

Conservation: Avoiding the Redds

We all have a deep-felt conviction for conservation—conservation for water, the ecosystem, and fish habitat. We probably all agree that the “grip and grin” has been abused for the pure enjoyment of Facebook feeds or Pinterest. The campaign “Keep ‘Em Wet” definitely did its job to reduce the number of grip and grin photos one might see on social media. But is that enough?

Predominantly the fly fishers I deal with on a daily basis are catch and release anglers. That is awesome because you or someone else might have the opportunity of hooking that fish again. If it’s a female and is released back, there’s a good chance she will produce more fish for us. We can all agree in theory that this is a great idea. But I see a serious void for fish conservation. I will preface this by stating that all fishing is good—whatever the regulations allow on a particular waterway is all good. But here is where I make my stand.

I recently read an article in a major publication that nearly made me want to throw out all my fishing gear and find a new sport. The article described where to find spawning brown trout. The author explained the area where fish lay their eggs, known as a redd. If you want to observe a redd, I am all about it because it is really intriguing to watch fish work the area. But this article in particular illustrated how to identify a redd, how to approach the area, and what streamers to use. Fishing over and wading in and around a redd was disturbing to me and seemed anti-conservation. Some of the largest fish in the river are on the redds during spawning season. They seem to be stacked up like sardines in a can. At what point is this sport fishing?

True conservation would tell us that fishing over and wading through these fertile zones should be avoided so that many more fish will be available later. A fish uses a ton of energy and loses body mass during the spawn. They are not looking to eat but will strike out of agitation or impulse. Some of the fish hooked don’t have the energy to fight and end up dying soon after. Obviously this is a worst case scenario; but if we are killing fish, are we conservationists?

I have seen firsthand fishing during this time. I have a couple of acquaintances that I will not fish with. On one occasion I witnessed a 23-inch 6 lb. female lose her life because of the struggle being hooked and landed. She was revived unsuccessfully for 10 minutes yet died soon after. Another example was seeing a 22-inch fish get hooked so deep in its gills with the larger streamer hook that the fish became dead weight within a few minutes of the fight. Is this being stewards of the river?

Evidently the author of the article mentioned above thought that fishing during this time was OK and wrote the story for thousands to read. The “Grip and Grin” Campaign that ultimately taught us to keep fish wet and release immediately upon hooking has been successful. But if we continue to espouse the practice of catching big fish during their vulnerable spawning period, there will be fewer fish or no fish at all. I would like to end with a tee-shirt quote I saw on the Fishpond website. This says it all: “Don’t **Redd** on Me!” Let’s give fish a chance.