



Chestnut Ridge Trout Unlimited

*by Ben Moyer
photos by the author*

For 15 years, CRTU's highly motivated members have worked hard to restore the trout streams of the Laurel Highlands

A century of reckless coal extraction had sentenced Pennsylvania's Laurel Highlands to second-class trout angling status by poisoning the Youghiogheny River and its tributaries. But the legacy of pollution and apathy was not enough to discourage the Chestnut Ridge Chapter of Trout Unlimited (CRTU) from pushing the region's streams—primarily in Fayette and Somerset counties—higher on the state's list for trout fishing destinations. Thanks to CRTU's award-winning record of coldwater stewardship, this 30-mile stretch of river and streams has developed watershed restoration, education, productive partnerships and more opportunities for trout fishing close to home.

The Chestnut Ridge Chapter of Trout Unlimited was founded in 1995 through the efforts of Eugene Gordon, an angler and fly tier from Mt. Braddock, Fayette County. Soon after, the group held its first annual fund-raising banquet

in Uniontown. This past March, CRTU held its 15th fund-raising dinner to help finance its efforts.

To enhance public awareness of the significant coldwater resources flowing into the Youghiogheny, CRTU sponsored the Youghiogheny River Symposium at Penn State's Fayette Campus in June 1997 attracting 200 participants, including many elected officials. With the Yough Symposium's momentum behind it, CRTU worked with the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources to produce a River Conservation Plan for the Middle Youghiogheny Corridor, stretching from Confluence to Connellsville. The plan identified acid mine drainage as the region's greatest coldwater conservation challenge.

To begin, CRTU chose Glade Run, so polluted by mine acid that no aquatic life remained.



Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commissioner Thomas Shetterly of the Chestnut Ridge Chapter of Trout Unlimited surveys the chapter's acid mine drainage treatment project on Morgan Run in Fayette County.

“Glade Run is high in the watershed, and it flows into Dunbar Creek, a regionally important, stocked fishery,” said Thomas Shetterly, long-time chairman of CRTU’s resource stewardship committee and Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC) commissioner. “We felt that any improvement we made on Glade Run would benefit fishing in the whole watershed downstream.”

California University of Pennsylvania’s prestigious Environmental Studies program, led by Dr. William Kimmel, provided the chemical and biological monitoring needed to gauge results and pursue additional funding.

With the help of funding from diverse sources such as Growing Greener, Growing Greener II, Western Pennsylvania Coalition for Abandoned Mine Reclamation and Miller Brewing Company’s Friends of the Field Program, Glade Run’s restoration began with the simple, but effective, placement of alkaline sand along the stream bank at three key locations on State Game Lands 51. With technical help from the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy’s Watershed Assistance Center, CRTU won funding for and built a permanent anoxic limestone treatment facility on the hottest acidic discharge on Glade Run’s headwaters. The facility neutralizes acid before it reaches Glade Run and reduces the need for continual additions of alkaline sand.

Soon after the system was online, Dr. Kimmel, CRTU volunteers and a team of graduate students, working with the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission, introduced wild brook trout from Little Dunbar Creek into the waters of Glade Run.

“That’s what we’re looking for,” Kimmel said two years later as the team netted a young-of-the-year brook trout from Glade Run during an electroshocking session. “It’s proof that trout are spawning here now.”

Macroinvertebrate surveys show that the abundance and diversity of aquatic insects also improved.

CRTU now has similar acid mine drainage treatment facilities planned or under construction on nearby Morgan Run and Jonathan Run, both tributaries to the Youghiogheny River flowing through game lands and Ohiopyle State Park.

“All these projects have been examples of partnerships,” said Mark Killar, watershed specialist with the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy’s Watershed Assistance Center. “Chestnut Ridge Trout Unlimited is the heart and soul. They’ve committed money from their own pockets, countless hours of behind-the-scenes work planning and administering the projects, and even more hours of sweat equity throughout the Youghiogheny watershed.”

Recognizing that, in some situations, water quantity can be as serious a threat to trout fisheries as water quality, CRTU has undertaken a water resource plan for the Laurel Hill Creek watershed that will balance the coldwater fishery with resort development, snow-making and local community needs.

Despite its high profile in reclamation and stewardship, Chestnut Ridge TU may be best known to area anglers for the trophy-size trout the chapter raises and plants in public waters. In the tailrace of the Youghiogheny Reservoir, CRTU built and operates the only cage culture trout nursery in the state. Members raise fingerlings from the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission’s Cooperative Nursery Program and release 6,000 to 11,000 trout in the river and its tributaries each year.

Recently, the group has expanded its educational and youth outreach efforts. The chapter donates hundreds of trout to youth fishing events, it sponsors a Trout in the Classroom project in West Greene School District, and each year the chapter sponsors a participant to the River Conservation and Fly Fishing Youth Camp on the Yellow Breeches Creek at Allenberry. See page 59 for more information on applying to the camp.

In 2006, Trout Unlimited awarded CRTU its national Silver Trout Award as one of the most effective chapters in the United States. One year later, the Pennsylvania Council of Trout Unlimited recognized CRTU as the best chapter in the state. The group has won awards for its website and newsletter, and member Thomas Shetterly has been honored with both National Trout Unlimited’s Distinguished Service Award and as the Pennsylvania Council’s Outstanding Coldwater Conservationist.

“Membership in this group has given me a chance to be around two things I love—trout streams and trout fishing,” President Gilpin said. “We in CRTU have accomplished a lot,



but we have lots more to do, and we’ll keep doing it right here.” ☐

The Chestnut Ridge Chapter of Trout Unlimited is working to restore wild brook trout populations in tributaries to the Youghiogheny River in southwestern Pennsylvania.