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Trout Unlimited aids spring creek

By Peter Vandergrift, Enterprise Staff Writer

A local chapter of Trout Unlimited helped a rancher fund a restoration projects on the historic Armstrong Spring Creek.

Work began on Thursday and ended Sunday on five separate projects on the two-mile long spring creek, which runs through the O'Hair family ranch six miles south of Livingston.

The projects focused on creating deeper pools and runs for trout that live and spawn in the creek, said Justin O'Hair, 37, the fifth generation of O'Hairs to live and work on the ranch.

The largest project was the construction of an island in a wide, shallow piece of the creek created when the Yellowstone River flooded in the mid-1990s.

The floods changed the creek bed, making less deep water for the fish.

The new island and restored channels created deeper water for the trout, O'Hair said.

As early as Sunday, rainbow and brown trout had moved into the improved area, O'Hair said Wednesday.

O'Hair and George Anderson, a local fly shop owner, spearheaded the project. The local TU chapter got involved when O'Hair broke his leg and rehabilitated with a physical therapist who was a TU member. The man suggested that O'Hair talk to the group, which provides funding for the stream enhancement projects, among other things.

"I would have been happy with \$200 dollars," said O'Hair.

What he got was \$1,000 from the Joe Brooks TU chapter and a matching sum from the Madison/Gallatin chapter of TU. This basically paid for the projects, he said.

The mission of TU is to conserve, protect and restore North America's cold water fisheries and their watersheds, according to Kerry Fee, a Joe Brooks TU board member.

Fish predation by birds was an issue after floodwaters from the mid-1990s flattened and filled in portions of the stream. The shallow water made spawning fish weary of attacks from above and trout moved out of the area, said O'Hair.

Since the spring creek connects to the Yellowstone River, it becomes a major spawning ground for river fish in the spring and fall, said Fee.

When first approached about the project, TU officials had concerns about funding a project on a private creek that charges a rod fee to fisherman.

But because of the important spawning habitat on the creek, the decision was made to finance the projects, Fee said.



Enterprise photo by Garrett Cheen

A fly fisherman wades Armstrong Spring Creek Wednesday afternoon, March 7, to a newly constructed island funded by Trout Unlimited aimed at enhancing trout habitat.

The work on the creek took about 26 man hours, many of which were done by Jim Darr who ran the excavator, scooping and distributing rock and dirt.

The spring creeks in Paradise Valley are a huge draw for fisherman all over the world. O'Hair said some of the more famous patrons to fish Armstrong's Spring Creek were former president Jimmy Carter and retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor.

The "big spring," as O'Hair calls it, pumps around 300 cubic feet per second of water into the creek.

This flow keeps the water open year-round for fishermen and livestock, O'Hair said.

Shortly after he settled in the Paradise Valley in about 1876, O'Hair's ancestor, O.T. Armstrong, read in a newspaper about 160 acres of land with a spring for sale. Armstrong found out about the public sale just the day before it was to happen.

He rode his horse all day over the mountains to Bozeman to buy the property, said O'Hair.

It's a good thing he did, since the spring creek has been a great source of water for livestock and extra income for the ranch, said O'Hair.

"Had we not been managing the stream and charging a fee to fish the creek, we may not still be here," O'Hair said of the family ranch.

The ranch charges a per angler/per day rate of \$40 in the winter, \$75 in the spring and fall and \$100 in the summer.