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## Kanawha River trophy trout catch puzzles angler, biologist

By John McCoy Staff writer

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Charleston resident Kyle Vickers had a one-in-a-million catch recently when he pulled a 21-inch rainbow trout from the Kanawha River, at a time of year when water temperatures should have killed the fish.

Courtesy photo

Imagine standing in the middle of a West Virginia hayfield and seeing a hippopotamus come strolling by.

That's sort of how Kyle Vickers felt when he caught a trophy-sized rainbow trout from the Kanawha River, just a few miles from downtown Charleston.

Trout aren't supposed to be found in the Kanawha, especially in July when the river's water temperatures top 80 degrees Fahrenheit. Jeff Hansbarger, district biologist for the state Division of Natural Resources, said trout simply can't tolerate temperatures that high.

"I would consider sustained temperatures above 70 degrees to be lethal for rainbow trout," he added. "It's a miracle that fish found water cold enough to sustain itself."

Vickers caught the trout near the mouth of Campbells Creek, where a small spillway discharges cool water into the river.

"I've seen guys cast nets for shad from that spillway," he said. "Water runs from it continuously. I have no idea where that water comes from, but when you wade through it, it's cold."

Vickers, who lives in Charleston, likes to fish that area for smallmouth bass, and on the morning of July 9 he was doing just that.

"It was around 9 or 9:30 in the morning, before the air temperature got hot," he recalled. "I was using an ultralight spinning rig, drifting chartreuse Berkeley PowerBait Trout Worms through some boulders. I'd already caught three or four smallmouth when the trout hit."

Vickers said the fish appeared to have come from a deep hole just out from the spillway, where the cold water would have collected.

"Usually, I can tell what kind of a fish I have on the hook just from feel," he added. "This fish fought like a bass, but it had some strength to it. After I turned the reel handle a few times, I could see the green color and the red stripe and knew it was a rainbow.

"I started going crazy. I thought, 'I've got to land this fish.' I got it on the bank, threw it on my stringer and got out of there."

The trout measured 21½ inches in length and weighed 3¼ pounds. Its length qualified it for a West Virginia Trophy Fish Citation.

Vickers, a veteran angler, knew immediately how unusual his catch was. He called Hansbarger, who confirmed the fish shouldn't have been able to survive in the river at this time of year.

“It makes me wonder where that fish came from,” Hansbarger said. “More than likely, it came from a tributary that had been stocked with trout, or from a tributary where school kids release trout they raise for Trout Unlimited’s Trout in the Classroom project.”

Neither Vickers nor Hansbarger believes the trout had been freshly stocked. Vickers said the rainbow had long, pink fins and a vivid red gill plate and lateral stripe. Freshly stocked rainbows usually have fins rounded off from rubbing against the walls of concrete hatchery raceways, and their colors are less vivid than a wild fish.

“That fish might have been stocked at one time, but it had been in the water long enough to take on a wild fish’s appearance and grow to that size,” Hansbarger said.

Vickers said the trout isn’t the largest he’s ever caught, but he plans to have it mounted anyway.

“It’s such an unusual catch, I can’t not mount it,” he said. “It’s going on the wall.”

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