

Fishing for Tomorrow

By: Theo Anest

Every spring during the rainbow spawn and fall during the brown spawn, the complicated debate starts for whether fishing to spawning trout on the redds is ethical and whether or not it affects the actual reproduction process. Therefore, this article is written only as an opinion and reflects the philosophy and practices of the Fishing for Tomorrow program practiced by both Colorado Skies Outfitters and Fishing for Tomorrow. It is meant to be an informative and educational article so that others can form their own opinion.

I am a graduate of the school of Natural Resources at Colorado State University, and have been fishing for trout my entire life. I am owner of Colorado Skies Outfitters, and serve as the Executive Director of the non profit 501(c)(3) organization Fly Fish for Life. Through my time as a fisherman and guide, I have seen the good, the bad, and the ugly practiced by fellow anglers in terms of ethical fly fishing practices.

Im not going pretend to be some "holier than thou" ethical purist fly fisherman. Have I pulled fish off of redds? You bet I have. It's tough to pass up an enormous fish super exposed in shallow water sitting there for the taking. With time though, I've had a lot of regrets about doing so in the days when I was "big fish hungry."

I will preface this article with a quick story. I was fishing a few falls ago and spotted a huge brown sitting on a bed on the Poudre. I didn't even think twice about it. I rolled a spaghetti and meat balls rig (egg and a worm) in front of her and she ate without hesitation. This fish was hot. Even on 3X tippet I had to play this fish for quite a while. I landed and released her and she took off just fine. No big deal I thought. I went back the next day, and the day after out of curiosity to find an empty bed. I felt pretty ashamed. Yes, I got the fish to eat, but how hard was it really? Spawning fish are territorial and they like to keep a clean nest. If a worm lands on the bed...they pick it up almost every time out of parental obligation, not hunger. I provide this quick story, to say the following.

I believe the general consensus of most fly fishermen is that fishing to spawning fish is not an ethical, challenging or a rewarding way to fish. However, those like myself in my early years cannot resist temptation of the "grip and grin" picture with a large spawning fish. There are also those that believe they are not doing anything wrong or harming the trout in anyway. It ultimately boils down to whether you are just being greedy and you, or you really believe you are not harming the fish.

There are those that argue that catching an actual spawning fish on a redd is no different than catching a pre-spawner in a run away from the redds. Yes you are putting stress on both of these fish, but a pre-spawn fish has time to recover before it actually starts spawning. A stressed spawning fish once released will continue to spawn, but will not have the same vigor. Therefore, the process of cleaning gravels and the spawning

will not be done at the same intensity it once would have. For example, go run five mile marathon as if your life literally depended on it and as soon as you finish, go home and make love to your mate. Yes you can do it (maybe), but is it the same as if you had been rested?

That said, catching spawning fish may not be harmful to the process but it certainly can't help. In recent years, I've become a firm believer that actually catching active spawning fish does not harm the overall process, but as mentioned does nothing to help. On the other hand, I do believe that walking in and around the actual redds does a significant amount of damage. Not only are you crushing eggs in the gravel under your boots, even worse, you are stirring up silt which settles into these spawning gravels. This in turn, limits the amount of oxygen for the eggs and they will suffocate. Therefore, if you must fish to spawning fish, the best thing you can do is wade and fish below them.

People often ask, "What do redds looks like?" In order for trout to have a good reproductive success rate, they seek out gravel bars that have gravels averaging from one to two inches. There also must be a good flow of water over these gravels that will bring high levels of oxygen; and for that to occur, they are usually located in shallow water. A redd can be from one square foot up to a large area of river.

During the process of spawning, the trout do two things. First, they clean the gravels which in turn creates clean (or areas of lighter color) depressions in the gravels. There is also a misconception that the eggs are actually deposited in these depressions which

is not true. The eggs are actually deposited in the mounds of gravel just below the depressions. Basically, while the trout kick up and clean the gravel, they deposit the eggs at the same time; therefore, the eggs end up buried in these mounds of gravel.

As I said in my story that made me once and forever think twice about fishing to spawners, I've done it. However, it is now hard for me to understand and accept the notion that catching or most of time foul hooking spawning trout in the side is a fun and ethical way to fly fish. You are intentionally targeting an easy prey that is tired, super exposed, and for the most part does not fight as hard because of the above mentioned factors. Fishing to spawners goes against the grain of what fly fishing is all about. Fly fishing is an addiction, full of art, grace and understanding our environment. It is not about greed or the photograph of the huge fish without mentioning how or where you caught it.

So what is the philosophy of Fishing for Tomorrow when it comes to fishing to spawning trout? We just don't do it! Why take the chance of potentially harming our future? We catch just as many fish by fishing the runs and riffles below the redds. Yes we use egg patterns, but we do not use them or anything on the redds.

Based on our philosophy, we have developed these "rules of thumb" which we follow and encourage you to practice as well.

Rule 1: If the fish is obviously sitting on a bed ie, a dug out pit in shallow water, with two fish right there or even just one, keep moving or look behind for a rainbow if you must. In Colorado, it's unique and rare that we support a wild trout population in almost all our rivers unlike other states. Don't tarnish a blessing. I think you'll feel better about yourself for passing a big fish than pulling her off a bed as easily as you tied on the giant egg pattern and worm.

Rule 2: not all fish spawn at the same exact time. The females are generally all full of eggs during the spawn, but not all of them are actively spawning. Even if they are not as I say "in the process" fish are still fairly stressed during spawning months. But I am not going to just stop fishing and I don't think you should either. So here is what I do. Spawn season fish are aggressive, and if they are going to eat an egg, worm or a streamer, they are not tippet shy. Trust me! Beef up your tippet size and land your fish quickly. Again for the "not in the process" fish, look to toss streamers in deep pools, or runs more than 3 feet deep. These fish are actively feeding in order to develop energy to spawn. Will hooking one of these pre-spwaners hurt the fishery? As I've said before, it won't help but I don't think its a total detriment like plucking a fish clearly sitting on a bed.

Rule 3: Watch your step! As your wading, stay out of the likely areas that look like beds. There is no sense damaging hundreds of eggs for no reason more than carelessness.

Rule 4: There are certain spawns that are less detrimental if fished. Whitefish on the Colorado, Roaring Fork or Crystal, fair game as far as I am concerned. The frying Pan has a problem with an over population of brown trout. In the late fall, hit the Pan but leave the bows alone in the late spring. In situations where where fish are coming out of lakes, fish those places before you fish a river with no migrating lake fish. Trout in lakes are put and take stockers that do grow to large sizes, but will be replaced. In general, I'd say these are the spawners to chase. If they are coming from a lake...they'll be a more annually stable population of migrators. This isn't the case in freestones like the Eagle, Roaring Fork, or Poudre. These rivers have a fragile population that relies on natural reproduction. The same can be said about Colorado River Brown and Rainbows. Colorado River fish move up the small tributaries from the main stem, not a lake.

Rule 5: I love to site fish more than anything, but as a general rule of thumb during the spawn, blind fish. The fish you can't see are likely to be the ones not actively spawning. But once again do so in non traditional spawning waters.

By writing this article, I am not trying to create any kind of stir, but with the amount of pressure fish in Colorado receive, we need to do our part to help these fish and preserve the resource. Hopefully I may have added a bit of clarity on the subject. The spawn is no doubt a great time to catch some amazing fish, but don't let your obsession for that fish of a life time get you so starry eyed that you lose sense of what is best for a

fishery. A ten pound fish is nothing to squawk about, but when your grip and grin pic show's a line of egg's coming out of the fish's rear, enough said!