

FAR MORE THAN FISHING



BY PEGGY O'NEILL

Considering the wide variety of water- and land-based outdoor recreation and wildlife habitats these riparian areas provide, Montana's "fishing access" sites may be due for a new name.

Florence resident Roger DiBrito loves Montana's fishing access sites—though not necessarily for casting a line. "I'm not much of a fisherman, but I consider our local site a recreational treasure," he says.

The retired teacher and his wife visit nearby Chief Looking Glass Fishing Access Site (FAS) along the Bitterroot River to hike, watch wildlife, ride their bikes, picnic, launch canoes or kayaks, or just relax. They also take their grandkids—ages 10 and 11—who like to fly-fish, swim, innertube, and explore nature. "It's so important to me and my family. We view it as our neighborhood park," DiBrito says.

Though designated only by simple signs showing a fish and a hook, what Montana's 338 fishing access sites provide in terms of outdoor recreation is anything but simple. "With no buildings or on-site staff, fishing access sites appear modest," says Pat Saffel, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks regional fisheries manager in Missoula, "but they create public access to an amazing variety of outdoor adventure."

FASs provide fishing access, certainly, but also extensive "water access"—for sailing, waterskiing, innertubing, stand-up paddleboarding, canoeing, kayaking, and rafting. "We use fishing access sites all summer for youth rafting and canoeing trips, and to get kids down to the rivers to swim and play," says Porter Hammitt, director of Missoula Outdoor Learning Adventures, which uses FASs on the Clark Fork, Bitterroot, and Blackfoot Rivers. "It's incredible, the amount of river access these sites provide the public," he says.

Yet even "water access" sells the sites short. People also visit FASs to camp, picnic,

hike, walk their dogs, photograph birds, ride horses, and sunbathe. Along the Yellowstone River, rockhounds use them to reach gravel bars to search for agates.

The sites are visited by 4-H clubs and school groups for nature study. Each fall, the Montana Natural History Center in Missoula takes roughly 1,700 fourth-graders to Kelly Island FAS on the Clark Fork River and several sites on the Bitterroot. "Fishing access sites are ideal places for kids to learn about wildlife and plants because the riparian habitat is so diverse," says Lisa Bickell, the center's education director. "It would be really hard to accomplish what we do each year if we didn't have these public lands."

Dave Fuller, regional FAS program manager in Glasgow, says Wolf Point disc golf

enthusiasts and local businesses helped establish a new nine-hole course at the Lewis and Clark FAS on the lower Missouri River. The FAS pavilion on Bearpaw Lake south of Havre, he adds, is booked throughout the summer for family reunions, wedding receptions, and other events.

Many fishing access sites also provide public hunting opportunities for white-tailed deer, pheasants, and waterfowl. On larger rivers such as the Missouri and Yellowstone, big game hunters launch boats at the sites to reach areas that hold otherwise-inaccessible mule deer, elk, and bighorn sheep.

"We want people to know that we have this huge network of public sites that provide all sorts of valuable recreational opportunities in addition to fishing," says Eileen Ryce, head of the FWP Fisheries Division.

WILDLIFE MAGNETS

In many ways, fishing access sites function as miniature wildlife management areas. Biologists say that habitat along streams, rivers, and lakes is some of the most ecologically diverse in Montana. Because they are prime spots for housing development, shorelines are rapidly being degraded. "Riparian areas like those at fishing access sites are among Montana's most important habitats for state 'species of concern' like the pileated woodpecker, white-faced ibis, and spotted bat," says Lauri Hanauska-Brown, chief of FWP's Nongame Wildlife



POPULAR PUT-IN Young paddlers with Missoula Outdoor Learning Adventures put in at the Johnsrud Fishing Access Site on the Blackfoot River. The youth-education organization says it relies on FWP access sites to bring kids to rivers for swimming and other outdoor recreation.

LEFT PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY LUKE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS; RIGHT, MISSOULA OUTDOOR LEARNING ADVENTURES

Peggy O'Neill is chief of the FWP Information Bureau in Helena.

Management Bureau.

Also home to eagles, owls, ospreys, and other raptors, as well as mink, turtles, toads, migrating warblers, and other species, FASs provide “some of the best wildlife watching in Montana,” says Jay Pape, FWP’s regional FAS program manager in Bozeman.

An added plus: FASs are public lands, so anyone can go there. Ted Cook, of Bozeman, says he and his wife visit Cherry River FAS on the East Gallatin River every March to see migrating sandhill cranes and yellow-headed blackbirds. “It’s how we mark the start of spring,” he says.

Of course, all this recreational use comes in addition to the sites’ primary purpose: a place for anglers to access rivers, lakes, and reservoirs. The sites are essential in a state where fishing is revered and public water access is protected by state law. A 2017 sur-

vey found that nearly half of all angling in the state is done after gaining access to water through a FAS

ANGLERS PAY

FASs are state lands managed by the FWP Division of Fisheries. The sites usually contain a boat ramp and vault latrine, and many offer primitive camping areas with picnic tables and fire rings. Some are on lakes and reservoirs, but most sites provide access to Montana’s renowned rivers and streams.

In addition to acquisition costs, FASs require the installation of boundary fencing, roads, parking areas, boat ramps, signs, and latrines. Costs for regular road grading, dust and weed control, trash pickup, ramp repair, caretaker services, and other general maintenance are ongoing.

Though FASs receive recreational use

from a wide range of Montanans and state visitors, anglers pay almost all of the costs. The lion’s share of funding comes from fishing license fees and matching federal dollars. A small slice comes from state vehicle registration fees. There are no day-use fees, though FWP charges camping fees at some sites where camping is allowed. “Lack of adequate funding is an issue that contributes to our maintenance challenges on FASs and hinders our ability to provide more amenities like trails and campsites for hikers, campers, and other visitors,” Ryce says.

Some fishing access sites see only a handful of visitors each year. Others, like the popular ones on the Bitterroot River near Missoula or those on the lower Blackfoot and Madison, are crowded all summer. “People are out there loving the resource—for better or worse,” Pape says.

SOME CHALLENGES

Because river and lake use grows each year, but no one’s making any new rivers or lakes, some FASs fill beyond capacity during midsummer. Parking areas overflow and boaters must wait in line to use ramps.

On a few river stretches, more nonanglers than anglers use the sites. FWP recorded 207,000 “angler days” on the Madison River in 2017—the most ever on any Montana river. Yet according to the Bureau of Land Management, the 20-mile stretch from Warm Springs to Black’s Ford receives roughly 400,000 “user days” each summer by growing numbers of innertubers.

“We’ve had to double the number of latrines and dumpsters at our Black’s Ford FAS,” says Travis Horton, FWP regional fisheries manager in Bozeman.

Fortunately, such heavy use is relatively rare. Despite FASs receiving a total of nearly 4 million visits each year, user conflicts seldom get out of hand. Anglers may gripe when someone’s trailer takes up two parking spots, and boaters complain when kayakers don’t follow etiquette that calls for loading and unloading away from ramps before and after launching. But for the most part, people using FASs respect one another. “We find that almost all of this varied use is compatible with fishing,” Ryce says. “A person out bird watching or throwing sticks for their dog after work doesn’t bother someone who’s launching a drift boat to fish the evening hatch.”

Even when users get in each other’s way, it’s often only momentarily. Saffel says that anglers launching a boat might be delayed for a few minutes as they work around sunbathers crowding the ramp area, but once on the water they quickly escape the crowds. “Besides,” he adds, “where we see most of the sunbathing and tubing at FASs is on areas of rivers where



OUTDOOR ADVENTURERS A youth group canoes down the Bitterroot after putting in at an FWP fishing access site near Lolo.

water is warmer and slower and the trout fishing isn’t as good, or in the middle of a sunny afternoon when the fishing slows down,” Saffel says. “Water temperature and sunshine naturally spread out the recreational use.”

GOOD FOR LOCAL ECONOMIES

FAS-based outdoor activities contribute to Montana’s renowned high quality of life; they are also good for local businesses. Restaurants, motels, and gas stations thrive on the traffic that FASs attract. “There’s no question that they contribute to the \$7 bil-

lion spent on outdoor recreation in Montana each year,” says Ryce. “If there isn’t any access, there isn’t any fishing, not to mention boating, canoeing, or many other things that residents and tourists like to do on the water.”

FWP works with communities and sportsmen’s groups to care for many FASs. One day each summer on the lower Blackfoot, volunteer scuba divers scour the river bottom for shoes, sunglasses, and beer bottles and cans lost by the near-constant stream of innertubers. Residents pick up streamside trash at the river’s heavily used sites. Several years

ago, FWP coordinated a community cleanup of Alberton Gorge on the lower Clark Fork River. Volunteers bagged 1,600 pounds of trash, including 40 car, truck, and tractor tires. Saffel says the department recently worked with anglers and the St. Regis Resort District to improve the St. Regis FAS on the Clark Fork.

The term “fishing access site” has become part of the lingo used by everyone who recreates on Montana’s waters. But as more and more people visit these sites for recreation other than angling, maybe it’s time to consider a new name and look. “The fish and hook image on the signs is a bit misleading,” Ryce says. “We’re considering changing the signs to better reflect the variety of recreational opportunities that the sites provide.”

Each year, FWP adds four to six FASs to the statewide system. DiBrito, the retired teacher, hopes the acquisitions continue, no matter what the sites are called. “With all the development we see in Montana, it seems that we’re losing more and more wild places every year,” he says. “That makes these peaceful little sanctuaries even more important than ever.”



ECOLOGICALLY DIVERSE Riparian areas like those protected by fishing access sites are some of Montana’s most important wildlife habitats.

FWP’s free “Fishing Access Sites Field Guide” is available for



MULTIUSE Clockwise from top left: In addition to their primary role for angling, Montana’s 338 fishing access sites provide habitat for otters and other furbearers; access for kayaking and canoeing; areas for pet exercise; campsites for overnight camping; places to hunt pheasants, deer, and waterfowl; picnic sites for day outings; and areas next to water where photographers and birders can see raptors, ducks, geese, shorebirds, and other wildlife.



CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: SHUTTERSTOCK, CINDY GOEDDELL, ERIC HEIDLE, JEREMIE HOLLIMAN, BEN PIERCE, TOM DICKSON, SHUTTERSTOCK, SHUTTERSTOCK

TOP TO BOTTOM: MISSOULA OUTDOOR LEARNING ADVENTURES; JASON SAVAGE