



PORTRAIT OF A RIVER

WORDS BY EUGENE BUCHANAN · ART BY MARK LESH

FROM ITS BIRTHPLACE HIGH IN THE FLAT TOPS OF NORTHWEST COLORADO to its junction with the Green River 250 miles later, the Yampa River is as unbridled as the wild horses that roam nearby Browns Park, once home to the nefarious Hole-in-the-Wall Gang. The last (mostly) free-flowing tributary of the Colorado River, the Yampa changes from a trickle in the fall to a raging torrent each spring.

Like rivers everywhere, the Yampa is vital to many users. As a recreational resource, it supports fishing outfitters, kayak schools, rafting operations and even a thriving tubing scene. It's also habitat to endangered fish species and is the lifeblood of two cities and a handful of towns with serious agricultural interests. Now, as the last major basin in the state with unappropriated water, everyone from municipalities to mining operations is fighting for a piece of its bounty, prompting an Old-West style showdown over water rights.

PROPERTY AND NAVIGATION RIGHTS

Colorado's river navigation rules are ambiguous and subject to much interpretation. Landowners own both banks and even the river bottom, but not the water coursing downstream. In theory, paddlers can float through private land, so long as they don't touch the riverbed. In practice, dozens of barbed-wire fences spanning the upper river make paddling there both difficult and dangerous. That didn't stop local kayak school owner Pete Van De Carr from paddling the Yampa from its headwaters all the way to Utah carrying a package of Hostess Twinkies, which he sold for a quarter. "I wanted to show that you can use the river to conduct interstate commerce," he says. "That means it's navigable and that landowners can't block passage."

STAGECOACH TAILWATERS

The tailwaters below Stagecoach Reservoir shelter plenty of hard-fighting rainbow trout. Unfortunately, many other species aren't thriving. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service lists the humpback

chub, bonytail, Colorado pikeminnow, and razorback sucker—all endemic to the Yampa and Colorado River basins—as endangered under the Endangered Species Act. Their decline is due to everything from habitat degradation to the introduction of competitive and predatory nonnative species. Scientists say peak river flows are vital for their spawning and nursery habitats.

STEAMBOAT TOWN RUN

If you want to learn how to kayak, it doesn't get much better than downtown Steamboat Springs. Just past its confluence with Class IV-V Fish Creek, the Yampa turns from north to west over a series of Class II waves, passing natural hot springs and outdoor eateries en route to the C and D Holes, at times the best playwaves in the state. The two playboating features are so popular that the city used them as the basis for winning a Recreational In-Channel Diversion (RICD) water right in 2003, proving that, in the eyes of the law, recreation is as good a use of the river's water as industry and agriculture.

CROSS MOUNTAIN AND THE PUMPBACK

At normal flows, Cross Mountain Canyon is a solid Class IV run, but when the water peaks in late spring, it becomes a seven-mile Class V crucible. If you miss your line in Osterizer at high water, you can count on getting recirculated. But if they have their way, two other entities will dampen the Yampa's peak flow with some recirculating of their own. In 2007, the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District proposed a \$4 billion project to pump water from the Yampa back over the Continental Divide to thirsty Denver suburbs over 200 miles away. The so-called Pumpback project would siphon 20 percent of the river's high-water flow before it reached Cross Mountain, effectively de-watering the canyon's historic highs. Energy developers pose a similar threat. Anticipating a boom in its water-intensive oil-shale operations, Shell Oil filed for a water right in December that would divert 8 percent of peak flow into a reservoir near the hamlet of Maybell.

YAMPA CANYON

Every winter, river runners fill out permit lottery applications for the chance to float regulated rivers. Yampa Canyon, a 71-mile run through Dinosaur National Monument, is always high on the list. Last year the river office received 4,297 applications for just 284

spots, putting the success rate at just 6.6 percent—about the same as getting through Warm Springs rapid dry. If you do win a permit, though, you'll raft, kayak or canoe past outlaw hideouts, Native American ruins and pristine beaches. You'll enjoy slot canyon side hikes, navigate the rollercoaster of Split Mountain Canyon and, when you reach the confluence with the Green at Echo Park, you'll understand why the late David Brower fought so hard to save the river from being dammed in 1956, marking one of the American conservation movement's earliest and most important victories.

WILD AND SCENIC DESIGNATION

Like bounty hunters closing in on the Hole-in-the-Wall Gang, there may be help on the horizon. The Bureau of Land Management is moving forward with a final Resource Management Plan that would label three sections of the river, including Cross Mountain Canyon, as suitable for Wild and Scenic status. While the move would likely lead to protests and court proceedings before Congressional designation, conservationists have an extra bullet in their chambers: former Colorado Sen. Ken Salazar, who is now Secretary of the Interior. "Having that designation would be a tremendous help," says local river conservationist Kent Vertrees. "The Yampa deserves it."