



Trout mortality, movements, and habitat selection during winter in South Willow Creek, Montana
by William Cecil Schrader

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Fish
and Wildlife Management

Montana State University

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Abstract:

Few studies have assessed impacts of small hydropower development or provided information to recommend winter minimum instream flows. I examined trout populations, movements, and habitats selected during winter in three South Willow Creek study sections before small hydropower development. Streamflows were lowest during winter (November-March) both years of the study (1984-86). Overwinter decreases in rainbow trout (>75 mm) densities averaged 32% (range 18 to 45%) over both years and all sections; standing crops decreased 30,% (range 11 to 36%) . Changes in brook trout populations were less. During winter 1985-86, net distances moved by radio-tagged rainbow trout (>225 mm) ranged from 3 to 261 m. They selected high-quality pools with overhead cover, especially overhanging rock and surface turbulence, and avoided areas without cover. Selected depths were >45 cm and selected velocities were <30 cm/s; they avoided depths <15 cm and velocities >45 cm/s. Substrate selection was variable, but large substrate (>256 mm) was used for cover. Instream flows that provide maximum quantities of these selected habitats are recommended to sustain rainbow trout populations during winter.

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This thesis has been read by each member of the thesis committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citations, bibliographic style, and consistency, and is ready for submission to the College of Graduate Studies.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
APPROVAL.....	ii
STATEMENT OF PERMISSION TO USE.....	iii
VITA.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
LIST OF TABLES.....	viii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	x
ABSTRACT.....	xiv
INTRODUCTION.....	1
STUDY AREA.....	4
METHODS.....	10
Stream Physical Conditions.....	10
Trout Populations.....	12
Winter Movements and Habitat Selection.....	14
Radiotelemetry.....	14
Movements and Habitat Use.....	17
Habitat Availability.....	19
RESULTS.....	21
Stream Physical Conditions.....	21
Discharge.....	21
Temperature.....	21
Trout Populations.....	25
Species Composition and Relative Abundance...	25
Size Structure.....	28
Density and Standing Crop.....	31

TABLE OF CONTENTS - Continued

	Page
Average Condition Factor.....	37
Winter Movements.....	37
Winter Habitat Selection.....	40
DISCUSSION.....	54
Winter Mortality.....	54
Winter Movements.....	59
Winter Habitat Selection.....	62
LITERATURE CITED.....	68
APPENDICES.....	75
Appendix A - Rainbow Trout Length Frequency Distributions.....	76
Appendix B - Rainbow and Brook Trout Densities and Standing Crops.....	80
Appendix C - Comparisons of Middle and Lower Sections by Habitat Variable.....	83

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. General characteristics of the three study sections, South Willow Creek, Montana. Measurements were made shortly after ice-out, April 13 and 14, 1985, following procedures of Orth (1983).....	8
2. Characteristics of radio transmitters used to evaluate adult rainbow trout winter habitat use in South Willow Creek, Montana.....	17
3. Measured discharge (m^3/s) in the three study sections, South Willow Creek, Montana.....	23
4. Point estimates and confidence intervals (80%) of rainbow and brook trout (>125 mm) average condition factors (K) in the three study sections, South Willow Creek, Montana.....	38
5. Total and net distances radio-tagged rainbow trout (>225 mm) moved (± 3 m) between mid-November 1985, and late February 1986, in South Willow Creek, Montana. Maximum distance is the greatest distance measured between weekly tracking periods. Total and net distances moved were summed from N daytime (0700-1800) locations.....	39
6. Movement of rainbow and brook trout based on Floy fingerling tag returns, South Willow Creek, Montana. Tag returns include multiple returns (individuals recaptured more than once). Number moved includes over-summer and over-winter movements to other sections by both species.....	41
7. Summary of statistical comparisons (χ^2 tests of independence) between sections by habitat variable. Variables reflect availability during winter in South Willow Creek, Montana. $p < 0.05 = *$, $p < 0.01 = **$	42

LIST OF TABLES - Continued

Table	Page
8. Relative diversity indices of habitat variables measured in South Willow Creek, Montana. Variables reflect availability during winter. Low diversity = 0.00 and high diversity = 1.00 (Zar 1974).....	49
9. Summary of statistical comparisons (log-likelihood ratio [G] and chi-square [X^2] goodness-of-fit) between winter habitats used by radio-tagged rainbow trout (>225 mm) and those available in each study section, South Willow Creek, Montana. $p < 0.05 = *$, $p < 0.01 = **$	50
10. Point estimates and confidence intervals (80%) of rainbow and brook trout densities in the three study sections, South Willow Creek, Montana. Estimates are for fish >75 mm total length.....	81
11. Point estimates and confidence intervals (80%) of rainbow and brook trout standing crops in the three study sections, South Willow Creek, Montana. Estimates are for fish >75 mm total length.....	82

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Location of the study area, South Willow Creek, Montana.....	5
2. Location of the study sections in relation to the small hydropower project, South Willow Creek, Montana.....	6
3. Stage-discharge rating curve for the staff gage near the middle section, South Willow Creek, Montana. Q = predicted discharge and S = stage in the fitted regression equation.....	11
4. Point estimates of discharge and interpolations over time in the middle section, South Willow Creek, Montana (n=118). Dashed line is MDFWP's minimum flow recommendation (0.28 m ³ /s) as determined by the wetted perimeter method.....	22
5. Average monthly maximum and minimum water temperatures and interpolations over time in the upper and middle sections, South Willow Creek, Montana.....	24
6. Average monthly maximum and minimum air temperatures and interpolations over time at Pony, Montana (NOAA, 1984-86).....	26
7. Relative abundance of trout species captured in the three study sections and all sections combined, South Willow Creek, Montana. Sample sizes are in parentheses.....	27
8. Length frequency distributions of rainbow trout captured in all sections combined, South Willow Creek, Montana. Sample sizes are in parentheses.	29
9. Length frequency distributions of brook trout captured in all sections combined, South Willow Creek, Montana. Sample sizes are in parentheses.	30

LIST OF FIGURES - Continued

Figure	Page
10. Point estimates and confidence intervals (80%) of rainbow trout (>75 mm) densities in the three study sections, South Willow Creek, Montana. Percentage figures are changes from fall to spring.....	32
11. Point estimates and confidence intervals (80%) of rainbow trout (>75 mm) standing crops in the three study sections, South Willow Creek, Montana. Percentage figures are changes from fall to spring.....	33
12. Point estimates and confidence intervals (80%) of brook trout (>75 mm) densities in the upper section, South Willow Creek, Montana. Percentage figures are changes from fall to spring.....	35
13. Point estimates and confidence intervals (80%) of brook trout (>75 mm) standing crops in the upper section, South Willow Creek, Montana. Percentage figures are changes from fall to spring.....	36
14. Point estimates and confidence intervals (95%) of winter habitat types used by radio-tagged rainbow trout (>225 mm) compared to available types in the upper and combined middle/lower sections, South Willow Creek, Montana. Sample sizes are in parentheses.....	43
15. Point estimates and confidence intervals (95%) of winter depths used by radio-tagged rainbow trout (>225 mm) compared to available depths in the upper and combined middle/lower sections, South Willow Creek, Montana. Sample sizes are in parentheses.....	44
16. Point estimates and confidence intervals (95%) of winter velocities used by radio-tagged rainbow trout (>225 mm) compared to available velocities in the upper and combined middle/lower sections, South Willow Creek, Montana. Sample sizes are in parentheses.....	45

LIST OF FIGURES - Continued

Figure	Page
17. Point estimates and confidence intervals (95%) of winter overhead cover types used by radio-tagged rainbow trout (>225 mm) compared to available types in the upper and combined middle/lower sections, South Willow Creek, Montana. Organic debris = DEB, overhanging vegetation = OHV, undercut bank = UNB, moss = MOS, turbulence = TUR, overhanging rock = OHR, no cover = NC. Sample sizes are in parentheses.....	46
18. Point estimates and confidence intervals (95%) of winter substrate types used by radio-tagged rainbow trout (>225 mm) compared to available types in the upper and combined middle/lower sections, South Willow Creek, Montana. Sample sizes are in parentheses.....	47
19. Point estimates and confidence intervals (95%) of rated pools used by radio-tagged rainbow trout (>225 mm) during winter compared to those available in the upper and combined middle/lower sections, South Willow Creek, Montana. Lowest quality pools = 1 and highest = 5. Sample sizes are in parentheses.....	48
20. Length frequency distributions of rainbow trout captured in the upper section, South Willow Creek, Montana. Sample sizes are in parentheses.	77
21. Length frequency distributions of rainbow trout captured in the middle section, South Willow Creek, Montana. Sample sizes are in parentheses.	78
22. Length frequency distributions of rainbow trout captured in the lower section, South Willow Creek, Montana. Sample sizes are in parentheses.	79
23. Point estimates and confidence intervals (95%) of winter habitat types used by radio-tagged rainbow trout (>225 mm) compared to available types in the middle and lower sections, South Willow Creek, Montana. Sample sizes are in parentheses.	84

LIST OF FIGURES - Continued

Figure	Page
24. Point estimates and confidence intervals (95%) of winter depths used by radio-tagged rainbow trout (>225 mm) compared to available depths in the middle and lower sections, South Willow Creek, Montana. Sample sizes are in parentheses.....	85
25. Point estimates and confidence intervals (95%) of winter velocities used by radio-tagged rainbow trout (>225 mm) compared to available velocities in the middle and lower sections, South Willow Creek, Montana. Sample sizes are in parentheses.	86
26. Point estimates and confidence intervals (95%) of winter overhead cover types used by radio-tagged rainbow trout (>225 mm) compared to available types in the middle and lower sections, South Willow Creek, Montana. Organic debris = DEB, overhanging vegetation = OHV, undercut bank = UNB, moss = MOS, turbulence = TUR, overhanging rock = OHR, no cover = NC. Sample sizes are in parentheses.....	87
27. Point estimates and confidence intervals (95%) of winter substrate types used by radio-tagged rainbow trout (>225 mm) compared to available types in the middle and lower sections, South Willow Creek, Montana. Sample sizes are in parentheses.....	88
28. Point estimates and confidence intervals (95%) of rated pools used by radio-tagged rainbow trout (>225 mm) during winter compared to those available in the middle and lower sections, South Willow Creek, Montana. Lowest quality pools = 1 and highest = 5. Sample sizes are in parentheses.....	89

ABSTRACT

Few studies have assessed impacts of small hydropower development or provided information to recommend winter minimum instream flows. I examined trout populations, movements, and habitats selected during winter in three South Willow Creek study sections before small hydropower development. Streamflows were lowest during winter (November-March) both years of the study (1984-86). Overwinter decreases in rainbow trout (>75 mm) densities averaged 32% (range 18 to 45%) over both years and all sections; standing crops decreased 30% (range 11 to 36%). Changes in brook trout populations were less. During winter 1985-86, net distances moved by radio-tagged rainbow trout (>225 mm) ranged from 3 to 261 m. They selected high-quality pools with overhead cover, especially overhanging rock and surface turbulence, and avoided areas without cover. Selected depths were >45 cm and selected velocities were <30 cm/s; they avoided depths <15 cm and velocities >45 cm/s. Substrate selection was variable, but large substrate (>256 mm) was used for cover. Instream flows that provide maximum quantities of these selected habitats are recommended to sustain rainbow trout populations during winter.

INTRODUCTION

Recent federal and state economic incentives have stimulated development of renewable electrical energy and have led to increased interest in small hydropower (less than 5 megawatts) production. For example, since passage of the Public Utility Regulatory Policies Act in 1978 and the National Energy Security Act in 1980, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) has received over 6,100 hydropower applications; less than 3,000 applications had been submitted in the preceding 60 years (O'Connor 1985). In Montana, nearly 90 applications for small hydropower were filed with FERC in 1981 and 1982 (Leathe and Enk 1985). Although most of this interest has proved to be speculative, several projects in Montana have been licensed or exempted from licensing and are now operational.

Small hydropower development in Montana and elsewhere has resource management agencies, developers, and the public concerned about potential impacts to stream fisheries. This concern led to a symposium on small hydropower and fisheries in Colorado in 1985 (Olson et al. 1985). Graham (1985) noted that the potential for adverse impacts is partly dependent on the type of project, its mode of operation, and the status of the stream fishery.

Projects of primary concern in the Rocky Mountains are high-head diversions on small, high-gradient streams inhabited by salmonids (Graham 1985). This kind of project would impound and then divert water around a section of stream (often a kilometer or more) to create hydraulic head and run electrical turbines. Although streamflows in the section would be reduced throughout the year, relatively severe dewatering could occur during winter when power demand is largest and streamflows are smallest. Salmonid abundance may decrease with winter dewatering if winter habitat is limiting or if fish are already stressed by snow and ice, low water temperatures, or other harsh conditions.

Besides reduced streamflows, other potential impacts include (Rochester et al. 1984; Graham 1985; Leathe and Enk 1985):

1. Direct mortality from turbines.
2. Barriers to migration.
3. Increased fine sediment deposition.
4. Altered flow and temperature regimes.
5. Excessive streambed scouring by ice.
6. Gas supersaturation.

These concerns are compounded by lack of information (Sale 1985). Little research has been published describing the individual or cumulative impacts of small hydropower development. This is especially true with regard to winter

dewatering. Resource agencies are responsible for recommending minimum instream flows to protect stream fisheries, and they often rely on information about habitats selected by fish (e.g., Instream Flow Incremental Methodology-Bovee and Cochnauer 1977; Bovee and Milhous 1978; Bovee 1982, 1986). Yet habitat selection information for salmonids, though generally known for summer and fall (Bovee 1978; Raleigh et al. 1984), is lacking for winter (Wesche and Rechard 1980). This lack of information may be particularly significant if salmonid habitat requirements change seasonally (Campbell and Neuner 1985; Cunjak and Power 1986).

Lotic ecosystem response to modified flow regimes is complex and not well understood for any season (Sale 1985). Flow alterations can result in changes not only in physical habitat availability but also in water chemistry and temperatures, nutrient cycling, biomass and energy relationships, and fish population and community dynamics.

This study was conducted at South Willow Creek, Montana, during 1984-86. My objectives were to (1) provide baseline information on stream physical conditions and trout population parameters, especially winter mortality and movements, before small hydropower development; and (2) quantify winter habitats selected by adult rainbow trout. "Winter" is defined as that period when water temperatures were less than 4C (November through March).

STUDY AREA

The study area was in South Willow Creek, Montana (Figure 1), at and around a site where a small hydropower project began operating in 1986. Starting at a diversion dam immediately below the confluence of Potosi Creek (Figure 2), water from the mainstem is piped 700 m downstream, run through a turbine, and returned to the stream channel. Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (MDFWP) recommends that a minimum flow of $0.28 \text{ m}^3/\text{s}$ remain in the bypassed channel throughout the year (Fred Nelson, MDFWP, personal communication).

South Willow Creek is a drainage of the Tobacco Root Mountains in southwestern Montana (Figure 1). The stream originates at the confluence of its north headwater fork, which flows from Granite Lake (elevation 2719 m), with its south fork, which flows from Bell Lake (2682 m). From its headwaters, South Willow Creek flows 22 km northeast, joins North Willow Creek, and forms a braided inlet to Harrison (Willow Creek) Reservoir. Willow Creek drains into the Jefferson River at the town of Willow Creek, Gallatin County, Montana.

The South Willow Creek drainage basin is about 90 km^2 and ranges in elevation from 1609 to 3228 m. Average stream

