



NEW WEST FEATURE.....

## Huge Colorado Runoff Is Mostly a Blessing

*The water's still fast and floods are few, but the anglers will have to wait.*

By Jeff Thomas, 8-12-11

As drought continues to hammer southern states—drying out Texas streams, lakes and water supplies—the only things empty in most Colorado rivers are the fishing nets.

“I haven’t seen water like this so late since my first year here in 1985,” said Thomas Schneider, owner of Boulder-based Sunrise Anglers, LLC. “I was guiding last weekend in the park (Rocky Mountain National Park in northern Colorado) and I haven’t seen the Roaring River that high, ever.”

Until the last few days, streams and rivers in the central and northern part of the state have remained largely inaccessible to anglers, because of fast-moving currents remaining at peak runoff conditions and monsoonal summer rains that continued to fill streams and cloud them with sediment.

“We’ve had to take clients onto the still water (lakes and ponds) a lot, and that isn’t what most tourists are looking for—they want that moving water experience,” Schneider continued. The tailwaters below dams are somewhat of a sanctuary for anglers looking for moving water—at least where it isn’t spilling over the dams—but this year, such an experience could be a little too moving.

“In many places it’s dangerous enough that you have to guide one-on-one,” Schneider said. “And that net man was important.” Once the quarry was in the current, “If you didn’t net a fish quick, you were never going to see it.”

For the Northern Water Colorado Water Conservancy District, it was hands down the best water year anyone had ever seen, said district spokesman Brian Werner. While peak runoff conditions continued into August, about a month more than normal, flooding anticipated from a quick runoff never materialized.

Water coming out of the northern Colorado River drainage was by far the biggest in history, and downstream hopes were that it would help raise the level of drought-stricken Lake Powell by 40 feet.

“Through July, we’ve seen inflows of 429,000 acre feet, and the prior record was 355,000 acre feet,” Werner said. “Those records go back to the early ’50s, so that’s more than 50 years of data.”

On Colorado’s eastern slope, the Cache la Poudre River drainage had its third-largest output of water, based on records that go back to the 1890s.

An average of 288,000 acre feet of water normally flows into the South Platte River from the Poudre by this time of year, which this year was at 377,000 acre feet by the end of July.

The 1983 record year of 625,000 acre feet produced widespread flooding, and 1980 also produced 406,000 acre feet. But again this year, the runoff continued at a more even pace, with no major flooding events.

“It’s the best year ever,” Werner reiterated.

Mike Gillespie, the state’s snow survey supervisor, said a number of survey sites in northern Colorado reported record breaking snowpack, but even more amazing was how long the snowpack has held.

“We had snowfall occurring about a month later than usual (into late June),” said Gillespie. Subsequently, the runoff, which normally tapers off in July, has lasted into August.

The Tower snow survey location, located on the Continental Divide on Buffalo Pass between Walden and Steamboat Springs, is normally the snowiest in the state and had a record year of about 80 inches of moisture content. Some of the more than 20 feet of snow that had accumulated was still there in the beginning of August, more than a month after a normal melt-out date.

Much of this was predictable, said Colorado State Climatologist Nolan Doesken, though in actuality it may have been difficult to believe how predictable it actually was this year.

The winter storms that blasted northern Colorado—and even the southern mountains had average years—are expected during a La Nina year, a periodic climate fluctuation marked by a cooling of tropical Pacific Ocean water.

“But it has been more typical than typical,” Doesken said. “You usually expect some variance (in the storm paths), but except for an early winter storm (that slipped on a more southerly track), there’s been no variance.”

Even as La Nina faded—and it may be back this fall—the pattern continued to hammer northern Colorado during the spring and summer months, although relenting long enough to allow combines to sweep through a good wheat crop made valuable by global prices.

Meanwhile, Colorado’s southern plains continued to suffer exceptional drought, affected by the same high-pressure area that keeps Texas and much of the southern U.S. parched.

Both high precipitation and drought are difficult patterns to break out of during summer months, Doesken said, because these slower-moving storms are highly reliant on the local availability of evaporated water. In effect, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

But even in the land of plenty, water is still the one topic worth fighting over. And both the Colorado and the Poudre are sure to be contentious areas as water development continues in the growing state.

The Northern District brings water from the West Slope to eastern Colorado via the Colorado-Big Thompson and Windy Gap projects. This year, the extensive network of reservoirs on

both sides of the divide is full, and some reservoirs have been spilling water in anticipation of helping to control flood-level flows.

“There’s no room at the inn,” Werner said. “We need more buckets.”

He said more than a million acre feet of water had flowed outside of the state through the South Platte and Colorado in the last three years, which could have been stored according to interstate compacts.

A major proposed project for the Northern District is the 70,000-acre-foot Glade Reservoir, which would siphon water from the Poudre, the last major free-flowing river in eastern Colorado. It’s a project that has its fair share of critics, even though it’s not on the main stem of the river and is taking water below most recreational uses and the gold- medal fishery.

“The one thing about Northern, whether it’s a good year or drought year, they want more reservoirs,” said Mark Easter, a board member of the Save the Poudre organization. “That’s what happens when you think you only have one tool to work with.”

Easter said because this year is so far from the norm, it’s slightly ludicrous to tout how quickly Northern’s projects might fill.

“One of the most important flows for the river is these peak flushing flows,” Easter said. “They really determine the ecology of the river and without them the river will die.”

Among other effects, large peak flows clean out algae, sediment and pollution, while recharging side channels and wetlands, allowing cooling overgrowth of cottonwood and willow trees on the riverbanks, Easter said.

There are quite a few fly fishers champing at the bit to try out that theory, especially flushing the slippery algae off rocks. However, Schneider said the late-summer fishing should be well worth the wait, especially after a decade of drought and high water temperatures late in the season.

“The fish are going to be hungry,” he promised.

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### **Comment By Brodie Farquhar, 8-12-11**

To see what impact this remarkable snow season and runoff have had for Lake Mead and Lake Powell:

<http://www.usbr.gov/uc/water/crsp/cs/gcd.html>

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