Once you put your feet on the trail, it’s like discovering the real Montana,” says Pat Saffel, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks regional fisheries manager in Missoula. “You climb that last switchback and then the lake comes into view—it’s like going back in time. The fishing is usually good and catch limits are liberal, so it’s okay to keep and eat some of your catch.” Saffel agrees that one of the greatest benefits of fishing alpine lakes is a meal of fresh trout, which often have delectable pink meat that comes from eating zooplankton and scuds (freshwater shrimp).

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What backpackers and hikers have discovered about the state’s fish-rich alpine lakes. BY MIKE RAETHER

**ABOVE THE CLOUDS**

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**SWIMMING IN AIR**

The crystalline water of backcountry lakes reveals fish and bottom substrate with startling clarity. Trout like this cutthroat often cruise close to shore, making them easy targets for beginners unable to cast far. Flies, lures, and bait all work well for mountain trout.

**TREASURE HUNT**

Half the fun of fishing mountain lakes is finding them. I start my research by exploring U.S. Forest Service and wilderness maps for likely destinations. These are available at any Forest Service office or can be purchased on-line (see sidebar on page 39). After finding a few potential lakes on a map, I search for information about trails leading to the waters. I’ve had my best luck calling or visiting area Forest Service offices, which usually have valuable information about trails and destinations—as well as important safety tips.

A few years ago while preparing to hike to a pair of alpine lakes, I decided at the last second to call the local Forest Service office to see if they had any new information. I learned that a rowdy bear had ransacked a hiker’s backpack near the lakes just a few years before. I was able to steer clear of the area and enjoy a successful day of fishing.

**ASIAN AMBIGUITY**

As a result of this work, many mountain lakes now have self-sustaining trout populations. Lakes where trout can’t naturally reproduce receive periodic stocking to maintain the fishery. FWP primarily stocks lakes most desirable to and popular with anglers, planting fish every three to six years. Vashro says the management target for most alpine lakes is 100 fingerlings stocked per surface acre. Low water fertility and long alpine winters make it tough for mountain trout to grow as quickly as their brethren in the warmer river valleys. Three years following a planting, trout in mountain lakes run 8 to 10 inches long. They continue to grow until age six, when they reach 14 to 16 inches. After that most die of old age.

According to Vashro, some people don’t believe stocking is appropriate in historically fishless lakes because the trout might alter indigenous communities of plankton, insects, and amphipods. Some oppose stocking in a designated wilderness because it manipulates the area’s natural state. “Even though there’s criticism of stocking in wilderness, surveys show that fishing is one of the most desired activities of most backcountry hikers. Those stocked lakes are definitely appreciated and used,” says Vashro.

Out of respect for wilderness values, planting trout is allowed only where the practice was established before the area was officially designated as wilderness. FWP only uses traditional methods of transporting fish such as horses and even backpacks, just like a century ago. “Most wilderness lakes are intentionally left fishless,” says Vashro.

Montana’s greatest concentration of alpine lakes is in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness southwest of Billings, straddling the Montana-Wyoming border. These popular lakes contain a salmonid diversity that includes Yellowstone cutthroat trout, golden trout, and arctic grayling, says Ken Frazer, FWP regional fisheries manager in Billings. Like elsewhere in Montana, some of the Absaroka-Beartooth’s roughly 300 trout lakes produce trout naturally and some are stocked. The 114 stocked lakes are planted with trout every three to eight years.

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days before, convincing me that a trip to another lake would be a safer choice.

Other great resources include the many books on Montana hiking and backpacking found at libraries, bookstores, or on-line. FWP provides abundant resources for the alpine angler. I never visit any new mountain lake without first checking out the department’s website. FWP’s Montana Fishing Guide search page has specifics on every mountain lake that contains trout, including species present and stocking history. With this information I can usually predict the size and relative abundance of trout in a particular lake. FWP’s website also offers a free downloadable guide to many of the lakes in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness (see sidebar on page 39).

HOW TO CATCH ALPINE TROUT

Anglers have three options: fly-fishing, spin-fishing, or bait fishing. My pick for fly gear is a 3-weight rod with floating line, 7.5-foot leader, and 6X tippet. I often pack a second reel spooled with sink-tip line for when fish are deeper. I usually use terrestrial patterns such as ants and grasshoppers, nymphs such as a #12 or #14 brown Hare’s Ear (with or without the bead head), and #12 or #14 pink scuds, Royal Wulff and Elk Hare’s Dries also do well. Flies are lightweight, so I always bring plenty.

For spin fishing, try a #2 Mepps Aglia, #1 or #2 Blue Fox, or #4- or #6-ounce Rooster Tail. John Fraley, a mountain lake fishing expert who works for FWP in Kalispell, suggests using a ¼-ounce Kamlooper spoon, which he calls “the best cutthroat trout lure ever made.” For spinners, I prefer the more somber color combinations with silver blades. For anglers who prefer bait, try half a nightcrawler on a single hook without any additional weight. Use the casting bubble to get some distance. Cast it out and let the bait sink gradually. Bear in mind that fish caught by bait are often hooked too deep to release unharmed. I suggest using a #10 straight shank circle hook, which catches fish in the mouth instead of the throat or gullet, allowing for easy and harmless release.

Regardless of the fishing method you choose, keep your lines and leaders light: 4- or 6-pound-test. Otherwise fish can see the line in the clear water and will stay away from your offering. Alpine fish are not especially bright, but they can be line shy.

Mike Rastorfer is a writer in St. Regis.

My favorite way to cook trout is by poaching. Into my lightweight 7-inch titanium frying pan I place two or three small trout, gutted and with heads and tails removed. I add an inch of water, place the pan over a backpacking stove, and heat. The trick is to simmer the trout for a few minutes. Be careful not to let the water come to a rolling boil or it will be out of the fish apart and you’ll end up with trout stew. Use a small, plastic spatula to gently press the fish flat as they cook and carefully turn them once.

The fish are done when the dorsal fin comes out with a light tug, usually after about ten minutes of cooking. Slide the trout gently onto a small plate, sprinkle with salt and pepper, and enjoy a meal only alpine lake fishing can offer.

Want to help FWP preserve and manage alpine trout lakes? Take part in the Angler Fishing Log Program. Participants write down their mountain lake angling activities in a logbook provided by FWP and then send it to the department at the end of the year. Jim Vasko, FWP regional fisheries manager in Kalispell, says he and other fisheries managers and biologists use the records to learn what’s occurring at mountain trout lakes so they can decide how best to manage the fishery. Sign up on-line at fwp.mt.gov/fishing/guide/fishingLog/default.html, or call FWP at (406) 444-2545.

USDA Forest Service: www.fs.fed.us/maps/
USDA Forest Service, Northern Region: (406) 329-351
Montana office: Federal Building, 200 East Broadway, P.O. Box 7669, Missoula, MT 59807-7669
FWP Fishing Guide: fwp.mt.gov/fishing/guide/

Mountain Fishing Lakes Resources

Fishing the Beartooths, by Pat Marcuson
The Montanans’ Fishing Guide, Volume 1, by Dick Konizeski
Fly-Fishing the Rocky Mountain Backcountry, by Rich Osthoff

LAKESIDE Left: Many mountain lakes are ringed with dense brush, making casting a challenge and barge encounters more likely. Right: Though the highest alpine lakeshores are barren of trees, reaching prime fishing spots is hard due to steep lakes banks. Fortunately, the trout are usually eager to take a fly or lure, and fishing from a single spot will often spell success.