

STILL TURNING HEADS



Despite record floods, growing recreational use, and a brief scare last summer, the upper **Yellowstone River** continues to reign as one of the nation's top trout waters.

BY BEN PIERCE

PARADISE FOUND A view, looking north, of the Yellowstone River and Paradise Valley from above Tom Miner Basin. Spectacular scenery is a major reason for the river's longstanding popularity.

PHOTO BY DON MACCARTER

BIG NET COUNTRY The Yellowstone's deep pools and abundant insects and sculpins produce larger-than-average trout. But connecting with trophy rainbows, browns, or Yellowstone cutthroat takes skill and experience. First-time visitors should consider hiring a guide for a day or two to learn which insects are hatching and what patterns to use.



The upper Yellowstone is one of those rivers every trout angler grows up dreaming about. I first saw it as a kid while flipping through the pages of my dad's sporting magazines. I remember one photograph in particular of an angler wearing a cowboy hat, casting a fly rod in the golden late-afternoon light. Behind him, snowcapped peaks rose in the distance. It was almost too beautiful to believe.

Growing up, I became smitten with the lore of the Yellowstone River, widely considered one of the world's finest trout fisheries. I learned that this longest undammed river in the Lower 48 was made famous by legendary fly-fishermen like Dan Bailey, Joe Brooks, and Charles Brooks for its superior water quality, prolific hatches, large and abundant trout, and breathtaking scenery. I read again and again that it was on every

serious trout angler's bucket list. When I moved to Bozeman for college in 1994, the Yellowstone was just a half hour away. Not infrequently, I'd cut class to fish that legendary water, which more than lived up to my grandiose expectations. Big fish. Great dry-fly action. And vistas straight out of a tourism advertisement.

But over the years I drifted away from the Yellowstone. There's just so much other prime water to fish in Montana. Its fame notwithstanding, the Yellowstone had become lost in the crowd.



A YELLOWSTONE INSTITUTION
In 1938, Dan Bailey opened a fly shop in Livingston, a stone's throw from the Yellowstone River, offering guiding services and hand-tied flies. By 1981 the shop was the leading fly manufacturer in the United States.

Then, late last summer, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks was forced to close the upper Yellowstone for a few weeks (see sidebar, page 36). That was like having cold river water splashed in my face. I decided to take another look at the Yellowstone. How was the river holding up amid increased angling pressure, record flooding, and habitat degradation? Was it still

living up to its reputation? In 1966, Joe Brooks wrote in *The Complete Guide to Fishing Across North America* that "the Yellowstone offers probably the best trout fishing in America today." Does that claim still hold up 50 years later?

The Canyon Stretch
The Yellowstone River rises in the Absaroka Mountains of northwestern Wyoming, then flows northward through Yellowstone National Park, entering then exiting Yellowstone Lake. This area of the park has a high density of grizzly bears, which feed on trout congregating in the Yellowstone and other lake tributaries during spring spawning season. Flowing northwest from the lake, the river tumbles over Lower Falls and through the famous Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone before entering Montana at the gateway town of Gardiner near the Roosevelt Arch.

During early summer, the river below Gardiner is popular with whitewater rafters, and rightly so. This part of the upper Yellowstone is a downright ripper during spring runoff and well into July. A look over the edge of the U.S. Highway 89 bridge that spans the river in Gardiner reveals its character. Precipitous canyon walls descend to willow-lined banks strewn with boulders the size of VW Beetles. The river flattens out a mile or so downstream and stays gentle for a few more miles before entering Yankee Jim Canyon, the wildest whitewater on the river.

The same qualities that make this part of the Yellowstone great for rafting produce excellent fishing in late June and early July. Stonefly hatches, particularly salmonflies and golden stones, benefit from the high-gradient, oxygenated water of the canyon. Big nymphs like Kaufmann's Stoneflies and Girdle Bugs fished along the banks ahead of the hatch will draw strikes. A well-placed cast beneath a willow once the big bugs are out can be equally productive. Looking for Yellowstone cutthroat? Scott Opitz, FWP Yellowstone River biologist in Livingston, says this stretch holds the greatest abundance of those native fish.

Because of the whitewater, relatively few anglers fish this stretch. Yet by putting in at Queen of the Waters or Brogan's Landing Fishing Access Sites and taking out at Slip-and-Slide, you can cover great fishing water

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: HAWK WELLES/SHUTTERSTOCK; WIKIMEDIA

and stay clear of the rough stuff. Halfway down on river left, look for Devil's Slide, an unusual 125-foot-tall rock formation consisting of vertical walls separated by a long seam of red, iron-impregnated rock.

Below Slip-and-Slide, Yankee Jim Canyon is for expert boaters only. Named for James George of Vermont (hence "Yankee"), who helped build the first road from Bozeman to Mammoth Hot Springs in the 1870s, Yankee Jim Canyon has claimed the lives of several anglers over the years. Only experienced oarsmen should attempt this stretch. If you have the skill, it's worth floating to reach areas few other anglers fish. "Yankee Jim Canyon weeds out the average Joe floaters and anglers," Bozeman outfitter Hank Welles says. "Even though you are right off the road, you feel like you are miles away from everything."

Though possible, it's tough to wade the Gardiner-to-Emigrant stretch. The river is swift and strong, banks are hard to traverse, and casting is difficult. Farther downstream, however, wade fishing is easier. Anglers generally fish for a mile or two up- or downstream from any of the 12 access sites

Ben Pierce is an editor-at-large for the Bozeman Daily Chronicle.



"They fought like small tigers, and I lost three flies before I could understand their method of escape. Ye gods! That was fishing."

between Yankee Jim Canyon and Livingston.

In 1890, British author Rudyard Kipling stopped to fish the Yellowstone River during a train trip up the Paradise Valley. Of the Yellowstone cutthroat trout he caught in this stretch, Kipling wrote, "They fought like small tigers, and I lost three flies before I could understand their method of escape. Ye gods! That was fishing."

Numbers of genetically pure cutthroat on the Yellowstone have declined by 75 percent or more since Kipling's visit. The native trout have been hybridized by non-native rainbows and displaced by aggressive browns. Adding to the decline: habitat degradation from irrigation, streamside grazing, road building,

and other human activities.

FWP has made strides to restore at least some of the native population. In the early 2000s, biologists worked with landowners to improve habitat on Emigrant Spring Creek, Big Creek, North Fork Fridley Creek, and other spawning tributaries of the Yellowstone. In some cases, the department bought water leases from landowners to keep water in streams that were previously drained for irrigation.

Scenic stretch

Below Yankee Jim Canyon, the upper Yellowstone turns north at the foot of Tom Miner Basin and breaks out into the broad Paradise Valley. Though the valley is increasingly dotted with new ranchettes and summer homes, the river itself has lost none of its aesthetic charm. Bisecting the Absaroka Range to the east and the Gallatin Range to the west, the Yellowstone here has been immortalized on the covers of countless fly-fishing magazines. Point of Rocks Fishing Access Site offers a launch point for day floats to Emigrant.

This is some of the prettiest water in all of Montana. Add to that cutthroat, brown, and rainbow trout up to and occasionally exceeding 18 inches, and it's no wonder this is

the most popular stretch on the river.

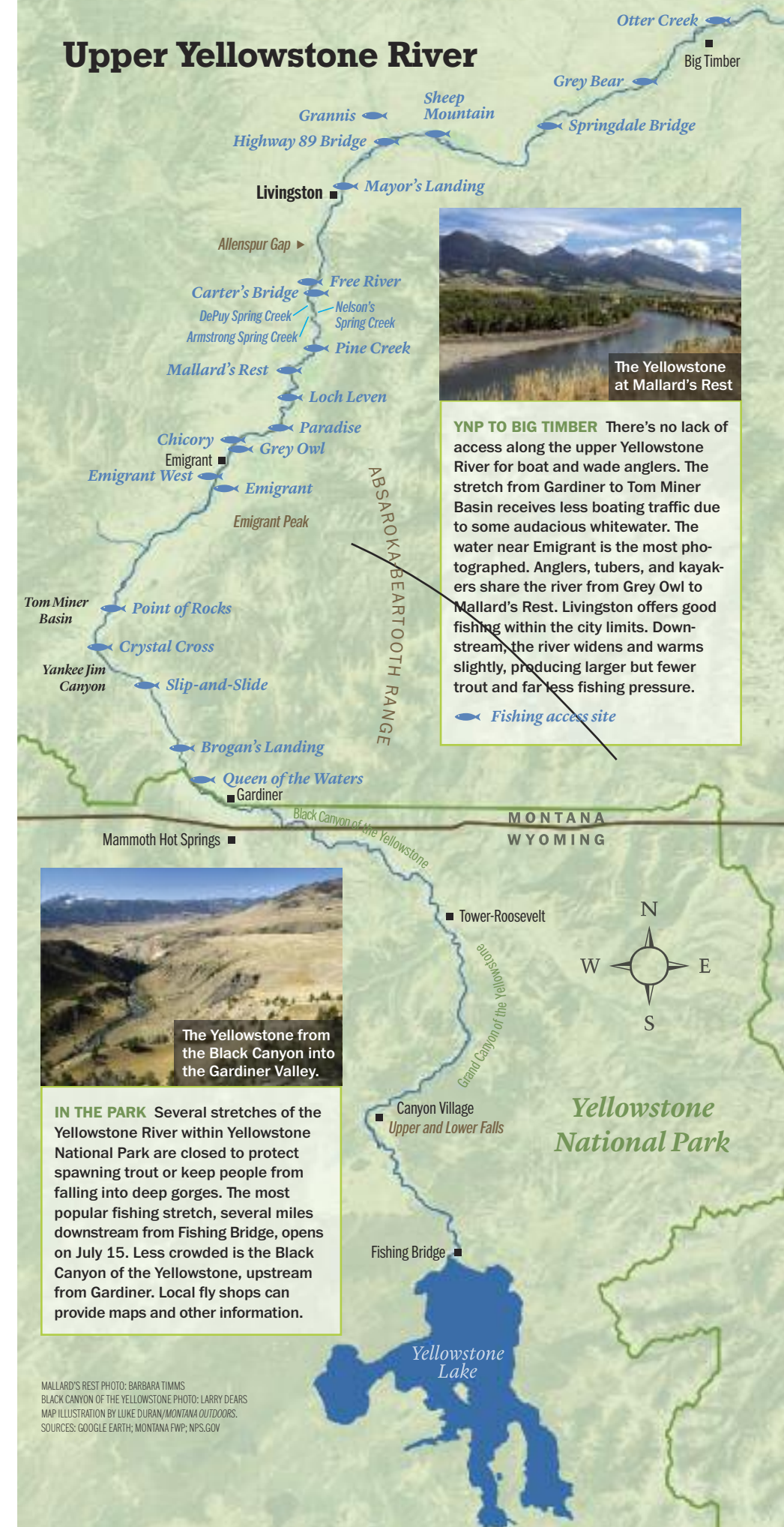
Other attractions include great hatches of *Baetis* mayflies, March Browns, and Mother's Day caddis, plenty of boat-launching sites, and large trout willing to attack streamers. "When those big fish move up out of their holes along the bank, they are looking for baitfish and crayfish," Welles says. "There are some 10-pounders in there."

This scenic stretch attracts more than anglers. The 11-mile "bird float" from Grey Owl to Mallard's Rest has become increasingly popular with kayakers and tubers in the summer. "Crowding and inability to park at fishing accesses have changed the experience for many longtime anglers," Opitz says.

The river itself has changed, too. Back-to-back "100-year" floods on the Yellowstone in 1996 and 1997 created new channels and islands, filled longtime pools and scoured out new ones, and created new spawning riffles that increased rainbow numbers a few years later.

The floods also temporarily created public access to a privately owned tributary, Armstrong Spring Creek. Armstrong and two other popular pay-to-fish streams, DePuy (nearby) and Nelson's Spring Creeks (across the river), are rarities in Montana,

Upper Yellowstone River



The Yellowstone at Mallard's Rest

YNP TO BIG TIMBER There's no lack of access along the upper Yellowstone River for boat and wade anglers. The stretch from Gardiner to Tom Miner Basin receives less boating traffic due to some audacious whitewater. The water near Emigrant is the most photographed. Anglers, tubers, and kayakers share the river from Grey Owl to Mallard's Rest. Livingston offers good fishing within the city limits. Downstream, the river widens and warms slightly, producing larger but fewer trout and far less fishing pressure.



The Yellowstone from the Black Canyon into the Gardiner Valley.

IN THE PARK Several stretches of the Yellowstone River within Yellowstone National Park are closed to protect spawning trout or keep people from falling into deep gorges. The most popular fishing stretch, several miles downstream from Fishing Bridge, opens on July 15. Less crowded is the Black Canyon of the Yellowstone, upstream from Gardiner. Local fly shops can provide maps and other information.

MALLARD'S REST PHOTO: BARBARA TIMMS
BLACK CANYON OF THE YELLOWSTONE PHOTO: LARRY DEARS
MAP ILLUSTRATION BY LUKE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS.
SOURCES: GOOGLE EARTH; MONTANA FWP; NPS.GOV



LEGENDARY WATERS Clockwise from far left: Negotiating the deep gorge of Yankee Jim Canyon; finding the right salesman to seal the deal; fishing the Yellowstone's famous Mother's Day hatch in a blizzard of caddis; a native Yellowstone cutthroat trout ready for release.



NATIONAL EXPOSURE
The December 1978 issue of *Life* included a 10-page photo essay on the Yellowstone River. Nationwide, public sentiment weighed heavily against impounding the river. Wrote *Life*'s editors: "Paradise Valley could well become a 30-mile-long storage tank for water users far down the river." Soon after publication, a state board ruled against dam proposals.

Why the Paradise Valley isn't underwater

By Nick Bergmann

If not for the golden age of Montana conservation, there likely would be no upper Yellowstone River for fisheries biologists to manage.

As post-World War II urban economic growth fueled increasing energy consumption, coal-generated electricity gained regional and national importance. Despite substantial industrial coal development across the Colorado Plateau during the 1950s and '60s, such activity in southeastern Montana, northeastern Wyoming, and the western Dakotas remained quiet. Rumbblings of change began when the Montana Power Company proposed building two power plants in the small mining town of Colstrip.

What especially alarmed many Montanans was the U.S. Department of the Interior's grandiose plan in the early 1970s to turn the Northern Plains into a "national sacrifice area." Containing 42 coal-fired power plants that would produce the energy equivalent of 30 Grand Coulee Dams, the federal plan outlined a dizzying network of transmission lines and water projects. On the Yellowstone, the plan called for a series of dams, reservoirs, and aqueducts to divert 30 percent of the river's annual flow. This included a proposed 380-foot-

high dam at Allenspur Gap—a few miles south of Livingston (see map, page 33)—that would flood 20,000 acres along a 30-mile stretch of the Paradise Valley.

Opposition to rapid development of Montana's coal at the expense of the state's agricultural heritage and environmental integrity proved fierce. Local ranchers in the Bull Mountains banded together and formed the Northern Plains Resource Council. Residents of Park County mobilized to fight the Paradise Valley impoundment by forming the Allenspur Committee to Save the Upper Yellowstone. Grass-roots activism remained important throughout the struggle. Yet one of the most potent forces advocating Yellowstone River protection emerged from the Montana Department of Fish and Game, as the agency was then called. Empowered by a flurry of progressive legislation and a new, environmentally conscious state constitution, Jim Posewitz led the charge.

As head of the agency's Environment and Information Division during the 1970s, Posewitz coordinated a sustained effort to secure instream river flows for the benefit of fish, wildlife, and recreation. He found himself in an extraordinary position of managing teams of scientists gathering critical information about

the river's biological systems and publicizing the agency's conservation ethic through its media resources. Specifically, he oversaw production of an eloquent 32-minute film titled *The Yellowstone Concerto* and release of an influential special issue of *Montana Outdoors* dedicated to conserving the Yellowstone. Posewitz, working with a public relations firm, invited writers and photographers from across the United States on a scenic float down the Yellowstone River. Results of the public relations endeavor included a 10-page color photo essay of the trip published in *Life* magazine.

While the media blitz helped build public support, the department's scientific studies became indispensable to the Yellowstone's future during an intensive two-month public hearing in the summer of 1977. After years of inaction, the Montana Board of Natural Resources and Conservation finally issued a decision in December 1978 prioritizing the protection of the Yellowstone River Basin's economy and environment. Fish and Game and its conservation allies had prevailed in preventing a major hydroelectric dam on the upper Yellowstone River.

As the upper Yellowstone faces new and different challenges, ranging from increasing residential development to warming temperatures, it is worth revisiting the river's history. Digitized copies of *The Yellowstone Concerto*, the *Montana Outdoors* special Yellowstone issue, and a collection of scientific reports known as the Yellowstone Impact Study are publicly available at <http://www.arlis.org/docs/vol1/Susitna/41/APA4147.html> ■

known for its free public fishing access. The floods redirected the Yellowstone channel so that anglers could wade into the trout-rich Armstrong Spring Creek and avoid paying fees. "The ultimate decision was to engineer the river back to its original channel to protect Armstrong's important function as an essential spawning tributary," says Opitz. The restoration was controversial, but most anglers eventually agreed it was in the best interest of the Yellowstone trout fishery.

Another result of the record floods was more riprap. Many riverside homes were flooded and several washed away during the high water. Afterward, property owners trucked in tons of boulders to raise and fortify banks to prevent future loss. Unfortunately, that "corseted" the river and pushed the flooding downstream. "When a river runs high, some of that water needs to spill out into the floodplain," says Travis Horton, FWP regional fisheries manager in Bozeman. Spillover dissipates the river's energy, not to mention revitalizing cottonwood stands and washing nutrients into the

river. "When ripped banks prevent flooding in one stretch, the river water just continues on downstream, gathering force, and gushes out into someone else's property," he says.

Along I-90

Once the Yellowstone hits Livingston, the valley broadens further, the Crazy Mountains rising far to the north. There's some good wade fishing right in town, but it's a bit tricky to find. Ask at any of the four area fly shops for directions.

Downstream from Livingston, the Yellowstone winds east to Big Timber. It's a quieter stretch of water with fewer anglers and recreational floaters. Like the upstream water, fishing here picks up when the river clears after runoff in late June and early July. Here, big browns and rainbows lurk off cottonwood-lined islands or in numerous side channels. This stretch has fewer fish per mile, but you'll have those trout pretty much all to yourself. "Angling pressure decreases substantially downstream from Livingston,"

Jason Rhoten, FWP fisheries biologist in Billings, says. One way to take larger trout is by slowly stripping a big streamer in mid-river. Otherwise, fish a nymph, San Juan Worm, or caddis pupa or larva in riffles, pools, and seams near islands.

Mayor's Landing in Livingston to the Highway 89 Bridge at the mouth of the Shields River is a popular float. Sheep Mountain, Springdale Bridge, and Grey Bear Fishing Access Sites offer put-in and take-out options upstream of Big Timber.

Hatches not to miss

Though anglers catch some early season fish in March and even late February with *Baetis*, March Brown, and midge patterns, the first real bug blizzard is the Mother's Day caddis (Grannom) hatch. The best fishing is downstream from Livingston, though caddis patterns take trout all the way upstream to Gardiner this time of year. Caddis typically emerge during the first week of May when the water temperature reaches 50 degrees. During the hatch, parts of the river can be

PICTURE YOURSELF HERE For decades, shots like this, of an angler fishing the Yellowstone amid some of the world's most spectacular scenery, have quickened the pulse of anglers nationwide. Many make a pilgrimage to these hallowed waters at least once in their lifetime.



LEFT TO RIGHT: LUKE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS; ROWAN NYMAN

Nick Bergmann is a PhD student at Montana State University working on a conservation history of the Yellowstone River. Share your knowledge about the river's history or personal experiences related to the 1970s with him at Bergs456@gmail.com

covered with a writhing blanket of insects, Welles says. “Sometimes you can’t breathe from the clouds of caddis around your mouth and nostrils. There are so many caddis, I start to wonder why I am even throwing mine out there.”

Though the Mother’s Day caddis hatch can be staggering, it is often fleeting. The hatch generally arrives at the same time as spring runoff. Incredible fishing one day can be scuttled by muddy flows the next.

As water levels start to drop after runoff, salmonflies and golden stoneflies start to hatch, especially in the boulder-strewn water upstream from Emigrant. Once water levels stabilize, Green Drakes, Yellow Sallies, and PMD patterns will take fish. Then it’s hopper time.

During late summer, grasshopper fishing below Livingston can be legendary. The incessant wind, which occasionally shuts down a day of dry-fly angling on the Yellowstone, becomes downright helpful in August. Gusts push airborne grasshoppers

“There are so many caddis, I start to wonder why I am even throwing mine out there.”

out of hay fields along the river and onto the water, frequently drawing aggressive strikes. To mimic those hapless live hoppers, throw a big Stimulator or Moorish Hopper. Also bring along a few flying-ant patterns. While unpredictable at best, the flying-ant hatch on the Yellowstone can be memorable if you’re fortunate to float through on the right day.

Welles considers the Yellowstone’s unpredictable nature part of its appeal. “It’s a moody river,” he says. “Temperatures fluctuate. Flows fluctuate. It’s at the whim of Mother Nature. Even when I’m on it 20 days in a row, I don’t expect the next day to be like

the day before. That’s what makes it so cool.”

The same fickle nature that entertains guides can frustrate a first-time visitor. But any angler—new or experienced—can count on the river’s healthy trout population, larger-than-average fish, and screen-saver scenery. I’m not sure the Yellowstone “offers probably the best trout fishing in America.” Then again, what river could make that claim? Is it based on trout numbers per mile? Average fish size? Insect abundance? Catch rates? Scenery?

I’ll let someone else decide whether the Yellowstone is *the* best. But as an angler who has fished many great trout rivers in Montana and elsewhere over the past 20 years, I can say that it’s still, without question, among the best. 🐾

Want to follow the Yellowstone River downstream? Check out our portrait of the lower Yellowstone (“Yellow Light on the Yellowstone,” May-June 2013). Visit fwp.mt.gov/mtoutdoors/ and search for “Yellowstone.”

A grim new reality

Last August, thousands of mountain whitefish and small numbers of rainbow trout washed up on the banks of the Yellowstone River. After alarmed river users reported the fish kill, FWP took the unprecedented step of closing a 183-mile stretch of the Yellowstone—from Gardiner to Big Timber—to all recreational use.

Scientists determined that numbers of a microscopic parasite, *Tetracapsuloides bryosalmonae*, hosted by the river’s population of Bryozoan (a freshwater sponge), had become epidemic. The whitefish, already stressed by warm water, died of shock as they were overwhelmed by the parasites, which also infected some with Proliferative Kidney Disease. FWP estimates that tens of thousands of mountain

whitefish died during the brief outbreak.

The outbreak of parasites, known as PKX, appears to have been triggered by warm, low water in late August. That was caused by sparse snowpack from the previous spring combined with scorching summer heat that raised the river’s temperature to 70 degrees—about 15 degrees warmer than is ideal for trout and whitefish.

“Bryozoan populations require warm, slow water to expand their colonies,” FWP Yellowstone River fisheries biologist Scott Opitz says. “The whitefish kill was a result of increased exposure to the parasite.”

FWP closed the river, even while recognizing that it would cause temporary economic hardship to nearby communities. “The impact goes far beyond the water’s edge,” Governor Steve Bullock told guides and outfitters at a press conference on the bank of the Yellowstone last August. “We need to make sure we are not only protecting this watershed and this water but indeed our entire state.”

A survey by the *Livingston Enterprise* found that 93 percent of respondents supported the decision to close the river.

As water temperatures dropped in September and numbers of dead whitefish declined, FWP reopened the Yellowstone. But the danger has not passed. Since the fish kill, FWP has also discovered the parasite in portions of the Big Hole, Bighorn, Boulder, Jefferson, Galatin, East Gallatin, Madison, Shields, and Stillwater Rivers. “We don’t exactly know what environmental factors led to the fish kill, but, like with whirling disease, it seems related to low water and warmer temperatures,” says Opitz. “It doesn’t appear that this will be a one-time event. We’ll be dealing with this for a long time.”

—Ben Pierce



A mountain whitefish overwhelmed by low, warm water and PKX parasites.



PRETTY IN PINK The Yellowstone’s best fishing is in late summer when the relentless winds blow grasshoppers into the river, triggering aggressive strikes on hopper imitations in various colors (above). Big rivers generally produce bigger-than-average trout, and the Yellowstone is no exception. Though enticing oversized trout to take your fly is never easy, the river provides anglers with some of the best opportunities in Montana to catch large fish (below).



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: RYAN WEINER/OUTLAW PARTNERS; HANK WELLES; JEREMY ALLAN