

Get wild: Wet springtime snow is great for our watershed

Columns [FOLLOW COLUMNS](#) | March 31, 2022

Harlan Kimball
Get Wild



A rainbow trout is pictured on the Arkansas River in Colorado.

Harlan Kimball/Courtesy photo

It's almost that time of year where dirty water brings nutrients and life back into our rivers, streams and still waters. Anglers get excited for spring runoff. It's not the time to sit back because rivers are high or muddy. Instead, it's a time to dust off your big fly patterns and waders. For trout, runoff is their sign to come out of their winter hideouts and eat, eat, eat. Much of a trout's nutrition and body weight comes primarily from feeding during runoff. Abundance of food multiplies tenfold during this time, allowing fish to gorge on nutrient-rich offerings emerging from banks and riverbeds.

One of my favorite hatches to fish at the beginning of runoff is the famed salmonfly hatch. Every year, usually at the end of May, a large stonefly, called a salmonfly, begins to emerge from the banks of the Colorado River to shed its casing and dry its wings. Stoneflies, about the size of your pointer finger, lift off into the air and fall to the river, where eager trout are willing to strike. Eventually, trout have gorged themselves so much that fishing begins to slow. You can find some fish that have a crunchy feeling along their stomach because of all the swallowed salmonflies.

Last year was one of the most productive salmonfly hatches in some time. Due to a smaller spring runoff, these bugs were more vulnerable on the surface of the water, and trout were taking every opportunity they could to pack on pounds. It's not unusual to catch and release 20-30 fish per day on large dry flies during this hatch.

How spring runoff plays out will determine how productive fishing with these giant bugs is. One thing for anglers to keep in mind is timing and location. The best fishing may last only a few days and usually not longer than two weeks. In terms of location, the hatch starts downstream and makes its way up the Colorado River as water temperatures begin to reach anywhere from 55-57 degrees. If you keep an eye on water temperatures, you should be able to catch this hatch and fish it successfully.

Early spring is also a suitable time for us to gauge the health of our watersheds. As of now, the Colorado River basin snowpack is sitting at 102% of normal. This is good but not great. For us to make it through the dry season with cold, high flows, we need a few more snowstorms and low springtime temperatures to hold our snowpack for when our watershed needs it most.

Pre-runoff begins at lower elevation (below 10,000 feet) in early spring and slowly moves above 10,000 feet as overnight temperatures begin to rise. Lower sections of the Eagle, Colorado and Arkansas rivers have begun to see small spikes in flows, but I do not expect to see runoff fully begin until late May or early June. Be sure to check on river flows weekly as we expect things to start changing with warmer temperatures in the forecast. Don't shy away from fishing a river if you see a spike in flows. Fishing the first flow increase of the season can be very productive for anglers.

An awesome resource for researching river flows around our state is at DWR.State.co.us/tools/stations.[↗] Embrace springtime runoff! There's plenty of excellent fishing locations to explore around Colorado this time of year.



Harlan Kimball

“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Harlan Kimball is the marketing manager and shop employee at Cutthroat Anglers.

Support Local Journalism

As a Summit Daily News reader, you make our work possible.

Now more than ever, your financial support is critical to help us keep our communities informed about the evolving coronavirus pandemic and the impact it is having on our residents and businesses. Every contribution, no matter the size, will make a difference.

Your donation will be used exclusively to support quality, local journalism.

[**DONATE**](#)