

# Walleye

*Sander vitreus*

By Tom Dickson

Trout are western Montana's main attraction, but I have a soft spot for walleyes. Partly, it's the challenge. Catching a walleye requires negotiating massive reservoirs, trying to puzzle out underwater bottom structure, and staying alert for hours to feel the gentle tug of a fish inhaling your nightcrawler. The main reason, however, are those thick, white, bone-free fillets. There's no better eatin' fish.

**APPEARANCE** A close relative of the yellow perch, the walleye is a torpedo-shaped, medium-sized fish with marblelike eyes, a spiky dorsal fin, and sharp teeth. Though not indigenous to Montana, the walleye closely resembles its native cousin, the sauger. The main physical difference is that walleyes have a white corner on the lower lobe of their tail, while sauger don't. And walleyes lack the several rows of distinct black spots on the dorsal fin that sauger have. Some old-timers still call walleyes "wall-eyed pike," but the fish are not related to pike.

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**THE EYE** The walleye name comes from its large, glassy pupils. The opaque quality of the eye comes from a reflective layer of pigment, called the *tapetrum lucidum*, in the inner eye. The pigment layer allows walleyes to see prey at night or in murky water. This accounts for the fish's tendency to bite mostly after dark and on cloudy days, and to stay deep when the sun shines. On bright days, boat anglers hope for enough wind to create a "walleye chop"—waves that break up light rays enough so that walleyes move up into shallower water.

**LOCATION** In Montana, walleyes are now found in dozens of reservoirs east of the Continental Divide. The biggest is Fort Peck, which contains a nationally known walleye fishery. FWP stocks walleyes there and at Fresno, Nelson, Bighorn, Cooney, and Frances reservoirs. Canyon Ferry, Holter, and Tiber reservoirs have self-sustaining walleye populations that don't require stocking. Both the lower Yellowstone River and most of the Missouri River contain walleyes.

**SIZE** Walleyes can grow large. The state record, from Fort Peck Lake, is 16.63 pounds. The world record, from Tennessee, is 25 pounds. Most walleyes caught in Montana are a respectable 1 to 2 pounds.

**PREY** Walleyes are predators. They eat fish such as yellow perch, minnows, small trout, and also small walleyes. In Canyon Ferry alone, walleyes eat more than 750,000 pounds of perch each year—about 4 pounds of perch per walleye.

**FISHING** The best walleye fishing is usually in early summer. Perch and other prey spawn in the spring, and their abundant young are too small for adult walleyes to eat until midsummer. As a result, walleyes more eagerly attack bait and lures. Fishing picks up again in fall as walleyes beef up in preparation for winter and forage fish numbers, reduced by several months of predation, decline. The years of best fishing are those when lakes produce few forage fish, increasing the odds that walleyes will go after an angler's lure or bait.

**MANAGEMENT** Because many reservoirs have relatively little natural walleye spawning habitat, FWP rears and stocks about 40 million walleyes each year. Roughly 90 percent of these are mosquito-sized fry. Biologists take care to not overstock reservoirs, which can cause stunted growth. The new hatchery at Fort Peck Lake (see page 29) will boost FWP's ability to rear and stock walleyes.

"Managing walleyes in reservoirs is extremely difficult," says Dave Yerk, FWP fisheries biologist in Choteau. "Water levels are constantly in flux, and it's nearly impossible to keep the right balance between prey and predator species. We do our best, but we hope anglers understand that a lot of major factors affecting the size of walleye populations, such as drought, are simply beyond our control."

Some anglers have asked FWP to stock walleyes west of the Continental Divide. However, fisheries biologists are concerned the fish would escape stocked waters and damage westslope cutthroat trout and other native fisheries. 🐟

*For more information on walleyes and walleye fishing, visit the Montana Walleyes Unlimited website at [walleyesunlimited.com/](http://walleyesunlimited.com/).*

