

THE NEXT GENERATION, Creating Stream Explorers

Inspiring the next generation to experience the natural world is part of the mission of Collegiate Peaks Anglers, the local chapter of Trout Unlimited (TU). Since 1986, TU has taught hundreds of youth about the aquatic environment and fly casting and provided scholarships for students interested in conservation.

A new opportunity to more fully engage young people emerged with Salida schools going to a 4-day week. Using TU's Stream Explorers materials and lessons prepared by volunteers, a 3-hour block on Fridays for 5 weeks was scheduled for middle school students. The emphasis was on hands-on learning and science data collection.

In the first 2 weeks youngsters investigated the behavior of aquatic life including insects, shrimp and fish. They explored what life lived in their river, where they lived, their sizes, shapes and how and where they moved. Students did experiments where organisms, including fish, were exposed to hot and cold, light and dark and changes in gravity. Using their recorded data, they were asked to speculate on how seasonal changes in temperature and light might affect the behavior of fish in their river. Then students tied flies imitating the insects in the river.

In week 3 students reviewed their bug lessons and went to the river to learn about "reading" water. Basic instruction was given about fly rods, gear, casting, basic knots, spin casting, and safety, including hook removal techniques. Students practiced fly and spin casting. Youngsters took home activity sheets to identify organisms that live near the river and were charged with finding a fishing related website they found helpful.

Week 4 brought a snowstorm and a cold front. However, the students showed up in 25 degree clear weather. Utilizing the services of the Chaffee County Shuttle, we drove to Mt. Ouray Ponds. Students fished with fly and spinning rods in the lake and river. There were a few bites and 2 fish caught, but students enjoyed the gorgeous day.

In week 5 students studied fish biology, including the similarities between humans and fish. They visited the Fish Hatchery where they learned about fish rearing and observed fish scales and fry under microscopes.

TU invited parents to see their students "graduate" and provided pizza. All participants got Stream Explorer certificates, an Embrace a Stream Hat, t-shirt, and a folder with all kinds of good information to take home. Of 11 students who started, 6 earned Stream Explorer membership with Trout Unlimited by attending 80% of the sessions.

The committee reached its goal of having young people learn about the aquatic world and plans to do additional programming. A series of winter fly tying might be held since many students were quite excited about their brief exposure to this art.

Already some students are asking for fly rods as holiday gifts! So if you fish and know a young person, invite them to come with you next time! This program was free to participants and supported by Collegiate Peaks Anglers' funds which come from our annual Caddis Festival the first Saturday in May.

In addition to youth education, Collegiate Peaks Anglers does habitat restoration, Fly Fishing 101 classes, stream access maintenance, advocates for responsible public policies, works with a variety of agencies on conservation projects and sponsors youth fishing derbies. Volunteers usually put in about 3000 hours a year and drive thousands of miles to conserve, protect, and restore coldwater fisheries and their watersheds.