

# A Different Angle on the Expedition

DID FISH AND FISHING ALTER THE FATE OF LEWIS AND CLARK?

By Nick Genock



"I AMUSED MYSELF IN FISHING," wrote Captain Meriwether Lewis the evening of June 15, 1805. The Corps of Discovery was camped below the Great Falls of the Missouri River, and that afternoon Lewis and other men of the expedition had enjoyed catching several cutthroat trout by baiting their hooks with "melt" (deer spleen).

The Lewis and Clark Expedition was an angler's dream trip. On some days, members caught bass, catfish, trout, or other species as fast as they could bait a hook. But fish meant more to the expedition than occasional amusement. Fish were important in the collection of scientific information.

Lewis and Captain William Clark recorded 11 species of fish unknown to Americans at the time, and they mentioned more than 30 different species throughout the journey. Fish also staved off extreme hunger, providing the expedition with protein at times when deer and other game were scarce. And it was the sight of salmon on the Lemhi River in today's Idaho that told Lewis the Pacific Ocean was finally within reach.



Channel catfish, a Corps favorite.

"Numbers of Cat fish caught" During the first summer of the expedition, the Corps of Discovery members became accustomed to pulling large quantities of fish from the Missouri River. The men had regularly caught fish

since leaving St. Louis in the spring of 1804. Their best success came while fishing a Missouri River tributary in today's Nebraska, catching more than 800 fish in a single day.

The group's master angler was Silas Goodrich, whom Lewis described as "our fine fisherman." During the day, the young private often dropped a line from the end of the keelboat as it moved upstream. In the evenings, he would lead the men in casting lines from the sandy banks, at times hauling in fish by the dozens before dark. They caught smallmouth bass, freshwater drum, northern pike, and, most beloved by the men, catfish.

The tasty catfish fillets were excellent food, and the fish were easy to obtain. In what is now South Dakota, Clark wrote, "Numbers of Cat fish caught, those fish is so plenty that we catch them at any time and place in the river."

Once the expedition entered Montana, in April 1805, the men began encountering new fish species. It was in this stretch of the Missouri that Lewis first described the sauger

and goldeye. But the fish seemed less abundant than before. On May 22, Lewis wrote, "We have caught but few fish since we left the Mandans, they do not bite freely..." Fortunately, that created no food hardships, for the expedition had entered a region of North America with nearly limitless quantities of game. The captains wrote

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FISHING

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1 doz. Rock ditto	2.50
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1 India Line	42 =
2 Lines \$1	2 =
Sportsman's flask	1.50
3 Stave reel	3 =
	\$25.32

Recd by Geo. R. Lawton

Received the within articles  
Meriwether Lewis  
Capt 1st US Regt Inftry

**YE OLDE ANGLING ESSENTIALS** On the back of a flyer printed by the Old Experienced Tackle Shop in Philadelphia, proprietor George R. Lawton listed some of the fishing supplies purchased by Captain Meriwether Lewis in 1804 for the expedition, including reels, line, hooks, and that perennial angler favorite, a "sportsman's flask." U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES

about large herds of elk, deer, antelope, and bison that numbered in the thousands. However, even with such abundant and accessible game, Goodrich and the others continued to wet their lines, a testament to how much the men loved to eat fish.

*"...very fine trout."*

Once the expedition reached the Great Falls, the Missouri River's water temperature grew too cool for catfish but became suitable for trout. Tributaries from as far away as today's Yellowstone National Park, 250 miles to the south, cooled the river with mountain runoff throughout the summer.

"Goodrich had caught half a dozen very fine trout," Lewis wrote on June 13, 1805, at the base of the Great Falls. Those trout, ranging from 16 to 23 inches, were westslope cutthroat, the first ever caught by an American.

For the next six weeks, as they continued upstream through the valleys of southwestern Montana, expedition members caught more cutthroat than any other species. But the trout weren't as plentiful as the catfish caught the previous summer. For several weeks Lewis wrote little about fishing, mentioning only that he occasionally saw fish, most of which were trout.

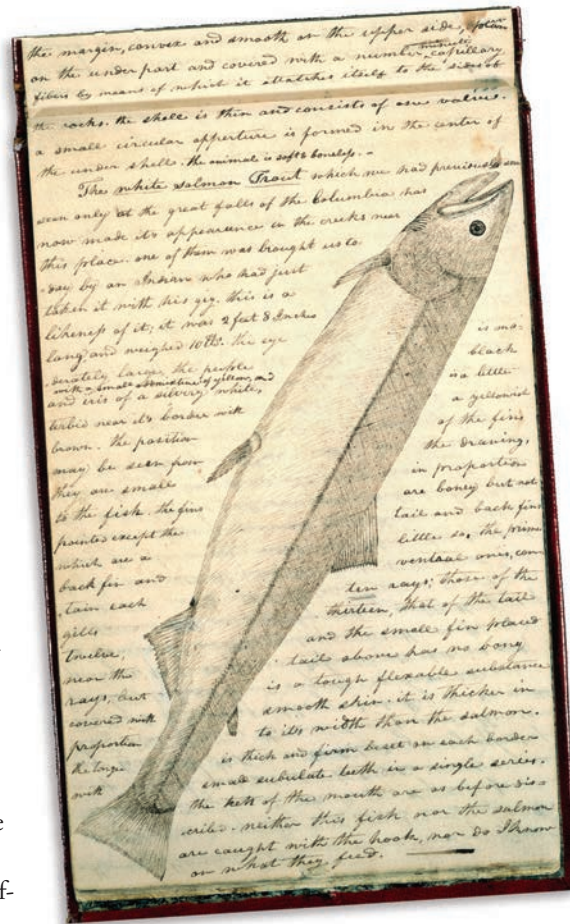
As the expedition moved past the Three Forks, Lewis worried his men might soon go hungry. "I know when we leave the buffalo country that we shall sometimes be under the necessity of fasting occasionally," he wrote on July 3. Sacagawea, their Shoshone interpreter, had informed them they would soon be leaving the buffalo range. And deer, elk, and other game were growing less abundant as they moved south up the river they had named for President Jefferson.

To add to the frustration, expedition members could often see fish but not catch them—a curse afflicting anglers from Izaak Walton's time to today. Wrote Lewis, "We see a great abundance of fish in the stream some of which we take to be trout but they will not bite at any bait we can offer

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them." At this point in the journey, the men could not count on fish for dinner.

Lewis grew increasingly desperate. Food was scarce, and he had yet to meet up with the Shoshone Indians he'd hoped would trade horses essential for carrying gear over the Rockies. Near present-day Dillon, Lewis took three men up a tributary of the Jefferson River (now called the Beaverhead) to locate Sacagawea's people.



**FINALLY, SALMON** Captain Lewis's illustration of a salmon, from his journal dated March 16, 1806. He first encountered salmon (facing page) the previous August, after crossing the Continental Divide into today's Idaho. He wrote that the salmon on the Lemhi River were the first "I had seen and perfectly convinced me that we were on the waters of the Pacific Ocean." AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

After leaving the river and heading west over the Continental Divide at Lemhi Pass into what is now Idaho, Lewis finally made contact with the Shoshone. There, in the Lemhi Valley, the captain found a new food source for his hungry expedition. Though they were leaving behind the game-rich

grasslands, Corps members were about to enter the drainage of one of the world's great salmon fisheries.

*"this was the first salmon I had seen...."*

Over the next two weeks, while negotiating with the Shoshone for horses, Lewis learned and wrote more about fish than anywhere else on the journey. Fish were far more important to Indians in this region than to those east of the divide. Biologists estimate that at the time 10 to 16 million salmon and steelhead migrated from the Pacific Ocean. Salmon and steelhead were to the Indians of the Northwest what bison were to the Plains tribes.

Lewis had his first taste of salmon on August 13, the same day he met the Shoshone chief Cameahwait. Lewis wrote that it was a momentous meal, for "this was the first salmon I had seen and perfectly convinced me that we were on the waters of the Pacific Ocean." Lewis and his men went back across the pass to find Clark and the main party. The expedition then returned to the Lemhi.

*"...they employ wairs, gigs, and fishing hooks."*

Salmon reach the Lemhi by swimming up the Columbia River to the Snake River and its tributary the Salmon, then to the Lemhi and other mountain streams. Lewis described how the

Shoshone captured these migratory salmon, writing that "in fishing they employ wairs, gigs, and fishing hooks."

The weirs were elaborately engineered fish traps. The Shoshone used trees to dam the Lemhi and spread it into four smaller channels, each with its own log dam. At the center of each dam, they placed a large, conical willow basket, which captured salmon swimming with the current. Each summer, the Shoshone hauled hundreds of salmon and steelhead from the weirs, then dried the fish to last through the winter.

The Indians also captured salmon with hooks, probably snagging the easily accessible fish. It's unclear whether these were bone hooks, or metal ones the Shoshone



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had acquired through trade.

The Indians readily shared their abundant harvest with the Corps. But the men also caught salmon themselves. On the Lemhi River they built a “bush drag”—likely a seine of woven willow switches. Lewis wrote, “in about 2 hours they caught 528 very good fish, most of them large trout, among them I now for the first time saw ten or a dozen of a white species of trout.”

The “white trout” were likely steelhead, a light silver-colored type of rainbow trout. Like salmon, steelhead live most of their adult lives in the Pacific Ocean but spawn in freshwater streams.

*“...doubts of Starveing...”*

Overnight, the Corps’s fishing success went from hot to cold. Lewis wrote that on the evening following the great salmon catch “we attempted to gig fish but were unsuccessfull only obtaining one small salmon.” Such a meager harvest was disconcerting. As attempts to capture salmon continued to fail, Clark also wrote about his fear of starvation, noting that the men were “hourly Complaining of their retched Situation and doubts of Starveing in a Countrey where no game of any kind except a few fish can be found.” He also sympathized with the Shoshone: “Those Pore people are here depending on what fish They Can Catch, without anything else to depend on.”

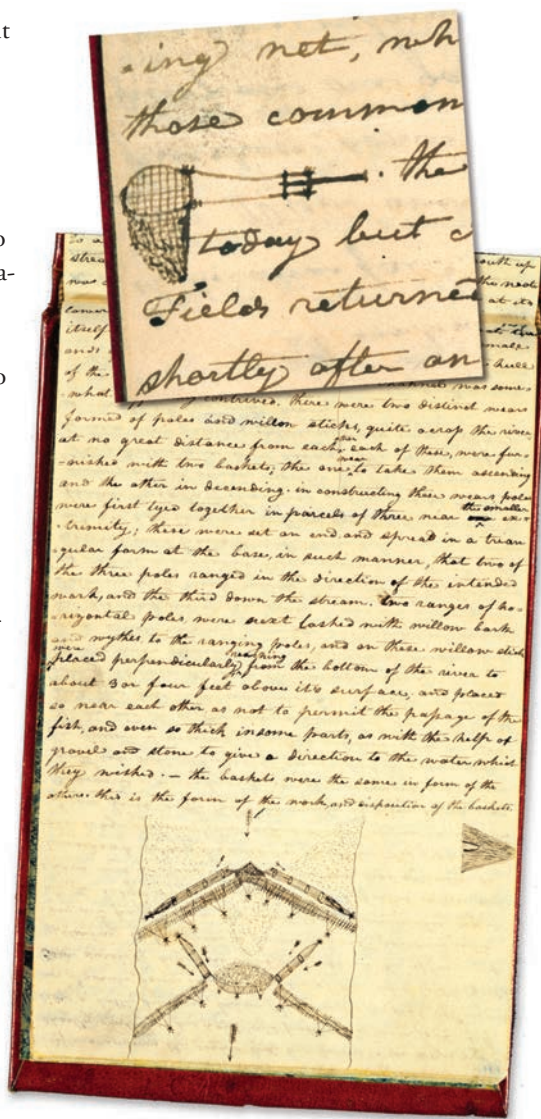
The captains knew summer was ending, and that they had to beat the snow or perish in the mountains. Since they knew they were on a river leading to the Pacific, one option would have been to continue down the Salmon. But Cameahwait had cautioned Lewis against it. The Shoshone chief knew once the Salmon turned west a few miles downstream from today’s town of North Fork, Idaho, it became a boiling caldron of whitewater. The river carved through steep cliffs and mountains covered in dense timber that would have been impossible for the expedition to traverse. (Today, that pristine, rugged region is the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness.)

The captains wanted to see for themselves, so Clark took a small crew down the Salmon on August 23. So steep were the banks the men had to direct their horses

into the river, which was so deep in places they had to swim. Clark turned back.

Lewis and Clark decided to leave the Salmon River and head north, back into today’s Montana. A few days later, the captains headed over Lost Trail Pass then down along the Bitterroot River to try another crossing west that the chief had told them about.

Once in the Bitterroot Valley, Lewis described the river as a “handsome stream.” But something was missing. Still on the Pacific side of the Continental Divide, the river should have contained anadromous (ocean-running) fish, but “from the circumstance of their being no sammon in it,” wrote Lewis, “I believe that there must be



**SALMONID SNARES** Lewis kept detailed notes of his men's and the Indians' fishing methods. Top: a fish net, May 18, 1806. Above: a Shoshone fish weir on the Lemhi River, August 21, 1805. AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

a considerable fall in it below.”

That may have been one reason the expedition didn't continue down the Bitterroot to the Clark Fork River. The last time the expedition had been forced around a large waterfall, at the Great Falls, it had required a month of grueling labor. With winter looming, Lewis surely didn't want to gamble on another lengthy portage.

Another reason for avoiding the Clark Fork was that Cameahwait had told the captains they could reach the Pacific by crossing the Bitterroots at Lolo Pass. The expedition almost perished on that crossing in a late-summer snowstorm, forcing members to eat one of the horses. However, the crew survived and eventually reached the Pacific.

Had the Corps of Discovery continued down the Bitterroot to the Clark Fork, it eventually would have faced several difficult obstacles, including Albani Falls in north-eastern Washington. As Lewis suspected, the barrier prevented salmon from swimming farther upstream. Lewis's understanding of anadromous fish may have helped steer the expedition away from a lengthy and difficult route.

Did fish save the Lewis and Clark Expedition? Probably not. But trout and other fish supplemented the expedition's diet on days when game was scarce. And the gifts of salmon from the Shoshone, along with salmon the crew members caught themselves, came when the men were nearly starving.

What's more, the many hours Goodrich and the others spent fishing certainly added to their enjoyment and sense of discovery while making their historic journey. Today, anglers from across the United States continue to fish the same rivers traveled by Lewis and Clark, discovering for themselves the wonders of the American West seen by the Corps of Discovery two centuries ago. 🌿

*In June, the Federation of Fly Fishers' Discovery Center in Livingston will unveil "Undaunted Anglers: Fish of Lewis & Clark." This permanent exhibit will contain a room-sized mural of the expedition's river journey, replicas of early 19th-century fishing gear, a willow fish trap recently built by Shoshone high school students in Idaho, and more. For information, call (406) 222-9369.*



FLY ANGLER ON THE MISSOURI RIVER BY DUSANSMETANA.COM

## LEWIS AND CLARK'S FISHERIES TODAY

Much has changed in the rivers traversed by the Corps of Discovery over the past two centuries. Yet much is the same.

What would likely surprise expedition members most are the seven major dams on the Missouri River, from St. Louis to the headwaters. The structures have turned much of the river into a chain of lakes. Dams have also altered the Columbia River system. Salmon must now negotiate four dams on the Columbia and four on the Snake to reach the Lemhi River and other mountain streams where they spawn.

Goodrich and others would also wonder what happened to the cutthroat trout. Cutthroat are the only trout native to Montana (except for rainbows in the far northwestern corner). But the easily caught cutts have been replaced with browns and rainbows in most rivers.

What expedition members would have found familiar is the appearance of many Montana rivers. Thanks to limited riverside development, lengths of the Missouri and Yellowstone—and even a few small stretches of the Jefferson, Beaverhead, and Bitterroot—still look the same as they did 200 years ago.

How long that will last, however, is up to Montanans and others who value the sight of pristine river landscapes like those witnessed by Lewis and Clark and their Corps of Discovery. —Tom Dickson



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The Corps never saw brown trout, which were first introduced to Montana in 1889.