

The Rifle River Story: Resurrection and Adoption

The Rifle River drainage covers 253,000 acres, with a main stem over 60 miles long, fed by over 140 miles of tributaries, both large and small. The Rifle fishery is diverse, from cold-water species that predominate year-round north of Greenwood Road, to warm water species below the town of Omer; between Greenwood Road and Omer (about 22 river miles), a healthy mix of both types of fishes coexist, with various species moving up- or down-stream seasonally. Additionally, because the Rifle is dam-free in all but the uppermost stretches of its West Branch, the River sees a significant influx of trout and salmon species from the Great Lakes in the spring and fall spawning seasons. The Rifle benefits from inflows from cold-water sanctuaries, typically Wilson, Gamble, Klacking, and Prior Creeks, plus Houghton Creek, and other, smaller streams.

The Rifle is, arguably, the trout fishery, of any size, nearest the Toledo, Detroit, Pontiac, Flint, Port Huron, Ann Arbor, Saginaw, Bay City, and Midland population centers, and lies close to the I-75 corridor, which is not far west of the river. There are indeed other, better-known streams further north, and west, but time saved in travel can be time spent onstream, and every extra mile driven represents additional and unnecessary carbon emissions from vehicles, making the Rifle doubly attractive to downstate fishermen and –women.

The upper section of the river is considered a cold water river system, likely of Blue Ribbon quality: that was not always so. In the early 1980's Trout Unlimited -- especially through Harold Kleinert -- brought focus to the Rifle River by successfully implementing both a cold-water bottom draw from Devoe Lake, and a diversion of a major headwater tributary, Gamble Creek, around Mallard Pond (a dark-bottomed shallow body of water that caused significant warming of its outflow), to keep water cool. In a very real sense, a greatly-expanded cold water trout stream was enabled through human intervention. This is not in conflict with Trout Unlimited's mission to "protect, reconnect, and restore," when one considers that the many cold-water tributaries and their resident fishes are now reconnected through their shared outflow stream. Lots of famous trout fisheries are tailwaters, all over the nation, and many of them were never trout fisheries to begin with -- monkeying with river systems sometimes yields rewarding results.

In the early 1990's a group was convened to hear a Rifle River Stream Bank Erosion Inventory, presented by Huron Pines RC&D and Trout Unlimited. At that time attendees were asked if they wanted to form a restoration committee to address sites identified in the inventory, and the RRWRC (Rifle River Watershed Restoration Committee) was formed, in order to HELP (Honor, Enjoy, Love and Protect) the Rifle River. Partners include the W. B. Mershon, and Ann Arbor, Chapters of Trout Unlimited, and several other non-profit, governmental, and private entities. To date, the partners have raised and spent nearly 1.5 million dollars to improve this resource, with projects including streambank erosion control, road-stream crossing improvements, stormwater management, and initiation of agriculture Best Management Practices.

Ongoing problems remain, and to preserve the Rifle as a cold-water fishery, the inflow of sedimentation because of badly-designed and poorly-maintained road crossings, direct livestock access, and general streambank degradation must be ameliorated. Sediment not only covers gravel and fills deep areas, thereby smothering larval forms of insects, limiting spawning habitat, and removing cover for fish, it also contributes to the warming of the river by broadening its course, consequently slowing the water and increasing its exposure time to sunlight.

In past efforts to address one aspect of the sedimentation problem, namely streambank stability, the Mershon Chapter, along with other Michigan TU chapters and conservation

partners, have employed and refined the use of “revetments” for stream bank stabilization. Early on, the use of rock was common, but now tree revetment is used almost exclusively. What has typically been employed in stabilization efforts are tiered layers of trees firmly anchored to slopes and eroding banks. Revetment building is only part of an array of restoration techniques we have used: lunker structure placement, beaver dam removal, spawning bed establishment and maintenance, and monitoring of fish populations and temperatures in the upper river have been undertaken.

Our Chapter’s ongoing involvement in maintenance, now including a river cleanup every September, is a great form of activity to involve our membership. Come out sometime, get in the water, and meet some of our people: we’ll even feed you. Activities are listed on our website, <http://www.mershon-tu.org/index.html>, under the “News” tab, and on our Facebook page. If you can’t join in one of our projects, join us onstream.



Revetments, Labor and Management



Cleanup 2016