

# Just Fishing

A young mother sits on the edge of a stream bank clutching the belt of her 3-year-old son hoping to prevent him from falling into the water while he is drowning a worm in a swirling mountain stream. Busily casting his line — heavy with bobber and hook and worm into the current — the boy jabbars about the fish he's about to catch. Fishing farther downstream, her husband lacks the patience to put up with the antics of their impetuous, red-headed son. **Never dreaming her son might actually catch a fish, the woman is startled when the boy screams, "I got one" at the same time tumbling over the stream bank.** Grabbing the boy's arm, together they slide down the dusty bank into the water.

Minutes later with wet shoes and one hand on her son's shoulder, the other carrying the rod with the treasured trout flopping on the line, she clambers up the stream bank. Then she hears someone clear his throat. Looking up, she sees a wildlife officer who says, "Morning. Looks like you've got your hands full!"

"Yes," she sighs. "He's more than a handful. Of course he had to really catch a fish! I never dreamed he could actually catch one."

"Wonder if I might look at your fishing license? You know you need one if you're out here fishing," the officer said.

The woman replied in frustration, "The only fishing I'm doing is fishing him out of the water." As the family legend goes, the woman didn't have a license. Charitably, the wildlife officer took pity on the woman, yet admonished her with a warning that next time she'd better be prepared.

The enduring story has generated generous laughter for three generations. Likely it'll be retold at family get-togethers for years to come. Why? Perhaps it's the unrestrained enthusiasm of the young angler. Maybe it's the kindness of the wildlife officer. I suspect, a little of each. But who would have guessed that such warm memories would come from a simple fishing trip?

Many of us hold similar memories of times spent along a creek, a lake or pond where uncomplicated events created lifelong remembrances of fishing with friends or family. Ingrained in the sinews of our being, they're easily rekindled and forever cherished. What would our life be like without them? Sadly, many young people in Colorado and elsewhere throughout the country are growing up without such "memory-making outdoor experiences." Not necessarily by design, but through circumstances.

Population shifts from rural to urban environments have been well documented as has the shift from being in the outdoors entertaining ourselves to spending hours being entertained by electronic media rang-

ing from television to video games. There are people born, raised and living in urban environments like Denver whose only experience with the outdoors is seeing the distant Front Range. Fish is something ordered on a restaurant menu. Asked where one gets fish, a typical answer might be, "Duh! At the grocery store?" There is little or no association with enjoying the outdoors and having fun with a rod and reel.

Beyond the ramifications on fish and wildlife management, this yawning fissure between youth and the outdoors may well be having an impact on children themselves. Dr. Berry Brazelton, professor of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School, suggests, "The tragedy we are facing in this generation is that there is no time for children to explore, to play, to go outside . . . outdoor play lets children find themselves, find out what they're like as people, find what works and what doesn't work."

The Colorado Division of Wildlife (DOW) is working to change that. Beginning in 1994 with the hiring of Scott Gilmore, the Angler Outreach coordinator, the DOW and Gilmore have assiduously worked to introduce, involve and promote the outdoor experience to young people. More than just a story of an organization giving lip service to change, Gilmore and his army of volunteers travel the state introducing youth to fishing one child at a time.

Statistics reveal just part of the program's success. Each year since 2004 the program has outfitted 20,000 kids statewide with free rods, reels, other assorted fishing gear and copies of all important fishing regulations. Since the program's inception, more than 200,000 kids have felt the thrill of a fish tugging fiercely on their line and a first-person introduction to conservation and outdoor values. Add the parents, grandparents, guardians or family friends that are encouraged to accompany their children to the statewide events and the numbers approach a half-million Colorado residents who've been introduced to or rekindled their thrill of angling. By involving adults and kids together it's more likely they'll continue fishing, giving more opportunities for family and friend time outdoors.

By **Tim Christie**

An Environmental Learning for Kids mentor gives pointers to a young angler.

Beyond angling workshops, the DOW has partnered with other governmental agencies and nonprofits to expand the mission. Most noteworthy is the Environmental Learning for Kids organization, also known as ELK. Gilmore describes the nonprofit this way: "One of the problems we discovered is that urban children had little or no avenue for exploring the outdoors. This organization introduces kids to the outdoors, plus it encourages and supports them in exploring careers in conservation and natural resources. It's not just giving them experiences in many different facets of the outdoors; it promotes character development as well as education." In 2011 ELK had a 98 percent graduation rate for high school seniors in the year-round program. And with \$423,000 raised in scholarships as of 2010, ELK also promotes and supports college educations for participants.

Looking at those statistics, it's easy to be impressed with ELK's programs. Numbers tell just part of the story. The rest of it resides in the program's focus. Great images emerge such as a 16-year-old ELK student holding the hand of an 8-year-old girl casting a line for the first time at the edge of a Colorado pond. It's the sparkle in the girl's eye as the line settles 15 yards out on the water. A squeal of surprise as her red and orange bobber disappears into the dark water. A screamed, "I've got one!" as the line tightens, bowing the rod. A wiggling, cart-wheeling trout splashing on the surface, prompting several of the girl's friends to squeal out advice. "Don't lose it!" "Remember to keep the line tight!" The smiles of success and friendship as they gather for a memory-book photo, before releasing the fish and watching it swim away. A "Thank you, that was fun" at the end of the day as they board the van to go home. A day chock full of memory-making moments. A day in which one more child experiences the great outdoors and all it offers. The same day the 16-year-old ELK mentor realizes that becoming an outdoor recreational teacher would be a cool profession.

In June, Gilmore and 27 ELK kids traveled to Colorado's Four Corners region to conduct fishing workshops for youth of the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe and the Southern Ute Tribe. ELK students led several small group workshops in fishing. Mentoring the curious and eager Native American kids on this new experience, ELK kids shared their knowledge and excitement for angling and conservation. During eight days, 100 youth plus their families were involved, all leaving with some equipment, knowledge and excitement about going fishing. How many will continue fishing? That may never be known. But we do know that except for the years when the Rocky

Mountain West was suffering from severe drought, fishing license sales in Colorado have increased or stayed steady over the 17 years of the Angler Outreach Program. Introducing hundreds of thousands of kids and their parents isn't the sole reason for increased license sales, but its influence ought not be overlooked.

Kids mentoring kids is a novel yet proven technique that immerses both into the angling experience. Both walk away from the workshop with something. Some might say it's just fishing. But is it just that? Could it be that a single experience can change a life and set the stage for a person's entire future?

That boy who tumbled into the stream while fishing with his mom remembers the moment with vivid clarity. His parents spent every weekend and vacations doing activities in the outdoors with their kids, something that's very rare in this day of single parent and families in which both parents work. It's something very different from this era of computers, cell phones, texting, videos, soccer camps, music lessons and myriad distractions and pressures this modern world holds for youth and adults alike. He was raised at the edge of a small city with a creek running through town. At 8 years of age he spent his summer days biking with friends to fish all day in the stream when they weren't chasing frogs or otherwise entertaining themselves. They were never bored.

Our world has changed and those pages can't be turned back. Yet Colorado's Angler Outreach program and ELK are turning Colorado kids onto fishing. At the same time they're teaching youth about ethics, responsibility and how much fun the great outdoors holds. It's a gift worth giving, a cause worth supporting.

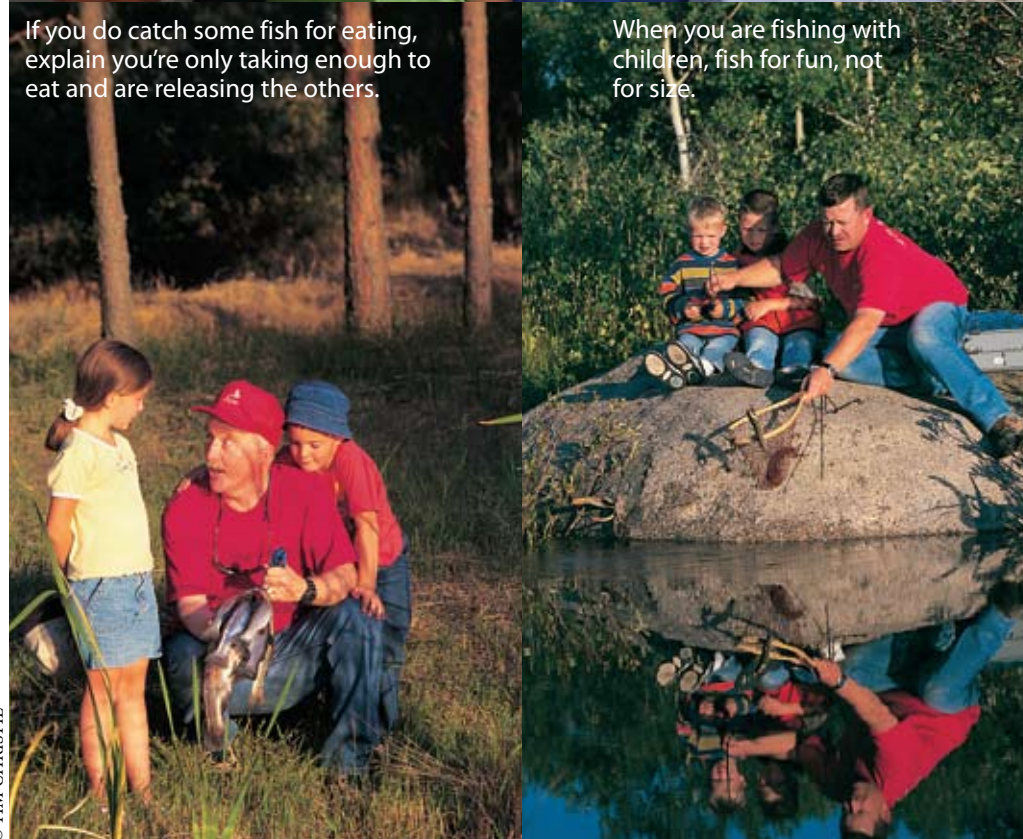
Gilmore said it best. "When I'm teaching a kid about fishing, it's not just about catching a fish. It's about having fun in the outdoors. And when a parent is there to share the experience we're teaching them how they can have fun together, and with minimal expense. Yet, when there is a young person at a workshop that doesn't have a parent or guardian accompanying them, well, it saddens me. At the end of the day I feel that the adult has been cheated out of sharing a real cool time with their kid! I'm glad I was there, but saddened by what they've missed."

If you love fishing as much as Gilmore and his volunteers do, you too can be that person who makes a lifelong mark on a child by passing on the heritage of angling. Take your son or daughter fishing. No kids? Well, there are neighborhood kids who'd love the opportunity. As Gilmore says, "It's just a matter of tak-



Scott Gilmore (left) and 27 Environmental Learning for Kids members conducted fishing workshops for youth of the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe and the Southern Ute Tribe.

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If you do catch some fish for eating, explain you're only taking enough to eat and are releasing the others.

When you are fishing with children, fish for fun, not for size.

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ing the time to spend time afield with them. Sure it's more fun if they catch something, but going fishing is more than just catching a fish. It's time spent out doors having fun. And trust me; they'll remember it for a lifetime."

Back to that scene on the stream bank. The mother believed she was just entertaining her son by sitting with him as he fished. She never realized that she was doing so much more than simply watching her son drown a worm. On that brilliant summer day her presence and actions nurtured his spirit and passion for the outdoors. His life's destiny was set in motion. Just fishing...it's a simple, yet potentially

powerful gift. It's about introducing someone to the outdoors. It's a day of your life spent in the outdoors sharing it with someone else. But it could mean much more. You may never know. It's as simple as taking a kid fishing. Just fishing.

Thanks, Mom! 🐟

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## Tips for Taking Kids Fishing

Intimidated by the thought of taking a kid fishing? Don't be. It's really pretty easy and the Colorado Division of Wildlife (DOW) is working hard to help you succeed in a variety of ways. Never been fishing but want to learn with your child? Check out <http://wildlife.state.co.us/Fishing/ClinicsAndEducation> which is a complete list of contacts and locations for clinics and other educational opportunities offered by DOW. Don't know where a good place to take a kid fishing? That's easy. The DOW's website lists great places to fish <http://wildlife.state.co.us/Fishing/WhereToGo/101Places/> and even give weekly reports on angling throughout the state as well as other information helpful for anglers <http://wildlife.state.co.us/Fishing/Reports>.

Here are a couple of tips for successfully taking a kid fishing.

### Keep it simple!

The easiest set up is a hook, a split shot sinker, a bobber and a night crawler. It's a foolproof recipe for catching fish, and something even the young kids can understand. Plus there's the visual aspect of the bobber that will hold their interest. And it helps adults keep track of what's happening. If you don't have much experience with fishing, well, the setup is very easy for you to work with. Plus this setup will catch fish on virtually any body of water.

### Be Patient. Praise often.

Kids will be challenged, and it's important that you're okay with that. They will make bad casts. They'll hook branches, their clothes, you, the family dog... anything in range. Do yourself a favor and use pliers to flatten the barb on the end of the hook. It will make removing the hook from you, them and the fish easier. If you don't get frustrated, they won't either. When they do something right, praise them. If they snag something, treat it lightheartedly... maybe even make a game out of it. There are many teachable moments when fishing. When they do something wrong, explain to them what happened and why, then teach them how to do it correctly.

### Fish for fun, not for size.

Kids love action and they have short attention spans. Go for fish that are easy to catch. Sunfish and bluegills are shallow-water fish, easy to find and easy to catch. They're perfect for a kid's first fishing trip.

Don't worry about catching that big trout, and don't define fishing success that way. The best day fishing I had with my dad was catching a mess of small brook trout in a stream. None were over 10 inches, but it is a cherished time spent with him.

### Make it about the kids

This is their trip, a time for you and them to have fun. Fishing through your eyes may be catching your limit of fish, and if you do, Scott Gilmore suggests you leave your equipment home. It eliminates being tempted to just fish for a few minutes, which turns into a couple of hours. This trip is about the kids and their day with you. Don't be frustrated if their idea of fun is chasing frogs. If they enjoy fishing with you, and it means they spent part of the time splashing in the water and skipping rocks across the water, great. Ultimately if they enjoy the experience, they'll begin to focus more on fishing. Admonishing them for not really fishing is a sure turnoff to the whole experience. See the whole experience through their eyes. Be a kid again... it's actually fun.

### Teach conservation

There is no better time to teach kids about conservation than on a fishing trip. When they catch a fish, show them all of the parts of a fish. Show them how a fish breathes underwater, how they see. If you don't know, do some pre-trip research. Teach them about the importance of clean water for all species. Catch-and-release fishing promotes good stewardship of the resource. If you do catch some fish for eating, explain you're only taking enough to eat and are releasing the others.

### Have Fun!

Success comes from having fun. Make it a trip for the memory book. Take photos. Especially take photos of them with their fish. Make sure you've got insect repellent, sunscreen, a good hat to shade their face from the sun, the right clothes to stay dry if it's raining, plenty of food and snacks that they like. Maybe surprise them with a treat that they don't normally get. This is about spending time away from cell phones, television and just time spent focused on enjoying the moment and companionship with them. You'll be amazed how quickly the time goes and what warm, rich memories are created for both of you.