

A Fresh Look at the Fisheries

Montana's new fisheries chief talks about illegal stocking, invasive species, and why native fish are such a priority.



Eileen Ryce, FWP Fisheries Division administrator

For the past year, since she was named the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Fisheries Division administrator, Eileen Ryce has overseen one of the nation's most publicized fisheries management programs. The 42-year-old FWP fisheries "chief," as the position is commonly called, is responsible for 400 employees who protect and restore fisheries habitat for recreational species and species of concern, manage some of the world's most famous trout rivers, operate 12 hatcheries, work to prevent the introduction and spread of aquatic invasive species, and maintain 335 fishing access sites.

Montana Outdoors sat down with Ryce to talk about the current state of Montana's diverse and valuable fisheries.

MONTANA OUTDOORS: Right off the bat, how did you end up here as head of the FWP Fisheries Division?

EILEEN RYCE: I started working for the division in 2004 managing its new Aquatic Invasive Species Program. In 2011 I was hired as chief of the Hatchery Bureau, and then last year I was named division administrator. I still wake up some mornings and can't believe I'm walking in the footsteps of Montana fisheries leaders who came before me, like Larry Peterman and Chris Hunter. It's a huge honor—and, to be truthful, a bit daunting—to be considered worthy of carrying on their legacy.

MO: Anyone who has heard you talk will recognize your brogue. How did you end up so far from home, and do you think your background gives you a perspective on Montana's fisheries that people born here might not have?

ER: I grew up in Scotland and moved here in 1997 to do my PhD in aquatic invasive species ecology at Montana State University. This year is my 20th anniversary in Montana.

One advantage, if you can call it that, of

coming from outside Montana is that I continue to be amazed at the remarkable fisheries resources here. The anglers, landowners, and fisheries biologists who came before us left behind some extraordinary fisheries for us to enjoy. Each day I'm amazed and appreciative of that, and it makes me all the more determined to conserve those fisheries for future generations.

MO: Though you've worked all your 12 years at FWP here in Helena, it seems that you have developed a lot of goodwill with field staff and fishing organizations. How did that happen?

ER: One reason is that my husband, Lee Nelson, was for a long time the FWP fisheries biologist in Townsend, so I literally married into the Fisheries Division. The biologists and technicians across Montana have been part of my social and professional life for years, and I worked closely with our remarkable hatchery crews across the state. As for the NGOs [nongovernmental organizations], I got to know several of them, especially Walleyes Unlimited and Trout Unlimited, during my time as hatcheries chief.

MO: Illegal fish stocking is a growing problem, especially west of the Continental Divide. Because it can be done in remote areas at night, it's especially difficult to prevent. Can FWP do anything to stop it?

ER: It is a huge problem, and we, along with local communities and anglers and fishing groups, are very concerned. Illegal fish stocking—like putting perch or northern pike into a lake—can ruin existing fisheries.

The state can increase penalties and try to boost enforcement, but ultimately it comes down to anglers monitoring themselves. Anglers need to recognize that certain species should not be in waters where they are not suited—like walleyes west of the Divide or northern pike in Canyon Ferry.

We have abundant fishing opportunities for many species in many places in Montana, but not all types of fish belong together. This isn't North Dakota, where walleye, perch, and northern pike can exist statewide without causing problems for other species. Our existing fisheries are just too recreationally and economically valuable to mess around with. More and more anglers are realizing that their home waters and fisheries are under threat from a few selfish lawbreakers.

MO: What's the status of Montana's most popular fisheries?

ER: There's lots of good news. Fort Peck and Canyon Ferry Reservoirs have been fishing great these past few years. A real sleeper lately has been Fresno, near Havre. If you like to catch walleye—including from shore—

I recommend heading there right now.

The Bighorn River is still producing huge numbers of trout, and the Madison River's rainbow population has bounced back to pre-whirling disease levels. The Missouri downstream of Holter Dam continues to hold more big trout per mile than any other river stretch in Montana. What am I missing? Oh yes, the Gallatin, Bitterroot, Yellowstone, and Clark Fork are all fishing really well, and the Big Hole remains one of the nation's premier fly-fishing destinations, especially during the salmonfly hatch.

Our biggest concern over the past decade for Montana's river and stream fisheries has been warming water temperatures and lower flows. That is stressing fish, making them more susceptible to disease and parasites, like we saw with mountain whitefish on the Yellowstone last summer. It also forces us to temporarily restrict hours or even close waters to protect fish from the stress of being caught, reeled in, and released.

It looks like we could have an excellent snowpack this spring, and that bodes well for summer flows. Unfortunately, big runoffs are becoming an anomaly and not the normal state of things, as was the case 20 years ago.

MO: River conflicts are increasing on the Bitterroot, Blackfoot, Madison, Bighorn, and Missouri Rivers, as well as Rock Creek. The main issue is overcrowding, but there's also concern about garbage cleanup, vandalism, trespassing, parking, and public safety. What's the solution?

ER: The key to resolving these conflicts is for local users to meet and try to reach some reasonable compromises on their own, with FWP staff acting as advisers. That's happened already on the Blackfoot, Madison, and a few other rivers. We encourage river users to find local solutions rather than look for rulings by the Montana Legislature or FWP in Helena. In some cases, just some new signage on common courtesy, or bringing in an FWP river ranger to enforce existing regulations, might be all that's needed. Unlike anglers, the growing number of tubers, kayakers, and other river users don't pay fees. As a result, we lack adequate funding to maintain fishing access sites and manage public use on some of the most heavily used waters.

MO: Any other major concerns that Montana anglers should be aware of?

ER: Definitely the threat of aquatic invasive species. That's huge right now with the discovery last fall of invasive mussel larvae—it's impossible to tell if they are zebra or quagga mussels at that life stage—in Tiber and Canyon Ferry Reservoirs. It's been a huge wake-up call for legislators, communities, and anglers. Everyone in the state needs to work together to stop the spread of invasive species within Montana and keep new ones from crossing state borders.

For anglers, that means getting dead serious about cleaning, draining, and drying their boats, bait buckets, boots, waders, and other gear. (For more on Montana's invasive mussel crisis, see page 4—Ed.)

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MO: The Fisheries Division focuses a lot of time and money on native species. Why has that become such a priority?

ER: Our main coldwater fisheries, which hold primarily non-native rainbow and brown trout, are, for the most part, doing very well. While we have issues like overcrowding, the fish populations are in good shape.

But native westslope cutthroat, Arctic grayling, bull trout, and white and pallid sturgeon fisheries are struggling. Those species occupy only a small fraction of their

historic range. I think about the native species that Lewis and Clark saw when they came here 200 years ago, and I believe we have an obligation to make sure those species are still here 200 years from now. It's sad to envision a Montana future where children never have a chance to catch a cutthroat trout or grayling like my daughter still can. We're not going to let that happen.

Our division is making great strides with native species management. The fact that we kept the grayling from being listed as a federally endangered species proved we can manage that species. Coming from the Hatchery Bureau, I'm especially proud of the work our crews have done to rear native species like grayling, cutthroat, and pallid sturgeon as part of the division's restoration efforts. The work by our biologists to restore westslope cutthroat in lakes and streams of the South Fork of the Flathead watershed has been remarkable, and I'm excited about new plans to do similar work in the upper North Fork of the Blackfoot.

We still have challenges with the federally listed bull trout and pallid sturgeon. I've been very impressed with our crews in eastern Montana and the work they've been doing for going on two decades. They have done groundbreaking research on pallids and are fighting for better water-release regimes at Fort Peck Dam and improved fish passage at Intake Dam to ensure that this species—one of the most endangered in North America—doesn't disappear entirely. They recognize what a national tragedy that would be. The same goes for our western Montana biologists, who have been doing all they can to restore and protect bull trout habitat since the species was listed in 1998.

MO: Let's end this on a personal note. Fishing season is underway across the state. What kind of fishing do you like best?

ER: Really, it's any type where I get to spend time with my eight-year-old daughter Fiona. I'm happy to fly-fish with her on the Missouri, or just sit on the bank of a kids fishing pond together, tossing out a worm and a bobber. The main thing is being with family and getting outside and enjoying the resource. If it's a walleye, a rainbow, a cutthroat, or even a goldeye on the end of the line, that doesn't really matter to me. 🐟

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