

Browns Canyon's Monumental Fishing Opportunity

Article & Photos by Scott Willoughby



When it comes to their favorite places to wet a line, fishermen are pretty tight-lipped by nature. So it comes as no surprise that the one-year anniversary of the designation of **Browns Canyon National Monument** came and went last February with little fanfare among Colorado's angling community.

Besides, nothing has really changed along the scenic slice of the Arkansas River that qualifies among the nation's premier public trout fisheries. And that's precisely the point.

"I grew up in big, wide-open spaces in Nevada, and there's been enormous

change to the landscapes — transmission lines, oil and gas coming in, major hard-rock mines and other projects," U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) director Neil Kornze said while rafting through the newly minted monument last July. "So I love it when I see a

community come together and say: 'Let's not just trust that this will always be the way we love it. Let's do something about it.' It's not necessarily about changing something in a dramatic way. Sometimes it's about keeping what you've got and what you love."

Nestled into the high-country hillside between Buena Vista and Salida, there's so much to love about Browns Canyon that it's difficult to know where to begin. The whitewater rafting is world-renowned and the associated rubbernecking is off the charts. Surrounded by the highest concentration of 14,000-foot peaks in the Lower 48, oblong granite gorges and round-rock outcroppings that offer a colorful maze of cover for a diverse array of wildlife, the scenery may be even better than the fishing.

And that's saying something.

The upper Arkansas River made a bit of a splash in 2014 when Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) proclaimed a full 102-mile segment passing through Browns Canyon as one of the state's elite trout fisheries. The Gold Medal Trout Water designation from the confluence with the Lake Fork of the Arkansas, near Leadville, downstream to Parkdale (just above the Royal Gorge) is easily the longest contiguous segment among some 300 total Gold Medal river miles statewide.

That honor recognized change in a good way, moving the discussion away from the river's early reputation for heavy-metal contamination due to mining pollution and into the conversation for the title of Colorado's top trout fishing stream.

Gold Medal Waters are considered the highest quality cold-water habitats accessible to the public and offer the greatest potential for trophy trout fishing. In order to receive the listing, a river must offer abundant public access and consistently support a standing stock of trout weighing at least 60 pounds per acre and a minimum average of 12 quality trout — larger than 14 inches — per acre.

Those are metrics that no portion of the Arkansas River could claim prior to the remedy of headwater mining impacts that impaired water quality into the mid-1990s. Before then, fish in the river around Salida could survive only about three years until the cumulative effects of mining pollution would take their toll. Upstream near Leadville, the fish couldn't survive at all.

"It was acutely toxic," said Greg Policky, CPW aquatic biologist for the area since 1992. "It affected the food resources as well, so it wasn't just a survival thing. It was a growth and fitness thing."

These days, the Arkansas holds up to 5,000 fish per mile in places and can go

toe-to-toe with other famous Gold Medal trout fisheries in Colorado like the Frypanpan River, Gunnison River and select sections of the South Platte.

And there is much to grow on.

The fabled Mother's Day caddis hatch marching upstream from Canon City toward the headwaters every spring is a dry-fly fisherman's dream come true. Rapidly increasing numbers of stoneflies, mayflies, craneflies, midges and drakes provide unprecedented diversity of fish food. Policky is even attempting to reintroduce giant salmonflies through an ambitious transplant effort now that water quality has improved.

Right in the heart of it, Browns Canyon National Monument may very well be home to the most underrated fishery on the river. A wild and self-sustaining population of aggressive brown trout stretching the tape to 20 inches mixes with an increasing minority of hardy Hofer rainbows, stocked since 2009. Best of all, many of them have yet to be educated to the ways of the angler.

"One of the reasons we like fishing in Browns is because we get bigger fish here. Maybe not quite as many fish as we might get downstream from Salida, but we tend to catch a little higher-quality fish," said Bill Dvorak, owner of Dvorak Expeditions and holder of the first commercial outfitter's license issued by the state. "I think that's due to the lack of fishing pressure. There's just not as many people that fish Browns Canyon."

While that may seem counterintuitive along the 13-mile stretch of river recognized as the most popular commercial rafting run in the nation, if not the world, the Arkansas Headwaters Recreation Area's management plan in Browns Canyon forbids commercial rafting launches for all except float fishermen after 3 p.m.

The majority of the Arkansas River's float-fishing traffic actually flows through Bighorn Sheep Canyon from Salida down to Texas Creek, while wade fishing guides tend to congregate between Salida and Vallie Bridge. The smaller water high upstream between Crystal Lakes and Granite is also attracting more wade-fishing attention in recent years, since natural resource damages for mining pollution awarded in 2007 were used for in-stream and riparian habitat improvement completed in 2014.

Meanwhile, those late-day Browns

Canyon float-fishing launches tend to yield the sort of solitary experience so many anglers crave, ensconced in the natural beauty everyone appreciates. Wade fishing at sunset can be downright lonely.

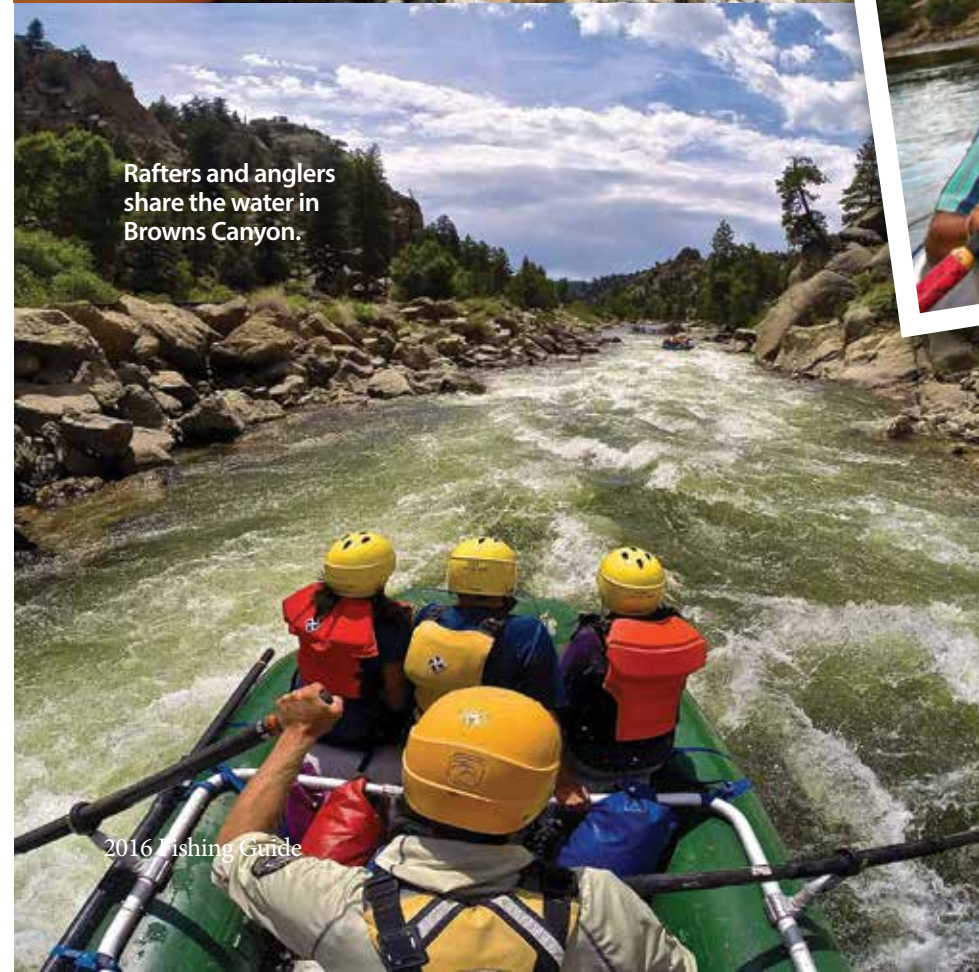
Ironically, that very sense of isolation harkens back to BLM director Kornze's comment about community coming together. Folks like Dvorak want to keep their favorite spot on an upward trajectory. And when it comes to preserving a public fishery through national monument designation like Browns Canyon or Rio Grande del Norte National Monument that begins at the Colorado border with New Mexico, the importance of the fishing and hunting community's united voice cannot be overstated.

"When you run down that river every day, you develop a sort of natural affinity for it and you want to protect it, you want to save it," said Dvorak, who helped rally the support of sportsmen as president of the grassroots Friends of Browns Canyon coalition. "Without the protections of the national monument proclamation, the federal lands could be sold off, mined or mismanaged under future federal administrations."

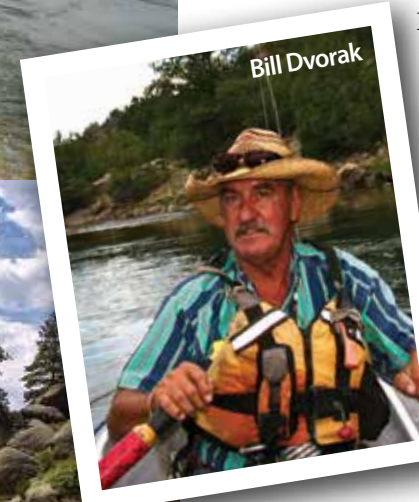
Dvorak and the sportsmen's conservation groups who helped push the monument proposal to the Oval Office for approval via the Antiquities Act recognize that there's an appropriate time and place to stand by your land. And when there's broad support for locally conceived proposals that assure public access, multiple use and appropriate wildlife management like in Browns Canyon, monuments can help establish enclaves that uphold continued opportunities for the public to fish and hunt in high-quality habitat within the boundaries.

That's a powerful tool to wield in this otherwise uncertain era of diminishing public access. The national monument label offers a layer of protection above and beyond Gold Medal that maintains the management structure, addresses sportsmen values and preserves the fishery in perpetuity.

That means those Browns Canyon browns have a lifetime to grow even bigger, multiply and reap the benefits of the cleanup efforts that have made the Arkansas River the favorite among Colorado fishermen. It gives the rainbow trout the space and strength to continue their rebound and reestablish their once



Rafters and anglers share the water in Browns Canyon.



robust numbers after a decimating decline due to mining pollution and the ravages of whirling disease. And it means that anyone with a fishing license will have the chance to walk into one of the most beautiful canyons in the world and wet a line anytime they feel like matching wits with a fish.

You might consider it a "Monumental Fishing" opportunity.

But perhaps most significant, the broad-sweeping protection applies to all historic uses of the habitat within the monument boundary. Beyond the Arkansas River running along its western edge from the Ruby Mountain boat launch to just beyond the ramp at Hecla Junction, Browns Canyon National Monument extends to nearly 22,000 acres of rugged, rocky terrain that's home to bighorn sheep, mule deer, elk, black bears, mountain lions and other wildlife, much of which resides in a 9,500-acre BLM Wilderness Study Area. Another 11,836 acres within the monument boundary falls under jurisdiction of the San Isabel National Forest.

Like the rest of Browns Canyon, those areas are destined to remain cooperatively managed between local, state and federal agencies, just as they are currently, preserving the backcountry integrity of the vast landscape alongside a multiple-use tradition of fishing, hunting and livestock grazing. Hiking, biking, horse-

back and OHV trails also will retain their designations once the plan built from years of community input is formally ratified.

So maybe Colorado fishermen should take a moment to put down our rods and pat ourselves on the back. We picked the ideal time and place to speak up in the name of not changing a darn thing. Browns Canyon already comes pretty close to perfection right now. And it always will. 🐟

Scott Willoughby is a frequent contributor to Colorado Outdoors. This article is copyrighted by the author.