

Useful fly patterns: Adams, Elk Hair Caddis, Blue-Winged Olive, midge patterns, Prince Nymph, Pale Morning Dun patterns, conehead Muddler Minnow, streamers, hoppers.


Summer can deliver great dry-fly action, with regular hatches of Pale Morning Duns, Green Drakes, Little Yellow Sallies, and Olive Stoneflies. PMDs hatch in the morning before the sunburns fill the river, and Green Drakes hatch in the evenings after most users leave for other activities.

Community Action

Community action again solved a problem in the late 1990s. The city of Steamboat Springs purchased a lot at 7th and Yampa Streets at Butcherknife Creek, then paved a parking lot and reinforced the adjacent riverbank with an "armoring" of 2- to 5-inch rock. Bill Chace, owner of Riverkeeper Inc., informed the recreation department that they had sterilized a tributary of the Yampa 100 feet from the confluence. He explained that soft armor would be better for the fishery and they listened. Nathan Proper, my son, 14 in 1998, made it his Eagle Scout Project with Bill as his mentor/advisor. Nathan raised $29,000 to restore the neglected habitat. It was truly a community project, with grants from Steamboat Ski & Resort Corporation, Yampa Valley Community Foundation, Norwest Bank, YVSICT, and volunteers from many walks of life. Nathan received the "Youth Philanthropist of the Year" award. Later, in high school, he gave a speech titled, "My Biggest Community Influence: Bill Chace is the Lorax," referring to a Dr. Seuss character concerned about the environment.

Chace says now, "I worry the younger generation thinks it has always been this way. There are a lot of good young anglers, but not many good stewards of the resource. How will we sustain this living river? It's like our bodies; it needs to be maintained once it is built. No one wants to hear this, but perhaps we need to pay more for fishing licenses. It's really cheap entertainment.

I was in Steamboat Fly Fisher buying some fly-tying material, when an older gentleman with a Southern accent said to me, 'I've fished all the big-name rivers. How have you kept the Yampa a secret?'

I replied, "Thirty years ago when someone caught a 17-inch fish, it was a big deal. Now many anglers realise it is common. Education, stewardship, and volunteers created our river's improvement. The Yampa is a great model for how to help a river. Establishing charitable trusts, fundraising, seeking grants, and stewardship from angling clubs are good places to start. I encourage all anglers to join a club, volunteer to sustain your fishery, and help educate your community. John Shevey, editor of this magazine, once wrote about how we often anthropomorphize our home rivers and how we come to see them as lifelong friends. In that spirit, I say enjoy the Yampa River. She's a beauty!"