



Trout

fishing is a legitimate excuse to spend long periods of time in the most beautiful places on earth. Of course anyone can hike along a stream or river to watch birds or take photos. But after a few hours, people might wonder why you're still there. Not so for anglers.

It doesn't seem odd to hang out streamside all day if I have a rod in my hand. People assume I'm waiting for a hatch or figuring out which fly to tie on, when I'm actually drinking in the scenery like any tourist.

To be sure, the fishing itself has great appeal. I like to see a trout inhale my dry fly as much as the next angler. But that doesn't happen nearly as often as I wish it did. Good thing a trout stream has so much more to offer.

The fact is, if we measure days on the water only by the number of trout caught, few of us could justify the effort—to our spouses or ourselves. But if instead an angler gives worth to time spent where watercress grows, cliff swallows skim the water surface, and snow-topped peaks rise beyond sage-covered

Sweet Surroundings

Trout are just one reason to linger along streams and rivers. By Tom Dickson

BEN PIERCE
Belt Creek in Sluice Boxes
State Park

foothills, then the hours have been well expended.

After a day wading the cool, clean waters of a gurgling stream or blue-ribbon river, I always return home relaxed and sated, no matter what took place at the end of my line.

Partly it's the quiet. The angry buzz of motorboats and personal watercraft rarely disturbs Montana's 15,000 miles of fishable trout streams and rivers. Though roads and freeways regularly parallel trout rivers, trees, wind, and water absorb most of the noise. For anglers standing in or watching the current, the hushed, moving water soothes like a shoulder massage. Add sunlight and a grassy bank for napping, and it's a wonder any fishing gets done at all.

A stream or river ties water and land together. And not just any land. The bank soil wicks water that keeps shoreline vegetation

Clockwise from right:

ROWAN NYMAN
Missouri River near Pelican Point

CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM
Cliff swallow mud nests along the Missouri

RADD ICENOGGLE
Evening hatch on the Bitterroot River

DENVER BRYAN
Fishing above a beaver dam

CHRIS MCGOWAN
Rainbow trout below Hauser Dam





lush, even as grass and brush on distant foothills wither in the summer heat. Plants above and below water make homes and food for insects that feed fish, which in turn attract piscivores like mink, otters, herons, kingfishers, and osprey. Along low shorelines, spring floods spread layers of silt where cottonwood seedlings sprout and grow into towering trees that hold eagle nests.

On trout streams an angler finds harmonies of color and tone. The water runs red, gold, slate, or aquamarine. Its surface can reflect sky, trees, clouds, sunshine, even moonlight, creating two views for the price of one.

Just as the current never stands still, so does the scenery constantly unfold, each bend revealing new vistas. Often distracted and unfocused, I rarely see wildlife when afield—except when pursuing trout. Then I'm like a cougar stepping cautiously from rock to rock, careful not to spook my quarry. Peering ahead, I search for new runs and riffles, or an undisturbed pool where a few stout fish have moved up from dark water to gulp struggling insects floating overhead.

In this manner I've come upon a doe and her twin fawns in the morning fog. Otters and mink, too, as well as a grizzly bear sniffing streamside shrubs in search of berries. I once spotted a



Clockwise from top:

CAROL POLICH
Madison River

SUMIO HARADA
Watercolors

ROWAN NYMAN
Bear Trap Canyon,
Madison River

ROBIN POOLE
Bighorn River

juvenile bull moose crossing midstream. I crouched to blend with the surroundings and watched as he ambled up the bank and melted into evergreen shadows, surprisingly silent for such a massive, awkward-appearing animal.

What we value in streams and rivers derives in large part from western Montana's geology. Mountains that formed eons ago hold snowfields well into summer, the steady runoff keeping valley water cool while nearby grasses wither. In some headwaters, springs bubbling up through limestone bedrock leach calcium carbonate left from shells of ancient marine life when the region was a vast ocean floor. The calcium jump-starts a food chain producing trout at its later stages, and then the raptors and land predators seeking those fish.

And credit for retaining this lovely trout water surely goes to the Montanans who for decades have worked to conserve its beauty and health. And to maintain public access to our state's priceless and un-ownable rivers and streams.

"I salute the gallantry and uncompromising standards of wild trout, and their tastes in landscapes," wrote the conservation writer John Madson. Though the fish themselves may be the main attraction, the sweet surroundings are what continue to draw many of us back, no matter what mood the trout are in. 🐻



clockwise from top left:

ALEC UNDERWOOD
Rock Creek

JOSHUA BERGAN
Willow Creek

BEN PIERCE
Fighting a Yellowstone cutthroat

JOHN JURACEK
O'Dell Creek near Ennis