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## A Perfect Cast

### Big Sky Youth Empowerment Project and Yellowstone Park Foundation join forces for research and outdoor mentorship at Trout Lake

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK — When it comes to fly fishing, Joe Davis of Gallatin Gateway can't get enough. As cutthroat trout speckled the surface of Trout Lake last Sunday, Davis rounded the lakeshore sending a fresh cast to each rise, eager for a hook up. "The fishing is great," Davis said. "To come up here and catch big, wild cutts like this — it's unreal." Davis, a member of Big Sky Youth Empowerment Project's summer fly fishing program, joined other members from around Gallatin Valley to help the Yellowstone Park Foundation conduct research on Yellowstone's wild trout population.

The group gathered at the Slough Creek parking area near Lamar Valley in the northwest corner of the park before heading up the road and the sometimes steep trail to Trout Lake.

BYEP is an organization that connects "at risk" high school students ages 14 to 18 with adult mentors between the ages of 20 and 30. The group meets three times a week for 12 weeks during summer and winter sessions, learning life skills through workshops and outdoor-oriented trips.

YPF is a group that raises funds for research in YNP. Aimed at projects that preserve, protect and enhance the Yellowstone experience, the foundation directs funds to projects that are beyond the scope of the park's federal budget.

One of the projects YPF is currently funding is an assessment of hybridization between Yellowstone cutthroat trout and rainbow trout in Trout Lake.

"When Yellowstone became a national park in 1872, the only salmonoids in the park were cutthroat trout and Arctic grayling," said Bill Voigt coordinator for YNP's Volunteer Fly Fishing Program. "When they started introducing rainbows and browns down in the lower Madison, that change."

Today, non-native fish species such as lake, brown and rainbow trout compete with the three species of cutthroat native to the park — Snake River, Yellowstone and westslope — for food and space.

Additionally, rainbow trout share a close enough genetic makeup with Yellowstone's cutthroats that the two species are able to crossbreed, making genetically pure cutthroat trout an increasing rarity in the park.

"That's causing a problem because cutthroat trout are the native trout of Yellowstone," Voigt told the group as they prepared to embark. "We want to protect those fish that are getting bred out."

Because the National Park Service has a limited budget and manpower, the YPF has employed the help of the many anglers who come to Yellowstone each year to enjoy the region's world-class fishing opportunities. By measuring, weighing, photographing and collecting DNA samples from fish caught by volunteers, the YPF can provide the park's aquatic research division with valuable information that would otherwise be unattainable.

It just so happens that the members of BYEP were more than happy to oblige.

"Not only are these kids given the chance to fish, but they are learning about the resources that they are growing up around," said Molly Pickall, grants manager for YPF. "They are learning why (these fish) are so important to protect and how they, themselves, can do something to help."

Those enrolled in BYEP's summer fly-fishing program who complete the 12-week course and graduate from the program are rewarded for their efforts not only with fond memories and new knowledge, but also with the gear they used so that they may continue their pursuits in the outdoors.

"It is great fishing up here. The surroundings are awesome," said BYEP participant, Jake Moore. "I had fished a couple of times before and I have been evolving with this group and tuning my skills."

The BYEP has become increasingly popular with high school students and adult mentors since its inception in 2001. The program offers a variety of activities for "at risk" boys and girls between the ages of 14 and 18 who are selected for the program on the basis of 20 risk factors established by the project.

During the winter months, BYEP has a ski program that takes young men and women to the slopes. In the summer, participants fly fish, whitewater raft, horseback ride and rock climb.

"Our three main goals," said Dave Granger BYEP program director, "are first, that the kids have fun. The second is to celebrate the local outdoors and the third is to stimulate new, healthy relationships either with their peers or with adult mentors."

BYEP holds two workshops a week during the 12-week course focused on a variety of topics ranging from teamwork and trust to communication, identity, conflict resolution and healthy relationships.

The project conducts interviews with school counselors and students to determine which applicants have the greatest need for the program.

While BYEP has experienced great success, the program faces an uphill battle given the great need for such programs.

"We had 130 kids apply for the winter program and we took 20 and some veterans for a total of 38," Granger said. "There is a great need — both for applicants and mentors — for these programs because we have many, many more people apply than we can take in."

The ultimate goal of the program, Granger said, is to have people who have gone through the program become mentors to the next generation of students.

"That is our greatest goal," Granger said.

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Jake Moore of Bozeman lets a cast soar across the surface of Trout Lake while fly fishing with the Big Sky Youth Empowerment Project and the Yellowstone Park Foundation in Yellowstone National Park last Sunday.



A Yellowstone cutthroat trout rises for a fly at Trout Lake in Yellowstone National Park. The Yellowstone Park Foundation is aiding in research of the Yellowstone cutthroat, which faces threats from non-native species such as lake, brown and rainbow trout.



Bill Voigt, coordinator of Yellowstone National Park's Volunteer Fly Fishing Program, leads a group from the Big Sky Youth Empowerment Project to Trout Lake in Yellowstone National Park last Sunday.



Sage Coppock of Bozeman holds up a Yellowstone cutthroat trout caught at Trout Lake in Yellowstone National Park. Coppock, a participant in the Big Sky Youth Empowerment Project's summer program, safely released the fish.



Bill Voigt, left, and Joann Voigt, coordinators of the Volunteer Fly Fishing Program in Yellowstone National Park, measure a Yellowstone cutthroat trout caught by a member of the Big Sky Youth Empowerment Project.