

IN LOVE WITH THE GALLATIN

Easy to access, easy to wade, and often even easy to fish, it's no wonder the spectacularly scenic Gallatin remains one of Montana's most popular trout rivers. **BY BEN PIERCE**

GO WITH THE FLOW Beneath towering limestone cliffs, an angler fishes a tailout in the Gallatin River upstream from Big Sky. Though a busy highway runs along most of its length, the Gallatin offers solitude like this for anglers willing to hike a bit.

The Gallatin River is the picture of a classic Montana trout stream. Lined with tall Douglas firs, framed by soaring snow-capped peaks, and packed with riffles, pools, and boulders, it's a river that begs to be fished.

If you've never set foot in the Gallatin, or even driven past, there's still a good chance you've seen it.

When director Robert Redford came to Montana in the early 1990s to film *A River Runs Through It*—based on the novella by Norman Maclean—he chose the Gallatin for the role of the Blackfoot River. The crest of Storm Castle Peak rising above the river graces the final scene of the film, which won an Academy Award for best cinematography.

Named by Meriwether Lewis for U.S. Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin, the river was popular long before Brad Pitt starred in “The Movie,” as it's called in Montana fly-fishing circles (often derisively, for helping overpromote a cherished sport that locals had all to themselves). As far back as the 1890s, a resort in the canyon promoted the Gallatin's superb fishing. In the 1920s, tourists who arrived at Gallatin Gateway on a branch line of the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway boarded the iconic Yellowstone National Park buses and took the bumpy dirt road along the Gallatin to the park entrance at West Yellowstone.

Today, a stream of traffic follows that same route through Gallatin Canyon along U.S. Highway 191 between Bozeman and Big Sky Resort or the national park. The highway parallels the river for much of its length and provides numerous access points to wadeable water that tempts anglers every inch of the way. It allows

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WELCOME Touted as the “new” entrance to Yellowstone National Park, Gallatin Gateway Arch was built in 1926 near the entrance to Gallatin Canyon. It was later removed when the road was widened.



Bozeman anglers to be knee deep in trout water just 15 minutes after leaving work.

The busy road also produces a steady sound of traffic that is never far off. But for Bozemanites who consider the Gallatin their home river, and for anglers who visit from throughout the world, the periodic roar of a passing semi is a small price to pay for quick and easy access to water so productive, so scenic, and, at times, so easy to fish.

UPPER RIVER

As might be expected of a river running 115 miles, the Gallatin varies widely in appearance and personality from beginning to end. The river starts as an outlet of Gallatin Lake in Yellowstone National Park's northwestern corner. Here, where the shallow, riffly creek meanders through meadows dotted with willow and sagebrush, an angler might spot moose, elk, and even bison. The stream is

dominated in this stretch by small but eager rainbows, which, along with the Gallatin's brown trout, were first stocked during the early 1900s. Mike Vaughn, recently retired FWP biologist in Bozeman, says that before the introduction of non-natives, the Gallatin was home to arctic grayling, mountain whitefish, and westslope cutthroat.

Though the grayling are gone, plenty of whitefish and an occasional cutthroat remain in the upper river, a stretch that runs down to near the confluence with the Taylor Fork. “Every so often you'll be surprised by a 16-inch cutt up there,” says Matt Ruuhela, of Wild Trout Outfitters in Big Sky.

Ruuhela adds that many anglers avoid the upper Gallatin within Yellowstone because it requires a park fishing license. “There's lots of beautiful water that gets little pressure,” he says. “You can drive or hike along miles of river in the park and not see anyone.”

Solitude quickly disappears downstream from the park boundary, where the Gallatin becomes a popular recreational playground. Traditionally used only by trout anglers and picnickers, the river in recent years has attracted growing numbers of whitewater kayakers and rafters. Paddlers test their grit and skill on the Gallatin's Class IV rapids during spring runoff, when water surges wildly through House Rock Rapid and the Mad Mile in Gallatin Canyon.

While kayaks and other watercraft can be abundant on the Gallatin during high water, anglers cannot fish from a boat except in the



WADEABLE WATER Most of the upper Gallatin from Yellowstone National Park down to the Taylor Fork confluence is gentle water rarely over thigh deep. Farther downstream, the river picks up speed and contains deep runs that hold bigger trout but can be difficult to fish.

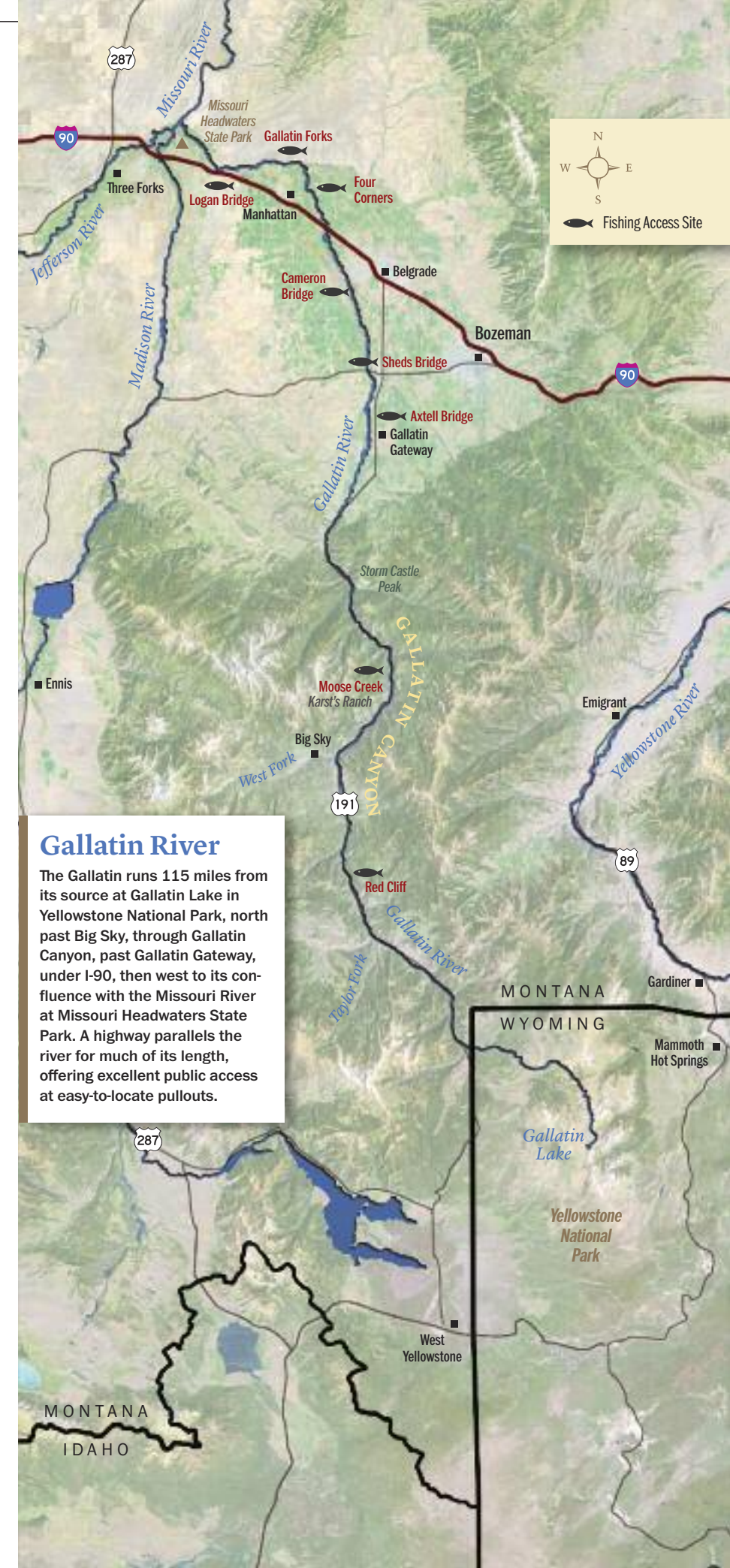
river's final 10 miles. To preserve its unique wade-fishing experience, the Gallatin is closed to float fishing from the park boundary to the mouth of the East Gallatin River near Manhattan, about 30 miles northwest of Bozeman. “The Gallatin offers a slower pace of fishing,” Ruuhela says. “In other rivers where you can fish from a boat, you float by a hole and get a few casts. On the Gallatin, where you're walking and wading, you can spend two or three hours in one spot. It's a good place for beginners, because you have time to learn a stretch of water, and you don't need to deal with the complexity of casting from a moving boat.”

CANYON STRETCH

About 15 miles downstream from where the Gallatin leaves the park, the Taylor Fork enters. The river now becomes bigger and sometimes murkier. After rains, volcanic duff in the Taylor Fork watershed causes the tributary to muddy the Gallatin for miles.

This is the start of the canyon stretch. The canyon bisects the Madison Mountains to the west and the Gallatin Range to the east while the river cuts through towering ocher-hued limestone cliffs and gains volume from tributaries. From the historic 320 Guest Ranch, founded in 1898, downstream to Big Sky, the river is primarily riffles and shallow pocket water behind midstream boulders.

The most heavily used section of the Gallatin extends from the confluence of the West Fork (of the Gallatin River) at Big Sky



Gallatin River

The Gallatin runs 115 miles from its source at Gallatin Lake in Yellowstone National Park, north past Big Sky, through Gallatin Canyon, past Gallatin Gateway, under I-90, then west to its confluence with the Missouri River at Missouri Headwaters State Park. A highway parallels the river for much of its length, offering excellent public access at easy-to-locate pullouts.

LEFT TO RIGHT: NPS.GOV; JOHN JURACEK; MAP BY LUKE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS

downstream to Karst's Ranch. Established in 1901 as a dude ranch by Pete Karst—prospector, entrepreneur, and founder of a stagecoach line—the now-defunct camp once boasted 56 cabins, Montana's first ski tow, a museum, a saloon, a brothel, and a swimming pool heated from an old boiler. Also known as Karst's Camp, the ranch served tourists as well as laborers who worked at a nearby asbestos mine.

Big Sky Resort is the Karst's Ranch of the 21st century. Envisioned by NBC newscaster and Montana native Chet Huntley, Big Sky Resort opened to the public in 1973. Following Huntley's death in 1974, the resort was purchased by Michigan-based Boyne Resorts. The following decades brought tremendous growth to Big Sky Resort, which—with acquisition of adjacent Moonlight Basin Resort in 2013—is now the nation's largest ski complex.

In summer and fall, the Big Sky Resort complex hosts weddings, corporate gatherings, and business conferences. Not surprisingly, all that growth has fisheries biologists keeping a close eye on the water. "With more development and more people, we are concerned about the potential for worsening water quality in the West Fork and the effects that could have on the mainstem Gallatin," Vaughn says.

SALMONFLIES AND SPRUCE MOTHS

Downstream from Big Sky, the river continues through scenic Gallatin Canyon. The steep cliffs keep the water shaded and cool, making it a great place to fish on hot summer days. The best angling in the chilly canyon often

starts around midday and runs through early afternoon, when water warmed by sunshine quickens fish metabolism and triggers hatches of aquatic insects.

Most dry fly anglers drift high-floating patterns along seams next to boulders, where trout wait for food to float past. Effective patterns include Humpies, Elk Hair Caddises, Stimulators, Royal Wulffs, Royal Trudes, and, for the spring *Baetis* hatch, small Parachute Adamses and Blue-Winged Olives. The biggest trout in the Gallatin River are taken by anglers fishing heavily weighted nymphs—like a black stonefly with rubber legs—in deep runs.

During June's high, roily runoff water, the Gallatin's largest aquatic insects—salmonflies—crawl from beneath underwater rocks onto banks, emerge from their shucks, and take flight.

These giant stoneflies swarm the canyon and will occasionally bring a big trout to the surface when they land on the water to lay eggs.

Because wading can be treacherous this time of year, Ruuhela recommends using a staff. He also advises newcomers not to get stuck on fishing salmonfly dries exclusively, even when the air is filled with big bugs. If trout don't want your Sofa Pillow, Godzilla, or other adult salmonfly imitation, use smaller attractor patterns or stonefly nymphs for a few hours and then return to the big dry

flies later, Ruuhela suggests. The June hatch progresses quickly up the Gallatin River into Yellowstone National Park. Look for vehicles parked in pullouts as indicators of the hatch's progress.

By early August, after runoff has subsided in the canyon, the Gallatin produces some of its best fishing. Spruce moths—terrestrial insects that feed on conifer needles—appear en masse along the river. "You always know it's going to be a good spruce moth day when, the night before, you see clouds of them swarming the streetlights in Big Sky,"

MOTH EATERS The Gallatin holds browns and rainbows, with an occasional cutthroat in the upper reaches in and near Yellowstone National Park. Some of the river's best fishing comes in early August, with the appearance of western spruce moths. High-floating yellow and amber caddis patterns work best, especially when cast near overhanging trees.



BOTH UNTOUCHED AND TRANSFORMED Most of the Gallatin River and surrounding area—like the canyon stretch (far left) and Ousel Falls (top left)—look no different from when trappers and miners first explored the region. Yet some aspects would be unrecognizable to early explorers. One change is the growing number of paddlers (top right) recreating in the Gallatin's Class IV rapids during late spring runoff. Another is the steady growth of Big Sky Resort (above), which attracts visitors year-round. Biologists are concerned that growing development could affect water quality of the West Fork Gallatin.

Ruuhela says. Use a high-floating yellow or amber caddis pattern and cast to water where trees hang over the river, he adds.

The Gallatin is known more for trout numbers and catchability than size. The fish run smaller than those in the nearby Madison and Yellowstone. Though 16-inchers are not uncommon, and even a few trout over 20 inches are caught each year, the fish through the canyon average 10 to 14 inches long.

Travis Horton, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks regional fisheries manager in Bozeman, says cold water and high fish densities limit growth. As on several other Montana rivers, the Gallatin might produce larger trout if more anglers harvested some small ones, allowing remaining fish more room to grow. "They'd probably still be smaller relative to other rivers in our region, but they'd certainly be bigger than they are now," says Horton.

LOWER RIVER

At the canyon entrance just upstream from Gallatin Gateway, the river spreads into a series of runs, riffles, and pools as it flows past housing developments and farm fields. The river then slows and meanders through

the broad valley floor, often braiding into a network of channels. Though less abundant than upstream, the fish here grow larger in the sunny, fertile water.

Two miles north of the town of Manhattan, at the Gallatin Forks Fishing Access Site, the Gallatin is joined by the East Gallatin. Flowing almost entirely through private property, this small but highly productive stream provides limited public access except at bridge crossings.

Parts of the lower Gallatin downstream from I-90 used to run nearly dry some summers. But in recent years, under the guidance of water commissioner and local rancher George Alberda, many irrigators voluntarily leave water they legally could use so that trout populations have adequate flows.

During the past few years, anglers have been unexpectedly hooking northern pike in the Gallatin's lower stretches. The fish, which may have escaped from a private pond near Manhattan, spread throughout the Missouri as far downstream as Canyon Ferry Reservoir. Fortunately, because northern pike require slow, warmer water, the piscivores won't move upstream into the Gallatin's famous canyon stretch. But the predators

could take a bite out of trout populations on the lower Gallatin—as well as the lower Jefferson and Madison. In response, FWP issued a no-limit regulation on the species in the three rivers and sent crews with gill nets to remove as many pike as possible on the Missouri River farther downstream. Though the predacious fish have not been totally eliminated and probably never will be, numbers are substantially reduced.

The Gallatin runs its final 10 miles to Missouri Headwaters State Park. Boat fishing is allowed in this stretch, which takes floaters through wild bottomlands containing abundant deer, beavers, mink, and waterfowl. Fly anglers catch big brown trout by working sculpin patterns and streamers along undercut banks. The fishing is especially good in fall, when spawning browns make a run up from the Missouri.

From beginning to end, the Gallatin serves up a wide diversity of fishing opportunities and scenic wonders. It definitely sees a lot of angling pressure, especially during the summer tourist season. But with more than 100 miles of fishable water, there's still plenty of river for everyone to have a stretch of the Gallatin all to themselves. 🐾



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