

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Fisheries Division
752-5501

LAKE WHITEFISH

Lake whitefish have grown greatly in popularity in recent years as anglers have discovered how to catch these tasty, hard-fighting fish. Try them and you'll find they're very different from their cousins, the mountain whitefish. Whitefish usually hit as the lure/jig is dropping or right as it hits the end of the line or bottom. It is important to fish within inches of the bottom, occasionally bumping bottom. We recommend a light action rod and 4-6 pound test line to detect the subtle hits and get the most sport out of these hard fighters. Everyone is still learning about the fishery so don't be afraid to experiment on times, locations, and techniques.

Flathead Lake: Look for whitefish in 20'-60' of water over sand and gravel bars and off points. They can be caught in 100'-150' of water but it's trickier. In general, you'll need to be anchored or drifting very slowly. The most popular lures are a Kastmaster spoon or a leadhead jig with a 1 ½"-2" Mr. Twister or Fuzzygrub body. Other popular lures are Crippled Herring, Swedish Pimple, Rattlesnake, Crocodile Trilobite, and Leadagator. Start with ¼ ounce lures and go to larger sizes as needed. The best colors imitate yellow perch. Chartreuse is the most popular color and green, silver, yellow, and gold can also work. Usually plain lures will work but occasionally a scent or a few maggots will help. A new method is a lure at the end of the line with a red or whitefish fly (Lake Mary Ronan Special) tipped with maggots tied 18" above.

Short jigging motions are the best. The whitefish usually hit when the lure hits the end of the line. Be alert for a single, soft tap. Experiment. Try jigging continuously to a few second pause and bumping the bottom occasionally to bouncing it on the bottom. Early morning hours are generally the best.

River Mouth Delta: April, May, July, August.

Main Lake: February, March, July, August, October, November. Popular spots are Woods Bay, Gravel Bay, Finley Point, the Narrows, Big Arm Bay, Wildhorse Island, and Peaceful Bay.

Ice Fishing: Somers and Big Arm bays. Use a fly tipped with maggots and watch the ice conditions.

Whitefish Lake: Same tips as Flathead Lake. Also, fish late December - early January during hours of darkness using a red fly tipped with maggots above a sinker or jigging spoon. Watch the ice conditions. Fish off Huston Point, State Park, Hellroaring Creek. Public access is limited.

Flathead River: The whitefish run starts mid-September, peaks mid-October to mid-November, and lasts into January. Good numbers of fish are found from the Stillwater River to Blankenship Bridge with the Old Steel Bridge and Highway 35 Bridge at Kalispell and the U.S. 2 Bridge at Columbia Falls the most popular holes. Look for fish in side eddies with little or no current, 6'-15' of water and a sand or fine gravel bottom. The standard lure is a ¼ ounce jighead with a 1 ½"-2" chartreuse Mr. Twister or 1" Berkely Microcraw. It is critical that you hop the jig across the bottom and lift (jig) the instant the lure hits the bottom. You'll feel a very light tap or the fish will just be there when you jig.

Rap the whitefish on the back of the head when first caught to keep them from bouncing around and bruising. Whitefish go mushy quickly in warm weather so keep them in a cooler with ice. A boat livewell is generally too warm.

Whitefish take a little extra work once you've caught them but you'll be rewarded with some mild, firm tasty fillets. To make it easier to fillet, we recommend cutting out the pelvic fins (the pair of fins in front of the anal vent) and slitting the fish from the vent to the gills. Fillet and skin the fish, and remove the ribs as you normally do. There is a layer of red muscle under the skin that has a fishy taste. We recommend removal of most of the layer by slicing it off with a fillet knife. It is especially important to remove the red meat if you are going to freeze the fillets. There are also a number of secondary rib bones that you can find by running your finger down the inside of the fillet. Remove these by cutting on each side of the bones with a fillet knife to take out a thin slice. The rib bones angle toward the fish's back.

Your hard work can now be rewarded with a delicious meal. Following are some of our favorite recipes. They're fairly simple and you'll wow your friends and family with your culinary expertise and a delicious meal. You can also substitute whitefish in any recipe that uses walleye, yellow perch, sole, pollock or similar fish. Many people enjoy lake whitefish smoked or pickled. Enjoy!

WHITEFISH BONNE FEMME

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| 1 lb. Fillet of Whitefish | Flour, Salt, Pepper |
| 1 TBSP Butter | Chopped Green Onions |
| ¼ cup White Wine | Juice of ½ Lemon |
| 4 fresh Mushrooms, sliced | |

Saute green onion and mushrooms in butter until light brown. Coat fish in flour and add. Season with salt and pepper. Cook fish for 2 minutes-turn-cook for 2 minutes. Pour wine and lemon juice over fish. Simmer 2 minutes longer. Serves 4.

WHITEFISH ALMONDINE

1. Rinse and drain fillets, cut into 3-4" chunks.
2. Mix egg and milk in a bowl to a thick batter (about 1 egg/7-8 chunks). Have flour in a bowl or bag. Add seasoned salt if desired.
3. Heat skillet on medium heat. Add oil to cover bottom (a little butter if desired).
4. Roll fish chunks in flour, dip in egg batter. Repeat. Place in single layer in skillet.
5. Cook fish until golden brown on side (about 5 minutes), turn and cook another 5 minutes.

Almondine Sauce

1. After you turn the fish, heat small skillet or saucepan on medium-high heat. Melt enough butter to cover bottom of pan. Add enough slivered almonds to cover bottom. Stir continuously to prevent burning until golden brown (3-4 minutes) Remove from heat, add a squirt of lemon juice (mixture will bubble up and turn dark). Place fillets on platter and spoon almondine sauce over them.

MICROWAVE WHITEFISH

1. Melt enough butter to cover bottom of pan.
2. Arrange fillets in single layer. Sprinkle with lemon juice and seasoning as desired (seasoned salt, lemon pepper, chopped parsley, etc.). Cover (fish will pop and spatter).
3. Microwave on high about 2 minutes. Turn fillets. Microwave another 2 minutes on high. Fish is done when it is white and flakes easily. Let sit 2 minutes and serve with lemon, tartar sauce, etc.

WHITEFISH SPREAD

1. Follow directions for microwave whitefish. Flake meat and mix with sour cream or plain yogurt. Serve warm or chilled with your favorite crackers.

BREAD CRUMB FISH TOPPING

3-4 Pieces of leftover bread, rolls, or buns.

1 TBSP Sesame Seeds

1 Tsp. Seasoned Salt

Dash Freshly Ground Black Pepper

Several Sprigs Parsley

Stick Butter or Margarine

2 oz. Parmesan Cheese

Tear bread into small pieces and put in food processor with all ingredients except butter/ margarine. Process mixture until coarsely ground. Cut stick butter or margarine into 3 or 4 pieces, add, and process until blended. Dry out topping in a warm oven but do not brown.

3 TBSP Flour

2 TBSP Corn Meal

1 Tsp. Each: Seasoned Salt, Chervil, and Parsley

1 TBSP Lemon Juice

Put the basic topping (above) into the processor and grind finely. Add flour, corn meal, and seasonings. Continue to process. Topping will store several months in refrigerator. Dip fillets in beaten egg and milk, roll in topping, and bake or fry until done.