

# Mountain Whitefish

*Prosopium williamsoni*

By John Fraley

When my family and I fish the South Fork of the Flathead River each year, we always enjoy catching and eating mountain whitefish. The fillets taste great broiled or fried, but most anglers would never consider eating a whitefish, which they consider a “trash fish,” or a nuisance that competes with more desirable trout. Due to such widespread prejudice, this scrappy, abundant member of the trout family is Montana’s most underutilized fish.

## APPEARANCE

Like its trout and salmon cousins, the mountain whitefish has a cylindrical body. It has a gray-bronze back fading to silvery sides, larger scales than those of trout, and a small mouth overhung by the upper jaw, giving it a suckerlike appearance. It can easily be distinguished from suckers and pikeminnows, however, by the presence of an adipose fin on its back just forward of the tail fin. Meriwether Lewis described the mountain whitefish as a “bottle-nosed fish” when he saw it in the upper Missouri drainage in 1805. Mountain whitefish average about 12 inches in Montana, but anglers regularly catch larger specimens. The state record mountain whitefish, just over 5 pounds, was caught in the Kootenai River. Similar species in Montana include pygmy whitefish (a native species) and lake whitefish (a non-native).

## DISTRIBUTION

You’ll usually find mountain whitefish in larger streams and rivers where you find trout. The species is common in large coldwater rivers and major tributaries on both sides of the Continental Divide in all three major drainages: the Columbia, Missouri, and Saskatchewan (St. Mary). In North America, the species is found from Alaska south to the headwaters of the Colorado River.

*John Fraley manages the FWP regional Information and Education Program in Kalispell.*



Whitefish usually reproduce at three years old, spawning at night in the fall. They do not build nests. The female broadcasts her eggs over gravel while the male fertilizes them. A mature female contains about 4,000 eggs. Eggs develop over winter and then hatch in March.

## MANAGEMENT

Mountain whitefish outnumber trout ten to one in rivers such as the Kootenai, Yellowstone, and Flathead. In the Madison River, mountain whitefish densities reach an incredible 15,000 fish per mile. While conducting underwater fish surveys in the South and Middle forks of the Flathead, I’ve seen portions of the stream bottom completely covered with mountain whitefish. Despite their abundance, whitefish don’t directly compete with trout because they use different habitats within a stream. Whitefish feed on aquatic insects on the stream bottom and usually occupy the lower stretches of a pool. Trout usually feed higher in the water column of a river and generally occupy the upper ends of pools. Due to the abundance of mountain whitefish, FWP allows a harvest limit of 100 fish in the western and central fishing districts. Few anglers take advantage of the opportunity.

## SPORTING AND EATING QUALITY

Many a trout angler has sighed in disappointment when what seems to be a big brown or rainbow turns out to be “just” a mountain whitefish. Yet a whitefish puts up an admirable fight (which is why so many anglers think it’s a trout until they actually see the fish). Mountain whitefish are also excellent table fare when cooked, smoked, or pickled. Participants in a Montana State University study agreed: Whitefish and trout taken from the Madison River, when cooked, were equal in texture, aroma, tenderness, and juiciness. For best results, fillet the whitefish, remove any brown fat and skin, coat with your favorite breading, and fry in light oil. Or season the boned and skinned fillets and microwave them for roughly three minutes per side. All in all, the mountain whitefish is a hard-fighting, delectable member of the trout family, worthy of much higher consideration than it currently receives. 🐟



ILLUSTRATION BY JOSEPH ZOMLEFER

CHUCK & GALE ROBBINS