featured

Takin' care of the

By Nelli Williams

Let's face it, trout are pretty wily creatures. They outsmart many of the die-hard, get-up-before-sunrise and fish-till-dark anglers out there.

But Snake River fine-spotted cutthroat trout in the Jackson area might have met their match. While Bill Healey has traveled the world chasing trout, he's now trying a new strategy: he's bringing the trout to him.

How? Healey has dedicated time and energy the past three years to restoring and enhancing trout and riparian habitat on a section of Cody Creek. The creek runs through his property two miles west of Jackson before joining Three Creek, which then meanders its way to the Snake River.

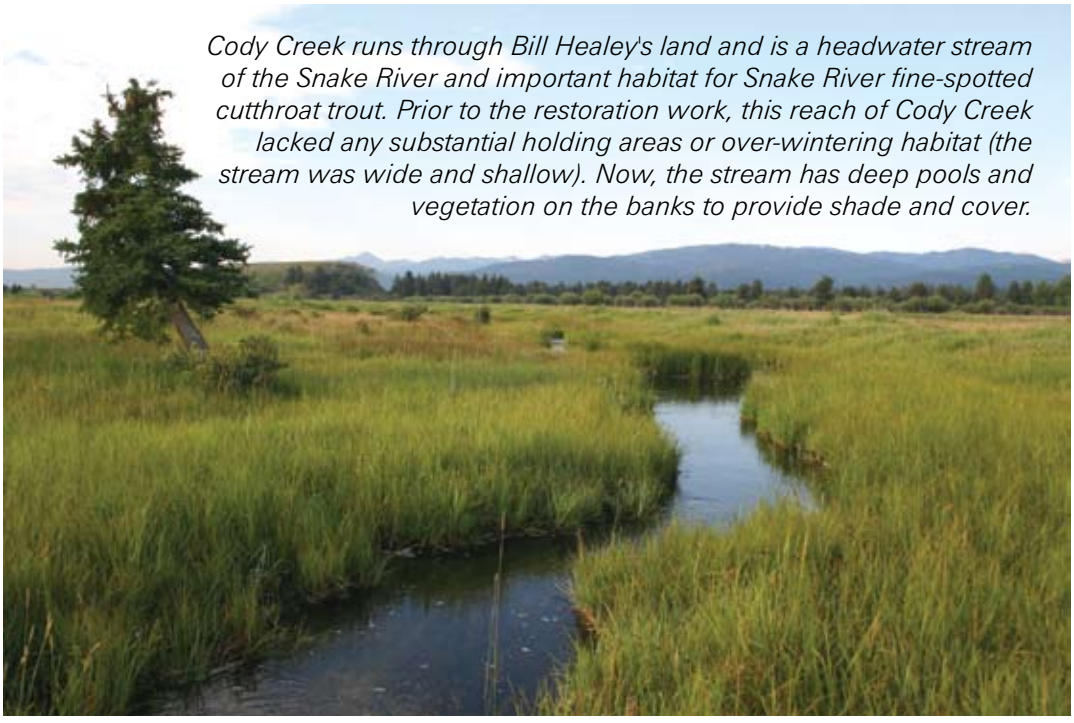
Trout need several basic things to thrive: access to winter and spawning habitat, clean, cool water, plenty of food, and a place to hide. As Healey is proving, all of these things can be done to some degree if your property has a river or creek flowing through it.

Step 1: Removing fish barriers

Wyoming's rich ranching and agricultural history has transformed waterways. Although many dams and diversions still provide much-needed water to local ranchers, some of these structures are obsolete. Scott Yates, Trout Unlimited's (TU) Wyoming Water Project director, says, "Barriers like dams present specific challenges to trout because they often prevent natural migration from downstream winter habitat to headwater spawning areas."

Healey had three fish barriers on his property: one small diversion dam and two additional barriers created long ago by the construction of several artificial ponds. He removed the dam and placed fish ladders at the outlet of the two ponds. In addition, his downstream neighbors teamed up on the effort and removed two more fish barriers.

"At first, all this work seemed piecemeal, but, by everyone doing a little bit here and there, we ended up having some pretty big impact on the way trout are able to move in Cody Creek," Healey observes. Because of this hard work,



Cody Creek runs through Bill Healey's land and is a headwater stream of the Snake River and important habitat for Snake River fine-spotted cutthroat trout. Prior to the restoration work, this reach of Cody Creek lacked any substantial holding areas or over-wintering habitat (the stream was wide and shallow). Now, the stream has deep pools and vegetation on the banks to provide shade and cover.

landowners trout

trout now swim all the way from the Snake River to their original spawning grounds at the headwaters of Cody Creek. Before starting such work, consult with the proper agencies and your local irrigation district (see story page 12).

Step 2: Clean, cool waters

Trout often act like canaries in coal mines of times past, serving as indicators of the overall health of a watershed. If trout are suffering, something isn't quite right. Proper management of lands surrounding trout streams is crucial to the welfare of fish, and grazing management can be a key component in this management. See "How grazing management affects water quality" in the Winter 2008 edition of *Barnyards&Backyards*, available online at http://barnyardstobackyards.com/articles.htm#Winter_2008.

Riparian areas along streams act like sponges and water filters – they absorb pollutants and excess organic matter and slowly release water back into streams after rains, which moderates flows that might otherwise cause flooding. Improving trout habitat also improves water quality by reducing sedimentation from bank erosion. Streams also naturally create diverse habitats as they search for the easiest path to the ocean. These habitats include bends, riffles, and deep pools where water is well oxygenated and can escape the warming effects of the sun.

When Healey purchased the property 12 years ago, he did some research to find out what his portion of land and stretch of stream looked like before all the roads, homes, and irrigation canals. Upon discovering most of his property was a wetland with Cody Creek running through it, Healey began restoring the area to its natural state.

He restored the former wetland areas by redirecting water to low areas (see story page 12). The return of cattails and other native vegetation resulted in an abundant array of wildlife species. "I see moose, elk, eagles, deer – the whole realm of wildlife species, right from my back porch. That's one of the things I enjoy most about living here," Healey notes. He also deepened several natural pools in the creek and ponds on his property providing trout a cool refuge during hot summer months and warmer waters during the heart of winter.

Step 3: Provide cover and food

When Healey bought his property, it had some streamside vegetation to provide shade for trout and protection from predators, but it lacked the large, in-stream structures trout love. To address this, Healey and his consultants strategically placed large logs and rocks in the streambed, paying careful attention to how they might alter the stream's flow. He also placed several rock structures in the bottom of the ponds' deep pools. Not only do these boulders and logs provide great habitat for trout, they provide cracks and crevices for trout's primary food source – aquatic insects.

Phil Cameron, Jackson Hole TU Chapter president, says this about the project: "Several board members had the opportunity to visit Bill's property immediately after the work was completed. The scope and quality of the enhancement work was carefully planned to provide maximum benefit to native trout. It's clear Bill Healey has set high standards for the beneficial impact a thoughtful, motivated, and trout-conscious landowner can have on local streams."

Healey's efforts are paying off. "It's working – not perfectly, though. The fish don't instantly know where the good habitat is, but they are figuring it out,"

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— Bill Healey

An aerial view of Bill Healey's property near Jackson.

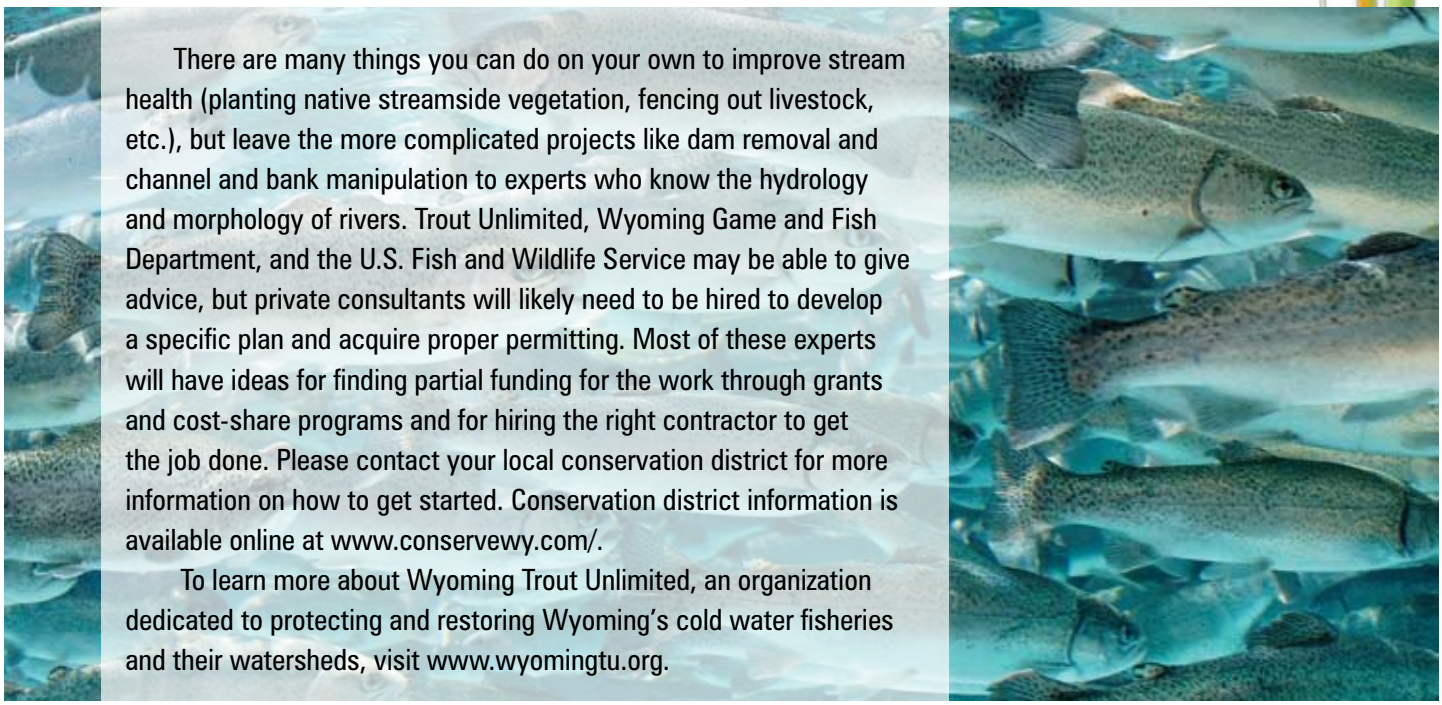
Healey says, and chuckles. "I'll keep tinkering. . ."

The trout are a little more confident in Healey's stream work than he is. Last spring, Snake River fine-spotted cutthroat trout spawning beds, called redds, were discovered in the headwaters of Cody Creek for the first time in many years.

"There's satisfaction in that. Knowing you've done the best you can to improve the land and water," Healey acknowledges. "I'm just a caretaker here. I'll come and go. I just do what I can to enhance and preserve this place while I am here."

He adds, "I've also put my property into a conservation easement, which puts some guidelines in place about future management practices …it helps ensure the work I've done here stays around for awhile."

When asked how the fishing is now, Healey responds with a grin on his face, "It's too easy! But my grandkids sure love it…"



There are many things you can do on your own to improve stream health (planting native streamside vegetation, fencing out livestock, etc.), but leave the more complicated projects like dam removal and channel and bank manipulation to experts who know the hydrology and morphology of rivers. Trout Unlimited, Wyoming Game and Fish Department, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service may be able to give advice, but private consultants will likely need to be hired to develop a specific plan and acquire proper permitting. Most of these experts will have ideas for finding partial funding for the work through grants and cost-share programs and for hiring the right contractor to get the job done. Please contact your local conservation district for more information on how to get started. Conservation district information is available online at www.conservewy.com/.

To learn more about Wyoming Trout Unlimited, an organization dedicated to protecting and restoring Wyoming's cold water fisheries and their watersheds, visit www.wyomingtu.org.

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