

Gypsum Creek a model project Eagle County stream provides good blueprint for repairing damage

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Gypsum - As trout streams go, Gypsum Creek isn't anything special. Modest size. Ordinary scenery. Not many fish that would make you sad to forget your camera.

But there is this certain mile-long stretch that shouts for attention, not because it contradicts this picture, but for what it represents in a new order of Colorado stream management.

A development company, the Brightwater Club, has possession of this Gypsum Creek segment as part of a luxury home project that includes a golf course and, ah, yes, a fishing component. No surprises here. It's a corollary of a theme echoing across nearly every valley in the state, particularly in real estate-intensive locations such as Eagle County.

Brightwater, located near the place where the creek wanders out of the national forest into what once was ranchland, is notable for a couple of reasons.

First, it will include a public component, rare for developments in which exclusivity is a byword. The company has platted an access road to the creek, and public fishers will be able to participate in a reservation system for specific times and beats, beginning next season.

Anglers will discover a splendid little stream chock-full of browns and rainbows, with an occasional brookie sprinkled in for color. Most are on the shady side of 12 inches, with an agreeable number nosing up to 14. Chief operating officer Ian Hause, himself a fly-fisher, tells of an occasional mossback brown darting out from beneath a tangle of willow roots to carry another fly back to its well-upholstered lair.

But it is most significant for the way a stream suffering the usual degradation caused by livestock has been rehabilitated. Just short months after the project was finished, a visitor has to look hard to find traces of the work.

"The challenge was to get the materials to places with difficult access without damaging existing vegetation," said B.J. Urbiztondo, owner of Denver-based Bioterra Constructors, which executed a blueprint designed by Walsh and Associates of Boulder.

An artful blend of large cottonwood logs, boulders, cobble and streamside planting, the project was performed under the watchful eye of the Division of Wildlife with a primary aim of bank stabilization. In the process, it also created many more holding places for trout.

"They probably are more happy than they were before," Urbiztondo said.

Gypsum Creek is but the latest in a continuing series of stream improvement projects, public and private, aimed at helping streams recover from a variety of ills inflicted by humans and their livestock.

From mining to ranching, 150 years of commerce historically has not been kind to Colorado's riparian zones.

"Predominately, it's cattle damage," said Jim Walsh, who 25 years ago founded Longmont-based Stream Team, first on a list of restoration firms that numbers about a dozen statewide. "Cows like to hang out in rivers. They beat down the banks and chew on the vegetation. We end up with what I call the three rivers syndrome - three wide and only one-third deep, and then it's not worth a damn."

The task is to restore a channel in which the flow of water can reform a natural sequence of pools and riffles conducive to trout.

Highly labor intensive, such projects increasingly are sponsored by gentlemen landowners who have purchased traditional ranches and converted them to aquatic recreation. The Colorado Division of Wildlife also has been aggressive in reclaiming stretches of rivers it owns or leases, a process that could extend for many years, considering the time and expense involved.

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