



# Check Out This Rod

**FWP sets up loaner stations for kids who want to fish but don't have the gear.** BY RON SELDEN

**K**ids love to fish. But many kids, especially those from low-income families, don't have access to rods, reels, and tackle. A popular Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks program based in Glasgow is helping change that in north-central and northeastern Montana.

The Kids to Fish Program loans rod-and-reel combinations to young anglers at no charge. Some lending also goes on in other parts of the state, but FWP's program in northeastern Montana is the most extensive and has greatly expanded in recent years.

Begun in 2007, the program now offers 45 loaner sites across the Hi-Line and elsewhere in the region. Kids can check out basic fishing rods, reels, and tackle that manufacturers and retailers provide to FWP at a discount. In all, more than 400 rod-and-reel combinations are available.

"Just because someone doesn't own a fishing rod doesn't mean they shouldn't be able to go fishing," says Josh VanWoert, who, as an FWP intern, helped run the program while attending the University of Montana-Western. "We want as many kids

as possible to be able to get out and fish, no matter where they live."

The fishing gear can be checked out for free at county libraries, convenience stores, gas stations, campgrounds, sporting goods outlets, cafes, marinas, and supermarkets, and at tribal offices on the Fort Peck, Fort Belknap, and Rocky Boy's Reservations.

A juvenile detention center uses the rods as part of its youth activity program. And some adults borrow the fishing gear for family reunions, church and school outings, and other events. "We get a lot of families, many

**EVERYTHING BUT THE BAIT** FWP has set up fishing rod loaner stations at department offices (facing page), libraries, gas stations, and campgrounds across northeastern Montana. Top: Kids sign out rods and basic tackle they can use free for up to a week. The loaner program is aimed at encouraging kids to spend time outside exploring the natural world—and maybe catching a fish in the process (above right, above left).

of them single parents, coming in to check out rods," says Bonnie Williamson, director of the Havre-Hill County Library. "Some parents come back more than once with their kids. We encourage it."

Most of the rods and tackle are borrowed by kids—often two or three friends who then walk or bike down to the local fishing pond or stream. "The kids really enjoy being able to stop by and get these rods. It's been working really well," says Marty Dillon at the Qwik Stop in Brockton, where anglers have their choice of two full racks of loaner fishing rods.

The loaner program works the same as a library. Youngsters pick out a rod-and-reel package and sign it out, promising to return the gear in good working order within a reasonable amount of time. "We aren't fussy. If

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they want to keep it for a week, they can," says Williamson.

Each rod-and-reel combination is rigged with a bobber, split shot, and hook—basic gear for catching panfish, sauger, walleyes, trout, or catfish in the region's many reservoirs, ponds, and streams. Anglers must supply their own minnows, worms, and other bait, as well as any crankbaits, spinners, spoons, or other additional tackle.

To keep the fishing gear in good shape, FWP relies on volunteers who repair broken rod tips, untangle line, and maintain reels. Members from several Walleyes Unlimited chapters and other volunteers "adopt" loaner racks in their communities and keep the equipment in working order. A recent Eagle Scout project required the scout to promote and expand the program. FWP officials say they welcome any assistance.

A few other FWP offices also loan fishing rods and gear. The south-central region

headquarters in Billings provides about 40 rods. Most are borrowed by kids to fish Lake Elmo, at the state park where the office is located. In western Montana, some loaner rods are available at Salmon Lake State Park. And the department's regional headquarters in Kalispell offers about a dozen spinning and fly rods.

In northeastern Montana, the loaner program extends across hundreds of miles from Plentywood to Loma and nearly everywhere in between, including the tiny McCone County community of Circle. There, Warren Graves, co-owner of the Circle County Market, recently set up the store's first rack of rods. "Kids have been eyeing them all winter," he says. "Once the weather gets nice, I think the rods will be flying off the rack." 🐾

*For more information, call the FWP regional office in Glasgow at (406) 228-3723.*

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: RON SELDEN/FWP; RON SELDEN; KENTON ROWE; KENTON ROWE