



# Gunnison River Below Crystal Dam

## FISH SURVEY AND MANAGEMENT INFORMATION

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**General Information:** The Gunnison River in the Black Canyon and Gunnison Gorge is a Gold Medal wild trout fishery that stretches over 40 miles from Crystal Reservoir to the town of Austin and provides many diverse wading and float fishing opportunities

**Location:** There are many access points in Montrose and Delta counties predominantly in the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park and the Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area. For access information and regulations see:

<http://www.nps.gov/blca/index.htm>

<http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/nca/ggnca.html>

**Primary Management:** Gold Medal quality coldwater fishing for wild brown and rainbow trout

### Amenities

- Popular foot trails include Warner Point, Red Rocks, Chukar, Bobcat, Duncan, Ute, and West River Trail
- Drive-to camping available in the National Park in East Portal and on the BLM along the South River Road
- Wilderness hiking camps and boating camps available in BLM wilderness area, see BLM web page for details
- Boating access is available by pack in only at Chukar trail. The float from Chukar to the North Fork includes class III and IV whitewater
- Float fishing access is available at the Gunnison Forks, Cottonwood Grove, and Orchard boat ramps off South River Road.

### Regulations

- From Crystal Res Dam downstream 200 yards:
  - Fishing prohibited as posted.
- From 200 yards downstream of Crystal Res dam to Relief Ditch diversion (5 miles above Austin Bridge):
  - Artificial flies and lures only.
  - Rainbows must be returned to water immediately.
  - Limit on brown trout is 4 fish of any size

### Previous Stocking

The Gunnison River is managed primarily as a wild trout water, with the exception that since 2004 whirling disease resistant rainbow trout have been stocked throughout the river to re-establish wild rainbow reproduction. These fish are typically stocked as 1-2" long fry.

### Sportfishing Notes

#### *Rainbow Trout*

- Highest number of rainbows occur in the East Portal area and upstream of the North Fork
- Good flies include midges, pheasant tails, scuds, elk hair caddis, salmonflies, hoppers, and black wooly buggers
- Important hatches include BWO's, grannom caddis (April/May), salmonflies (June), and golden stones (June)

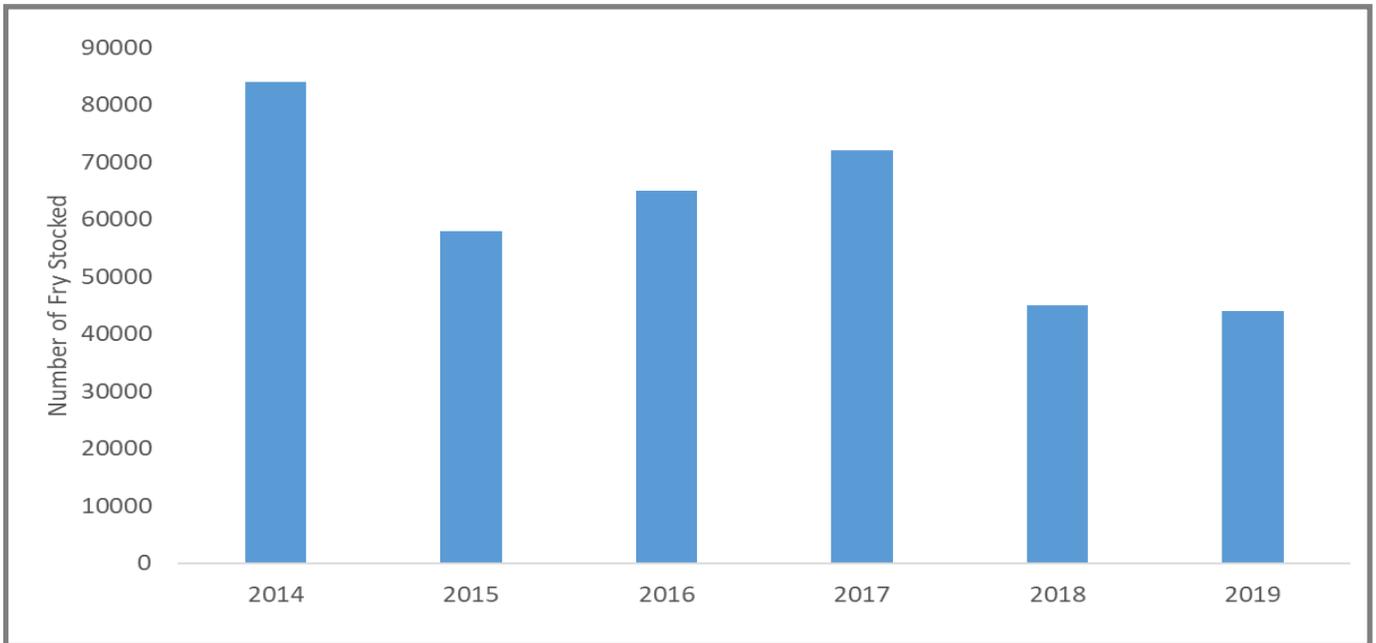
#### *Brown Trout*

- Brown trout are abundant throughout the river, Ute Park is a good spot
- Best fishing times include May, June, September and October.
- Fishing is best in the evening, at night, and early morning hours
- Good flies include wooly buggers, stoneflies, and bunny leaches

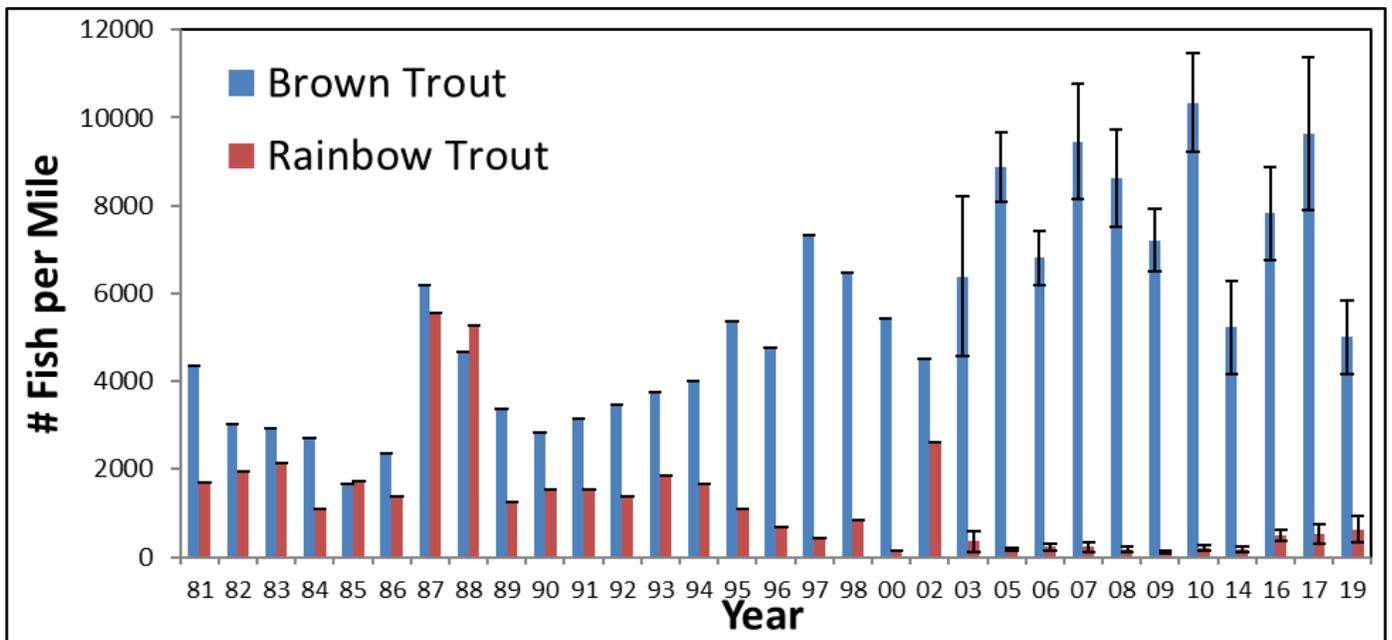


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**Figure 1.** Number of Gunnison River Rainbow Trout (GRR) fry stocked between Chuckar Trail and Red Canyon Rapid 2014-2019. These fry are spawned at East Portal annually, and have been shown to have resistance to whirling disease. CPW is stocking GRR fry in the Gunnison River along with other rivers in the state in an effort to overcome the effects of whirling disease.

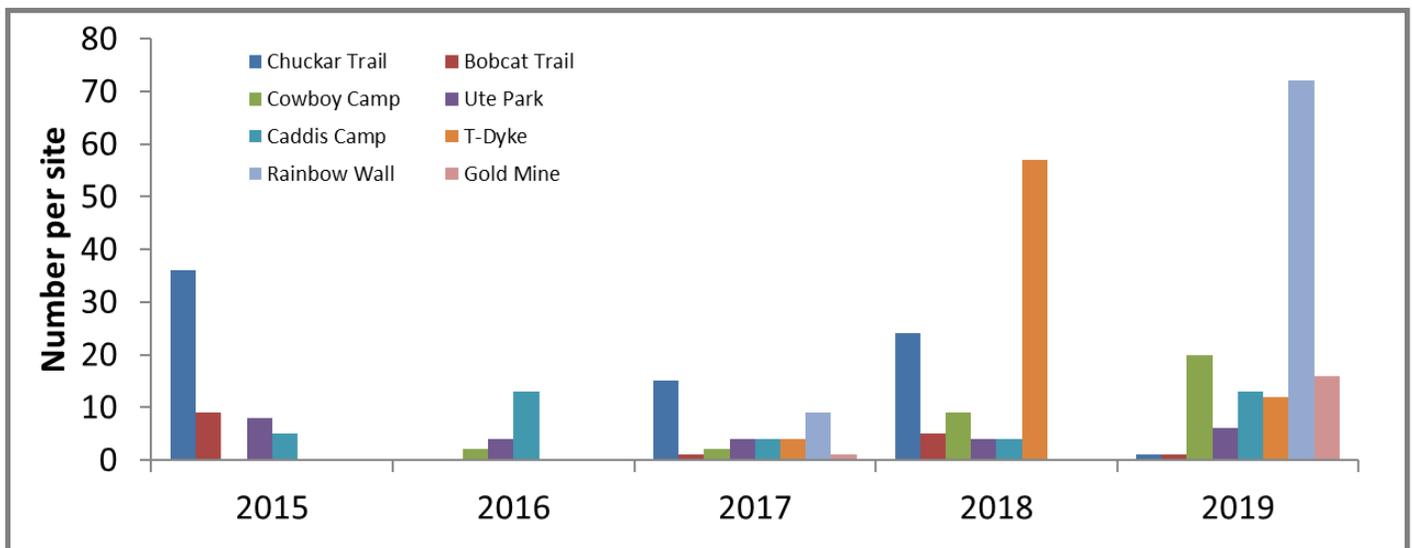


**Figure 2.** Trout population estimates for fish over six inches from the Ute Park section of the Gunnison River 1983-2019. Whirling disease was first found in this section of river in 1995, resulting in drastic declines in the numbers of rainbow trout in the river, and a boom in the number of brown trout in the river. GRR stocking started in 2014, and we have seen the rainbow trout population increase from an estimated 173 fish/mile to 630 fish/mile from 2014 to 2019.



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**Figure 3.** Number of wild rainbow trout fry estimated at each of eight 50-foot long sites sampled through the Gunnison Gorge 2015-2019. The numbers of wild rainbow trout fry appear to be increasing following the stocking of GRRs from the East Portal. This suggests that wild reproduction is returning to the Gunnison River, and that the adult rainbow trout population should continue to increase over the coming years.

## Management Summary

The trout fishery of the Gunnison River in the Gorge continues to be one of the highest quality Gold Medal fisheries in Colorado and anywhere in the west with 5 to 10 thousand trout per mile over 6 inches long. The fishery is still dominated by brown trout which, despite successful rainbow trout reproduction, are limiting the recovery of rainbow trout through competition and predation. Recent stocking of whirling disease resistant rainbow trout from the East Portal (GRR) appears to be resulting in an increase in both the number of adult rainbow trout and also wild rainbow trout fry through the canyon. CPW will continue to monitor this fishery to inform future management opportunities with GRR stocking. The high numbers of brown trout in the Gunnison River are limiting both the recovery of rainbows, but also the maximum size of trout in the river, and anglers are encouraged to keep brown trout.

The 2020 fishing forecast for the Gunnison River is good, and anglers should expect to catch good numbers of rainbow and brown trout from 12 to 20 inches, with the possibility of larger fish. Access at the East Portal and North Fork Gunnison confluence (Pleasure Park) is easiest, and offers great angling opportunities. For a more adventurous trip and increased solitude, plan carefully, and hike into the canyon either in Black Canyon National Park or within the Gunnison Gorge National Conservation



*Wild rainbow trout fry from the Gunnison Gorge*