



# Upper Arkansas River

## FISH SURVEY AND MANAGEMENT DATA

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**General Information:** The upper Arkansas River offers excellent fishing for brown and rainbow trout from Leadville through Canon City. Anglers enjoy plentiful access (68% of this reach is open to the public) and with up to 5000 trout per mile anglers catch rates are high for both walk/wade and float anglers. Lake Fork Creek to Parkdale designated Gold Medal January 2014.

**Location:** Lake, Chaffee, and Fremont Counties. See page 2 for map. For further information go to <http://cpw.state.co.us/placestogo/parks/ArkansasHeadwatersRecreationArea/Pages/MapsDirections.aspx> or <http://www.nowthisiscolorado.com/directory/activities/fishing>

**Recreational Management:** Wildlife (719-530-5520), AHRA (719-539-7289).

**Fishery Management:** Coldwater angling for brown and rainbow trout.

### Amenities and General Info.

- Over 80 miles of public access for walk/wade anglers (detailed maps available from several private sources)
- Numerous boat access points, facilities, and amenities managed by AHRA (see link above)
- Guided wade or float fishing available (see AHRA Fishing Outfitters List from above link)

### Previous Stocking

The Arkansas River is predominantly a wild brown trout fishery, however rainbow trout have been historically stocked to increase species diversity and angling opportunity. A whirling disease resistant rainbow strain has been stocked since 2009 in an attempt to establish a self-sustained rainbow trout population.

### Regulations

- Statewide bag and possession limits apply for most of river except as follows
- From US Hwy 24 overpass below Leadville downstream to near Two Bit Gulch (5.8 miles)
  - \* Artificial flies and lures only
  - \* Bag and possession limit for trout one fish 12" or shorter
- From Stockyard Bridge (Chaffee Co Rd 102) below Salida downstream to Badger Creek (7.5 miles)
  - \* Artificial flies and lures only
  - \* All rainbow trout must be returned to the water immediately
  - \* Limit on brown trout is four fish of any size

### Sportfishing Notes

#### Brown Trout

- Most common species representing over 80% of the trout community
- Average 12" with high numbers to 16" and an occasional fish taken over 20"

#### Rainbow Trout

- Add angling diversity to the trout community
- Average 14" but grow well in the Arkansas with a higher proportion reaching lengths over 16" and 20"
- New strain, Gunnison River Rainbow (GRR) began stocking in 2017.

#### Popular Insect Hatches

- BWO (mid-March to mid-May)
- Mother's Day caddis (mid-April to mid-May)
- Stoneflies, mayflies, hoppers (summer through fall)





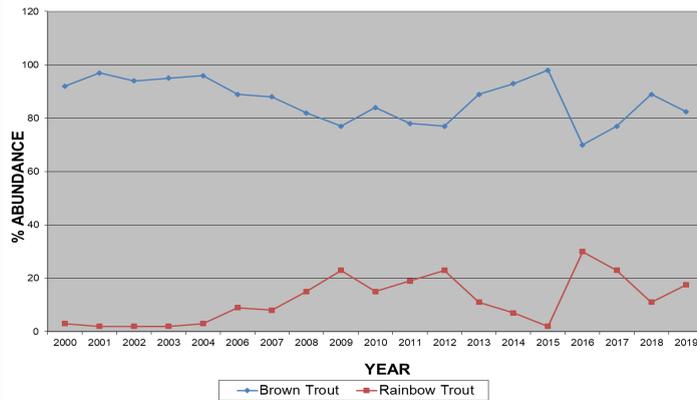
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## 2019 RIVER SURVEY DATA

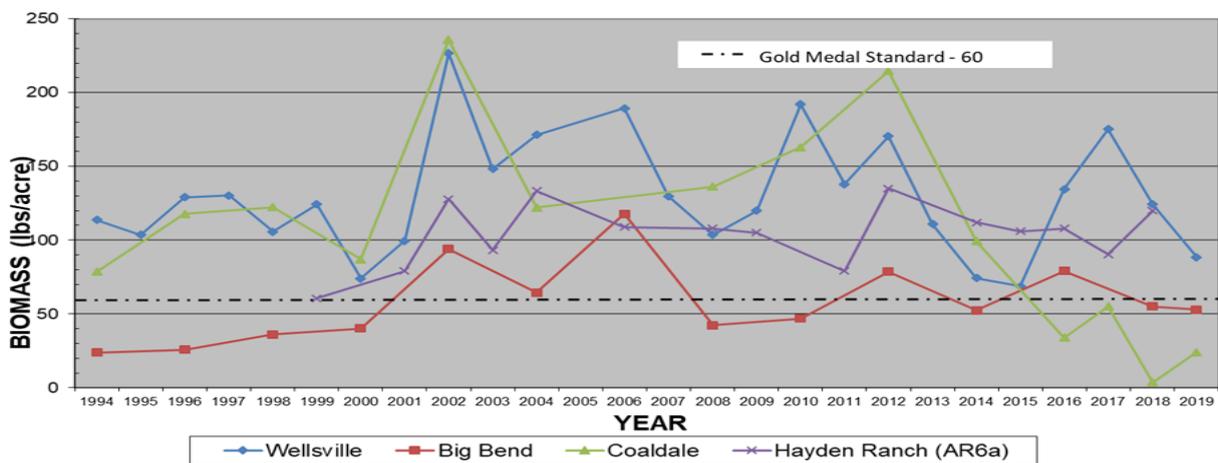
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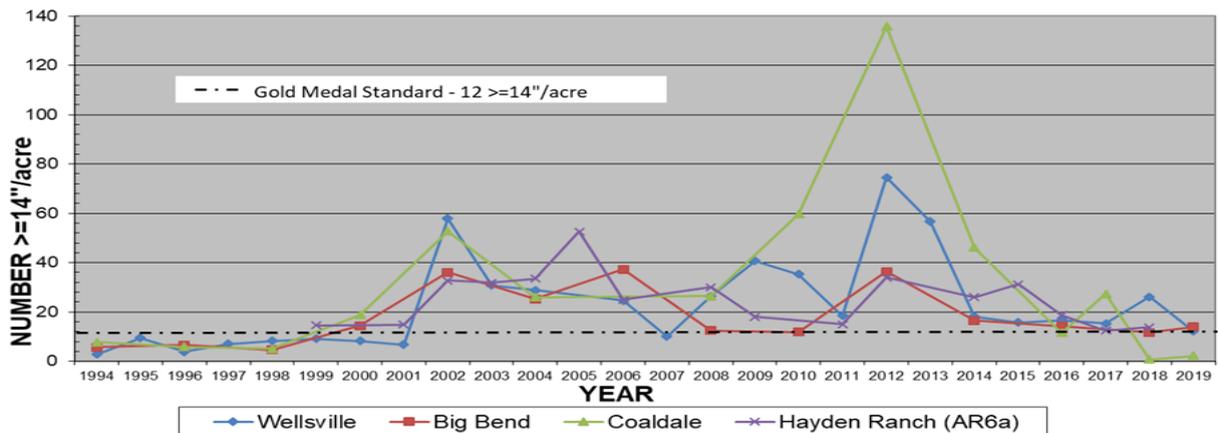
ARKANSAS RIVER TROUT COMPOSITION, WELLSVILLE, 2000-2019



ARKANSAS RIVER TROUT BIOMASS, 1994-2019



ARKANSAS RIVER TROUT  $\geq 14$ "/acre, 1994-2019





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## 2019 FISHING FORECAST

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One-hundred and two miles of the Arkansas River from Lake Fork Creek to Parkdale was designated as Gold Medal water in January 2014, signifying it as one of the finest fisheries in the state. Trout catch rates, size, and vigor should be good in 2020 and with abundant public access anglers can find ample opportunity to enjoy this excellent freestone fishery.

\*The Hayden Pass Fire of 2016 has had significant, negative effects on the trout population in a long section (23 miles) of the Arkansas River. 1.5 miles downstream of Coaldale, CO, where Big Cottonwood Creek enters the Arkansas, is the beginning of the most heavily impacted section of the Arkansas. Population level effects last as far downstream as Canon City, CO. Heavy rainfall events that fell on top of the Hayden burn scar caused historic flash flood events, and deposited sediment over the substrate of the Arkansas River. The flood events alone, when intense enough, can cause harm and cause trout mortality. The deposition of sediment creates a longer-lasting problem, by filling in the interstitial spaces of the substrate, effectively causing a massive reduction in aquatic invertebrate (fish food) habitat. As such, the lowest ~23 miles of Gold Medal designation are not meeting the Gold Medal criteria. Anglers are encouraged to focus their fishing efforts upstream of Coaldale, where the fishery remains excellent. In time, CPW expects the impacted, lower section to fully recover and once again meet Gold Medal standards.\*

Brown trout are the most prevalent species found and are caught most often by anglers. They average 12 inches long with good numbers to 16 inches and an occasional fish taken over 18 inches. They sustain themselves through natural reproduction.



Rainbow trout are less prevalent, but CPW continues to work towards creating a self-sustaining rainbow trout population in the Arkansas. Rainbow trout grow well in the Arkansas, averaging 14 inches, with a higher proportion reaching lengths over 16 and 20 inches. Historically, rainbow trout fry were eliminated by mining pollution and whirling disease (WD). Heavy metals no longer kill fry and six inch WD resistant rainbow trout (Hofer/Colorado River) have been stocked since 2009 in hopes of establishing a self-sustained rainbow trout population. Wild fry were produced in 2012 but very few have been collected since. This stocked hybrid has recruited poorly to age 1, perhaps struggling to survive in the Arkansas River. Management objectives have shifted toward a desire for a wild, more genetically fit strain. In early spring of 2017, 2018 and 2019, the Wellsville area was stocked with a wild, pure genetic strain of Gunnison River rainbow trout (GRR) that has shown resistance to whirling disease. This is a pilot program to see how these fish survive. Fall sampling in 2019 showed good survival of the new rainbow strain. CPW plans to produce more of these fish in the coming years to expand the stocking effort in the Arkansas River in 2020. These rainbow trout were stocked at a size of 3-4" on average, so anglers must be patient as we hope to see these fish survive and reproduce naturally in the next several years. Some GRRs are now in excess of 17"!

There is year round insect action on the Arkansas River for the fly fishing enthusiast! The most famous hatch on the Arkansas River is the Mother's Day caddis fly hatch. It begins in mid-April near Canon City and progresses upriver as water temperatures warm to about 54°F. Stoneflies and mayflies hatch throughout the summer and fall along with good hopper action. Midges are the winter mainstay and from mid-March to mid-May baetis mayflies are abundant, arguably rivaling the caddis hatch in fishing popularity. Lure fishermen do very well with Panther Martins and small plugs that imitate fingerling trout and bait anglers find ample success with natural baits such as night crawlers. Bait angling is particularly effective during runoff when most fish are close to the bank where the current is less. Bait angling is allowed most places on the Arkansas River except for a five mile stretch in Hayden Flats below Leadville and a 7.5 mile stretch below Salida from Stockyard Bridge to Badger Creek.



# Upper Arkansas River MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

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Salida Service Center

CPW is now going on year 4 of Gunnison River rainbow trout (GRR) stocking at Salida East, and results are still pending. ~60,000 3-4" GRRs (~20k annually) have been stocked at the Salida East boat ramp since 2017. Survival and growth of these rainbows has been good, and each age class has shown up in our 2019 survey efforts. Some of the 2017 age-class have now grown to over 16" in length! The underlying management goal is so see these rainbows successful spawn and sustain themselves naturally, a goal that has been elusive for the past decade plus on the Arkansas River. 2020 will be the first year that we expect to see any natural rainbow trout fry in the river, now that we have age-4 rainbows (sexually mature) in the population. GRR stocking efforts will expand in 2020, and monitoring efforts will continue annually.

The river trout fishery will improve with proper flow management including egg hatching and fry emergence, trout feeding efficiency, insect hatches, and angler satisfaction. Water flow is the single most important habitat variable affecting fisheries in the Arkansas River, whether by itself or in combination with other factors.

The Arkansas River trout population above Lake Creek is a product of the unique habitat found in this reach. This fish population has improved dramatically since heavy metal remediation and with favorable flow regimes most years, trout biometrics remain consistently high, remarkable for a river of this elevation. Instream and riparian habitat enhancement efforts completed in 2014 have further improved this fishery.



It has been suggested over the years to introduce a large forage item to the Arkansas River biota to boost trout growth and fitness. *Pteronarcys californica*, the giant salmonfly, was chosen to enhance forage opportunities for trout, to resurrect a native population that experienced a local extinction, and to enhance fishing opportunity. Across 3 years, approximately 133,000 nymphs were stocked at eight different locations (six in 2012) of the Arkansas River in the southern part of Chaffee County and northern part of Fremont County. Nymphs begin molting in early May and numerous exoskeletons are observed at all river release sites by late May in 2013 and 2014. The hatch seemed to closely follow the true onset of runoff when water temperature reached 50°F. Despite considerable effort in 2015, none were found. Further monitoring efforts from 2015 through 2018 turned up no results. At this point in time, it does not look like the introduction of the salmonfly was successful. Acute doses of heavy metals from the headwaters may still be limiting the viability of the salmonfly. Luckily, Colorado anglers have access to a number of other rivers that offer opportunities to fish the salmonfly hatch.

