

Redd dawn TU chapter puts spawning trout to bed

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Imagine for one moment that you leave your parents, your friends and your home for a fantastic job. After a few years, you decide to return home to start a family.

Your tiring journey ends by discovering everyone and everything important to you is gone - vanished for good.

This happens to hundreds of trout that make tireless journeys to what they believe will be suitable spawning habitat. Upon arrival, they find creeks filled with large rocks void of small gravel vital for reproduction.

One group of fishermen set out to put that problem to bed.

Armed with buckets, sledge hammers and steel reinforcing bars, members of Trout Unlimited's Chestnut Ridge Chapter recently installed eight spawning beds or "redds" in the distilling basin of the Youghiogheny River.

Through their efforts, the volunteers hope to provide trout with better opportunities for success in spawning.

"There are a number of big fish caught here in the fall and nobody is stocking them," said Tom Shetterly of Trout Unlimited's Chestnut Ridge Chapter.

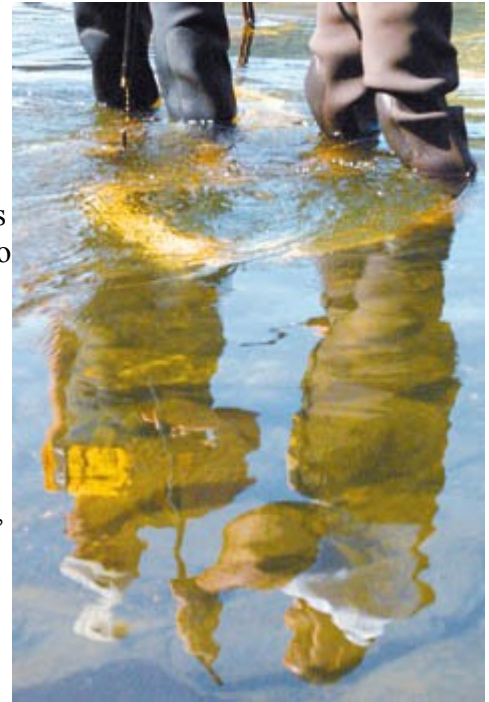
"We figured the trout were coming back to spawn."

He said fish are more than likely coming back to the cooperative nursery where they were raised 12 to 16 months earlier. Trout unlimited established the hatchery in the distilling basin in 1998.

Shetterly said the nursery produces about 10,000 trout each season.

The fish are released throughout the year, mostly in the Trophy Trout section of the Youghiogheny River, a few miles below the hatchery.

Shetterly said Trout Unlimited decided to create the redds because the distilling basin lacks small



gravel necessary for trout to spawn.

Cecil Houser, manager of the cooperative nursery unit of the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission said fine gravel is needed to protect the trout eggs.

He said as female trout dig depressions in streambeds with her tails, gravel particles are swept into the current and washed downstream, taking with them fine sediment that can attach to the eggs and cause them to die.

Once spawning beds are cleared out, only clean gravel for the eggs to safely attach to for protection are left.

The spawning beds made by the Trout Unlimited volunteers artificially provide this prized gravel.

The redds, crafted from two-inch by four-inch boards, are eight square feet in size.

They are placed in fast-moving water and covered with small gravel that is one to two inches in diameter.

Gary Smith, a fisheries technician for the Fish and Boat Commission, said water quality and temperature also affect success rate for trout reproduction.

"Here in Pennsylvania, we have one of the worst acid precipitations in the world," Smith said.

"But the fact that trout can survive year round with the bottom release from the reservoir shows the water temperature doesn't seem to be a problem."

Houser said it is common for stocked trout to become acclimated to their surroundings and spawn the year they were stocked in creeks that can support fish year round with cool water in the mid-50 degree range.

Cold water was a problem for the two youngest men in the work party the first week of the project.

"I was in there four hours last week up to my chest with no waders," Mark Kovacs of Uniontown said.

"I got out right when I lost consciousness," he said joking with his construction partner, Tom Shetterly Jr. of Grindstone.

As they waited for more gravel and spawning boxes to be sent out to them in a small boat, the duo continued working hand-in-hand - one holding a six-foot piece of rebar to pound the holding rod into the creek's bottom and the other tirelessly swinging a five-pound sledge hammer.

The rebar was run through the corners of the spawning boxes, pounded into the creek's bottom and bent to keep them secure.

Eventually the spawning beds were in place and the duo sipped sodas stashed away in their insulated waders as the scorching sun beat down on their backs.

After a short break, a boat with a dozen buckets of gravel was pulled across the current with a long, yellow rope by the pair of bed makers.

Both men swung their upper bodies in a perfect rhythm as if to the beat of music while reaching for buckets from the boat and dumping the precious loads of rock into the spawning beds.

Twenty-five tons of gravel were painstakingly transported in this fashion to cover the spawning beds with at least six inches of stone.

Shetterly says he is excited to come back in the fall and hopes to discover fish taking to these man-made spawning beds.

"It's one of those things we really don't know if it will work," Shetterly said.

"We try to emulate nature as good as we can and see what happens."

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