

PROBLEMS BY THE BUCKETFUL

Illegal stocking is ruining many Montana sport fisheries and aquatic systems, maybe forever. **By Tom Dickson**



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY LUKE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS

Ordinarily Pat Saffel likes hearing about anglers catching fish. Not this time. When the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks regional fisheries manager in Missoula saw a photo of an angler with a smallmouth bass caught in Seeley Lake last September, his heart sank. “This was the last thing we needed,” he says.

The aggressive non-native smallmouth bass can thrive in Seeley’s cool waters and compete with and eat kokanee, native westslope cutthroat trout, and federally threatened bull trout, Saffel says. Seeley is part of the Clearwater Valley Chain of Lakes, which includes Seeley, Salmon, Inez, Alva, and Rainy. Those waters already contain popular game fish populations as well as the protected species that FWP and others have been working for years to restore. “The addition of another predator fish could really mess things up,” Saffel says.

The Seeley discovery was just the latest in a string of unlawful fish plantings that are damaging fisheries across Montana. FWP has documented more than 500 illegal introductions in state lakes, reservoirs, ponds, and rivers since the 1980s. All were done without public or biological review of possible ramifications to existing fisheries and angling opportunities. Though the prohibited activity is statewide, most occurs west of the Continental Divide. Northern pike are most often transplanted unlawfully, with yellow perch a close second. Other species entering public waters through what’s known as “bucket biology” are crappies, walleye, smallmouth and largemouth bass, and trout.

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The lawbreakers are anglers who insist on new fishing opportunities close to home, say FWP officials. Though western Montana’s geology, climate, and tradition generally favor coldwater trout species, a minority of anglers illegally plant warm- and coolwater fish better suited to more temperate and fertile parts of the United States. The lawless activities—condemned by the state’s major fishing organizations—threaten native fish populations valued for their natural heritage, as well as federally threatened species. Just as troublesome, illicit fish stocking robs others of existing recreation and, after FWP is forced to clean up the mess, sticks all anglers with the bill.

MY FISH, NOT YOURS

The appeal of illegally stocked fish varies by species. Bass and pike hit lures and flies with abandon and fight wildly when hooked. Perch, walleye, crappie, and sunfish are prized for their tasty fillets. All those fish exist within Montana, particularly in the state’s eastern two-thirds. “It’s understandable why some anglers would want more of these species in western Montana,” says Mark Deleray, FWP fisheries biologist in Kalispell. “But unlawful stocking usually ends up ruining the fisheries already there.”

For instance, illegally introduced north-

ern pike have spoiled a once-popular largemouth bass fishery on the Thompson Chain of Lakes, says Mike Henseler, FWP fisheries biologist in Libby. On the Upper and Lower Stillwater Lakes northwest of Whitefish, pike are likely to blame for declines in once-healthy westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout populations.

Another example is Rogers Lake, 22 miles southwest of Kalispell, traditionally a popular arctic grayling fishery. “Then someone sneaked in some perch and, within a few years, they’d completely wiped out the grayling,” Deleray says. Perch reproduce so rapidly they often out-eat competing game fish and then stop growing for lack of food. “So Rogers went from a real popular fishing lake to one with very little worth catching,” Deleray says.

The Seeley-Swan Valley has been especially hard hit, says Ladd Knotek, FWP fisheries biologist in Missoula. During the early 1990s, northern pike were illegally stocked into several lakes (including Salmon and Seeley Lakes), damaging existing trout fisheries. The pike have since spread south into the Blackfoot and Clark Fork Rivers, where they feed on those waters’ brown, rainbow, bull, and cutthroat trout. In addition, illegally introduced brook trout have damaged one of Montana’s best westslope cutthroat fisheries—Clearwater Lake—at the head of the Clearwater River drainage.

New introductions often provide a ready source for even more unlawful introductions. “Once we start seeing pike, perch, or crappie in one lake, they start showing up in nearby waters,” says Deleray. “And a lot of these aquatic systems are interconnected, allowing

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invasive fish to spread naturally for miles to other waters.”

Concern over the illicit activity is widespread. Montana Trout Unlimited, Walleyes Unlimited of Montana, Montana B.A.S.S. Nation, and the Montana Wildlife Federation have publicly denounced unlawful fish planting. “We are totally against illegal stocking and totally for FWP efforts to stop it in its tracks,” says John Kelly, president of Walleyes Unlimited of Montana. Bruce Farling, executive director for Montana Trout Unlimited, calls illegal stocking a “completely selfish act by a few people putting everyone else’s recreation at risk just to satisfy their own desire.”

NOXON’S NEW WALLEYE

One of Montana’s most notorious illegal introductions took place at Noxon Rapids Reservoir. In 1991, walleye were discovered in the 8,000-acre impoundment of the Clark Fork River, which extends along Montana Highway 200 near the Idaho border. The fish likely arrived from several unauthorized introduction attempts in the late 1980s, says Kenny Breidinger, local FWP fisheries biologist. By 2000 annual survey nets showed that walleye were established and reproducing. Though numbers remain low compared to other Montana reservoirs containing walleye, the population continues to grow.

“Here is a lake that has excellent smallmouth and largemouth bass fisheries, is home of the largemouth state record [8.8 pounds], has winter perch fishing, and shows stable populations of westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout,” Breidinger says. “We have the whole package—sport fish, food fish, native fish, and a federally threatened fish—all doing well. And now that delicate balance is threatened by walleye.”

Breidinger says the addition of another predator species has already caused significant declines in forage fish such as native peamouth, pikeminnow, and suckers. Numbers of perch—a preferred walleye food—also are dropping. “The thing about walleye is they reproduce fast, so they can produce



UNWELCOME NEWCOMER

The smallmouth bass (above), a non-native species that recently appeared in Seeley Lake, poses a threat to the lake’s westslope cutthroat trout and federally threatened bull trout fisheries. Rainbow trout (right) and other salmonids are the main casualties of illegal introductions, though popular largemouth bass and walleye fisheries are also at risk.



a lot of new mouths to feed in a very short time,” Breidinger says.

The potential damage to Noxon’s federally threatened bull trout is especially worrisome. Throughout much of the year, walleye congregate at several tributary mouths, where young bull trout enter the lake from upstream rearing waters. “Now those juvenile trout also have to go through a gauntlet of walleye in addition to the bass and northern pike already there,” says Breidinger.

TOO MANY MOUTHS TO FEED

Adding a new fish species to a big lake may seem like a good idea. After all, with all that water, won’t the new fish just “fit in?” Unfortunately, no, say biologists. Cold and high in elevation, most western Montana lakes and rivers contain far fewer nutrients,

and prey fish than waters in states to the east and south. Adding new fish takes food away from existing ones. “It’s like having cows in a pasture, where everything is fine but then you add sheep, then llamas, then other grazers,” says Breidinger. “Pretty soon there are too many mouths to feed, not enough grass, and all the animals are going hungry.”

Adds Curtis Spindler, president of Montana B.A.S.S. Nation, “A lot of people don’t understand that our lakes have already reached a natural balance between predator and prey. You add a new predator species and that can really do some damage.”

New forage species can do the same, sometimes harming the game fish they are meant to benefit. “We get a lot of anglers asking us to stock new prey fish such as cisco or

rainbow smelt to help walleye,” says Don Skaar, chief of FWP’s Fish Management Bureau in Helena. “Unfortunately, some forage fish end up competing with walleye fry for zooplankton, which can lead to poorer growth and survival of young walleye.”

Prohibited stocking can also erase expensive and time-consuming work to conserve and restore native and federally threatened species. “FWP, landowners, and conservation groups like ours have spent years and millions of dollars restoring and improving westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout fisheries in the lakes, tributaries, and rivers connected to Seeley Lake,” says Farling. “The disturbing new illegal introduction of small-mouth bass threatens all of that.”

Another strike against illicit fish plants is the high cost of removing the unwanted newcomers. “Rehabbing” requires using specialized toxicants to eliminate all fish in the tainted water and then restocking desired species. Costs, paid for with fishing

license dollars, run \$15,000 to \$20,000 for smaller lakes and over \$50,000 for larger ones. “That’s time and money we could otherwise be spending on improving habitat and managing fish elsewhere,” says Bruce Rich, head of the FWP Fisheries Division.

Rehabilitation costs could potentially skyrocket. Across Montana’s border in Yellowstone National Park, an illegal introduction of lake trout decimated Yellowstone Lake’s pure-strain Yellowstone cutthroat trout population. On one tributary, historically used by bald eagles and grizzly bears to feed on spawning trout, cutthroat numbers went from 2,363 in 1999 to just 1 in 2004. The current tab to remove the lake’s unwanted lake trout, which first showed up in 1994, runs roughly \$2 million per year. “That indicates what kind of costs we could be facing here in Montana from a particularly harmful illegal introduction,” says Rich.

And that’s if the damage can even be fixed. In many cases, harm is irreparable.

“This is not like vandalizing a sign,” says Knotek. “These people are ruining entire fisheries and aquatic systems, maybe forever. The public loss is huge.”

Ironically, in most cases illegally stocked fish don’t even produce the desired effect. Deleray says that in the 56 waters where FWP has recorded perch in northwestern Montana, “only a handful” produce fish worth keeping. “Perch in most lakes have stunted out at 5 to 8 inches, too small to interest most anglers,” he says.

The same holds true with northern pike, native within Montana only to a tiny watershed east of Glacier National Park but now found in 50 waters west of the divide. In many lakes and backwaters, such as the Clearwater system, the predator so overwhelms existing fisheries that it eats itself out of house and home. Often all that remain are countless 18-inch “hammer handles” producing skinny, bony fillets and little sporting value.

Ultimately, says Rich, unlawful fish introductions are unfair and undemocratic activities in which a handful of anglers ruin the recreation of others. “How would you like it if some people went out to your favorite lake or river and wrecked it by putting the fish *they* wanted in there?” he says.

CONCERTED RESPONSE

Montana has begun taking illegal fish stocking seriously. The 1997 Montana Legislature increased the fine to \$5,000 and tacked on potential for jail time. In 2011, lawmakers doubled the fine to \$10,000.

Recently FWP proposed a new rule that beefs up the department’s response to confirmed reports of illegal introductions. FWP held public meetings this past winter across Montana to gather input on the proposal. The new rule would commit FWP to launching, within 30 days of a credible report (currently there is no response deadline), investigations that confirm the presence and distribution of the new species. The department would then draw up an action plan for responding to and potentially suppressing or even removing the unwanted species (currently no plan is required). Possible actions include using nets or even chemicals for removal, or closing the infested water to all fishing to remove incentives for future illicit stocking.

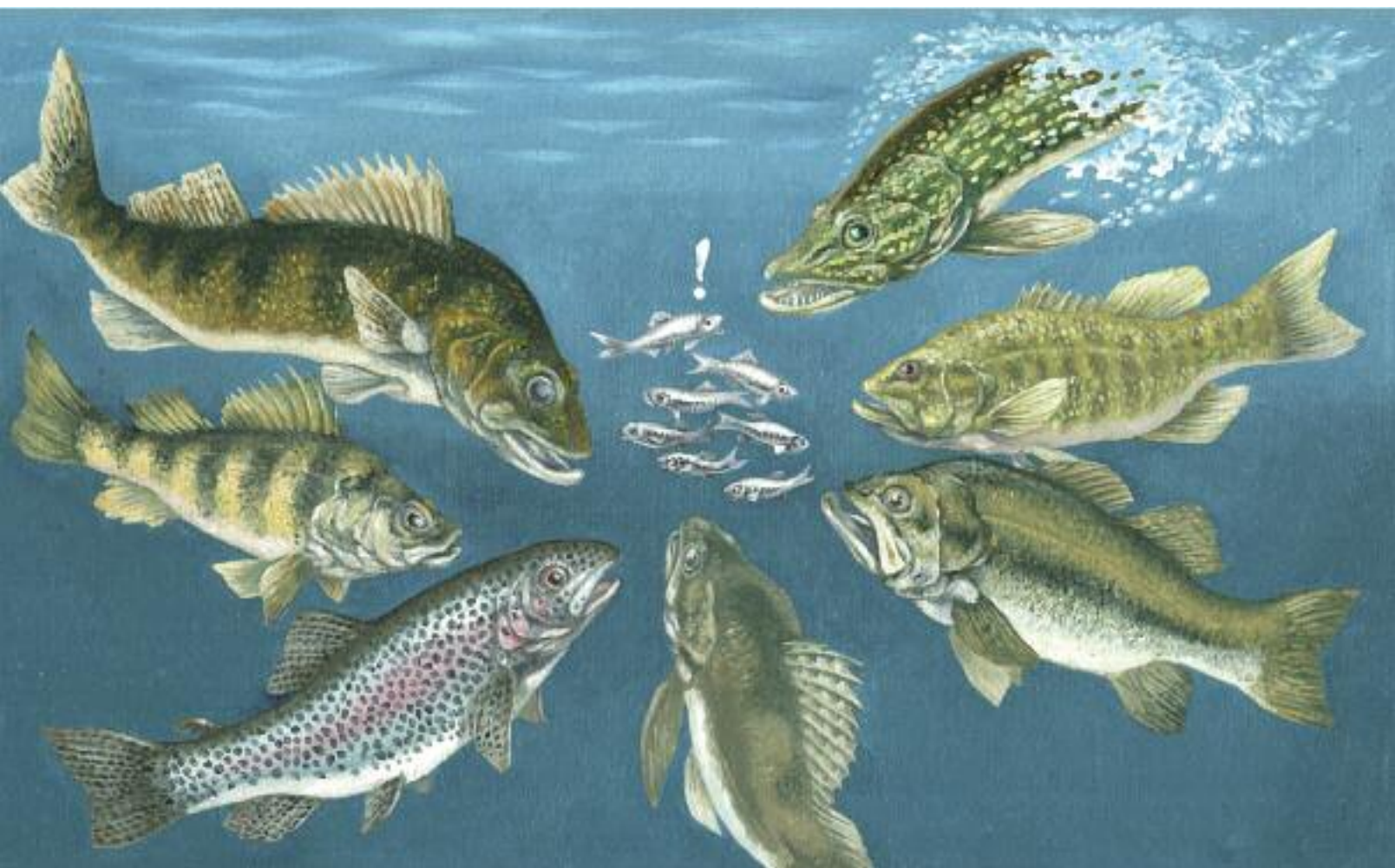
The biggest unmet challenge remains actually nabbing lawbreakers. “It’s very important to catch someone in the act,” says Jim Kropp, head of the FWP Enforce-



BACKFIRE In most cases, illegally stocked fish don’t even produce the desired results. The new species quickly eat up available stocks of bait fish (above, being identified by FWP crews) and end up stunting (right, undersized walleye). For instance, in the 56 waters where FWP has recorded illegal perch introductions in northwestern Montana, only a few produce perch of a size that most anglers want to catch and keep.



NOT ANOTHER ONE! In most cases, predator and prey species have already reached a natural balance in Montana’s lakes and rivers. “You add a new predator species, and that can really do some damage,” says the head of one statewide fishing organization.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: ILLUSTRATION BY ED JENNE; JESSE LEE VARNADO; SHUTTERSTOCK

“THIS IS NOT LIKE VANDALIZING A SIGN. THESE PEOPLE ARE RUINING ENTIRE FISHERIES AND AQUATIC SYSTEMS, MAYBE FOREVER.”

ment Division. “That’s why we’re enlisting the help of anglers and angling groups—the very people who have the most to lose.” The state’s main walleye and trout organizations offer rewards for tips on illegal introductions leading to convictions. FWP is working with these and other angling groups to form a coalition that will provide additional reward money.

At Seeley, FWP plans to look for small-mouth this spring, capture and tag adults, follow them to spawning sites, then target concentrations of the unwanted species to remove as many as possible with netting and electrofishing. “We have very little time to prevent an introduction from establishing itself,” says Saffel. “We have to find the fish when there still aren’t very many—a Catch 22—and then remove them. This

means aggressive action early. I think we definitely have a shot at eliminating small-mouth before they get established.”

At Noxon, the department is working on a revised environmental assessment of a study that, if undertaken, would examine the feasibility and cost effectiveness of suppressing walleye in the reservoir. FWP plans to have the new assessment available for public review next winter and decide by spring 2015 whether to do the project.

“What you’re seeing with the increased fines, the proposed Noxon study, the new FWP rule, and the reward coalition is a concerted effort by our agency and Montana’s angling community to stop this threat,” says Rich. “Illegal fish stocking can do irreversible harm to the state’s public resources, and we can’t tolerate it any longer.”