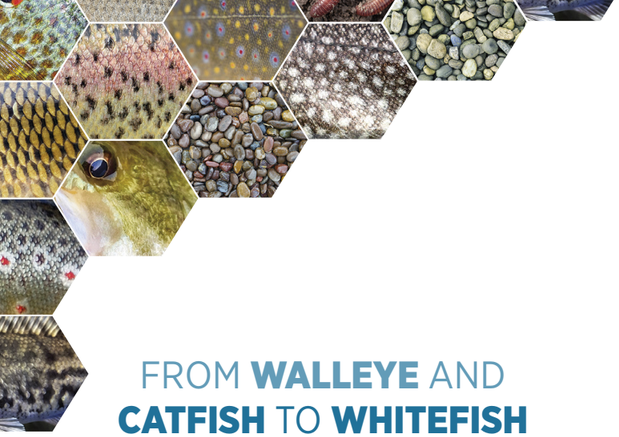


FROM **WALLEYE** AND **CATFISH** TO **WHITEFISH** AND **CUTTHROAT**, **MONTANA** OFFERS UP A DIZZYING DIVERSITY OF ANGLING ACTION.

BY TOM DICKSON

Not long ago I was listening to Eileen Ryce talk about the crazy amount of fishing that took place in Montana this past summer. Ryce, fisheries chief for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, told me that angling license sales boomed as families who had been stuck indoors flocked to lakes, rivers, and streams to connect with nature. "Fishing is the top dog of outdoor recreation in Montana, and it's been even more so in 2020," said Ryce, adding that angling generates nearly $1 billion in spending statewide each year.

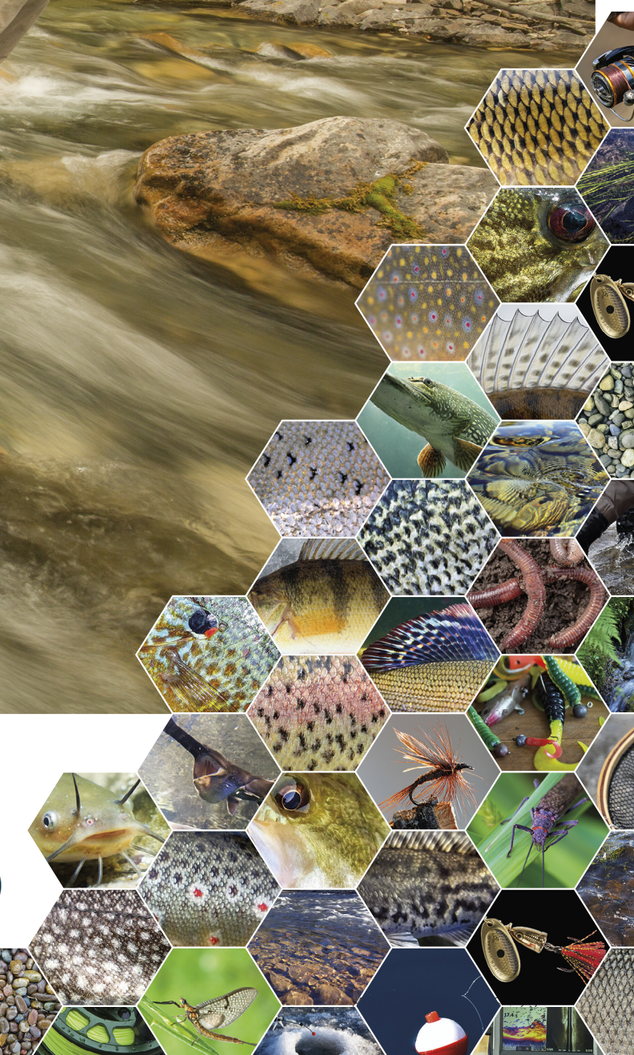
Ryce told me a big reason for all that angling and associated commerce is the wide assortment of fish species and fishing opportunities across the state. "I'd argue we have more diversity of freshwater fishing than any state in the Lower 48," she said. "And by that I mean species diversity and angling access."

Could that be true? At first I dismissed Ryce's claim as fisheries chief pride. I mean, what fish or wildlife agency doesn't claim its state has the nation's best angling or hunting?

Then I got to thinking about the 21-inch brown I'd caught on the Missouri River near Craig the previous week. The half-dozen three-pound rainbows I'd landed one afternoon at Canyon Ferry Reservoir a few weeks

PHOTO: ARNIE GIDLOW; SMALL INSET PHOTOS: SHUTTERSTOCK

TOO MANY TO COUNT An angler casts to westslope cutthroat trout in a mountain stream deep in the Bob Marshall Wilderness. Backcountry fishing is just one of countless angling opportunities that Montana provides statewide.



AWESOME OPPORTUNITIES

before that. The 50 or so eating-size yellow perch an FWP colleague and I had pulled through the ice on Holter Reservoir one winter afternoon. The catfish derby in Glasgow each June. The smallmouth and largemouth bass anglers who flock to Noxon Reservoir. The photo of a 31-inch walleye and what appeared to be a 25-pound northern pike that my barber recently showed me from her latest trips to Fort Peck Reservoir.

It all seemed so, well, diverse.

Wondering if maybe Montana's angling diversity and access were in fact all Ryce made them out to be, I went fishing for some answers.

DIVERSE, AND THEN SOME

To grasp all of what Montana offers anglers, I pored over FWP's 487-page fisheries management program guide and delved into the trove of fisheries and fishing information on FWP's comprehensive FishMT website application. I quickly realized that, even after fishing here for two decades, I knew only a fraction of what Montana provides in terms of diversity and access.

Let's start with the coldwater species. Like all trout anglers, I was already familiar with the famous blue-ribbon rivers like the Big Hole, Madison, Blackfoot, Bighorn, Yellowstone, and upper Missouri featured in books and magazines. But Montana also provides cutthroat, rainbow, brown, and brook trout angling in roughly 28,000 miles of other streams and rivers. It's home to more than 1,000 mountain lakes that offer intrepid anglers high-altitude fishing for stocked native and non-native trout, including, in a few waters, rare golden trout.

Coldwater anglers can also fish reservoirs like Holter, Hauser, Hebgen, Canyon Ferry, Ennis, and Georgetown for 18- to 24-inch rainbows, and chase after beefy trout weighing up to 10 pounds on fertile prairie lakes east of the Rocky Mountain Front.

Also on tap for salmonid seekers: dry-fly angling for Arctic grayling in the upper Ruby and Big Hole Rivers; trolling for deepwater lake trout on a handful of lakes and reservoirs including McGregor and Fort Peck; and angling for lake whitefish on Flathead and Whitefish Lakes, kokanee (landlocked sockeye salmon) in more than two dozen waters such as Lake Koocanusa and Horseshoe Reservoir, and native westslope and Yellowstone cutthroat on more than 1,000 miles of rivers and streams.

Montana even offers limited opportunities to catch federally threatened bull trout,

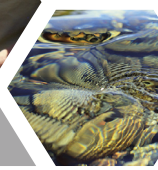
Tom Dickson is the editor of Montana Outdoors.

DIZZYING DIVERSITY

You name the game fish, Montana's got it. In coldwater, there's Arctic graying, Chinook salmon, kokanee, lake whitefish, Yellowstone and westslope cutthroat trout, as well as rainbow, brown, brook, bull, and even some golden trout. In warmwater, anglers can catch walleye, sauger, smallmouth and largemouth bass, channel catfish, perch, crappies, sunfish, tiger muskies, burbot, paddlefish, and shovelnose sturgeon.

Anglers also use a diversity of methods, including ice fishing, spearing, fly-fishing, spinner fishing, bait fishing, trotlining, and trolling, and we pursue fish while wading, from shore, from a boat, on ice, and also, for many of us, in our dreams.

LEFT TO RIGHT FROM TOP: SHUTTERSTOCK; SHUTTERSTOCK; SHUTTERSTOCK; SHUTTERSTOCK; SHUTTERSTOCK; JEREMIE HOLLMAN; ALLEN HAY; LON E. LAUBER; JEREMIE HOLLMAN; STEPH & SAM ZIERKE; STEPH & SAM ZIERKE; JEREMIE HOLLMAN; GARYKRAMER.NET; STEVEN AKRE; SHUTTERSTOCK; LISA DENSMORE BALLARD; GARYKRAMER.NET; NATHAN COOPER; PATRICK CLAYTON/ENGBRETSON UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY; NATHAN COOPER; SHUTTERSTOCK; ERIC ENGBRETSON; JEREMIE HOLLMAN; ELIZABETH MOORE; ROBERT S. MICHELSON; NATHAN COOPER; ALINA GARVER; JEREMIE HOLLMAN; ALLEN HAY; JEREMIE HOLLMAN; ALINA GARVER; LON E. LAUBER; JEREMIE HOLLMAN; ROBERT S. MICHELSON; STEVEN AKRE; CADE DURAN; SHUTTERSTOCK



which can top 20 pounds, on the South Fork of the Flathead River, Hungry Horse Reservoir, Lake Koocanusa, and Swan Lake. Another native gem, found in the state's far northwest, is the Columbia River redband trout, a pint-sized relative of the majestic steelhead that thousands of years ago may have made its way to that region from the Pacific Ocean.

Believe it or not—and I didn't until I saw photos and stocking records—you can also tie into a landlocked Chinook (king) salmon in the Treasure State at Fort Peck Reservoir, where anglers troll deep in late summer for fish weighing up to 25 pounds.

JUST WARMING UP

Montana provides even more angling opportunities statewide for warmwater species. Foremost is walleye fishing, which accounts for nearly 10 percent of the state's combined cold- and warmwater angling each year on waters ranging from sealike Fort Peck to modest 178-acre Beaver Creek Reservoir south of Havre. Other states may contain more walleye waters (Minnesota, where I grew up fishing, is home to more than 1,700), but few boast fish sizes and catch rates like Montana.

Ken Schmidt of Glasgow moved here 15 years ago from North Dakota, where he'd grown up fishing Devil's Lake and Lake Sakakawea, two of the nation's top walleye waters. His jaw dropped when he started chasing marble-eyes on Fort Peck. "The very first time I fished it, my wife caught a 33-incher and I caught a 32-incher," he says.

A 28-inch walleye in Minnesota makes the local newspapers, and people speak in hushed, reverent tones of the angler who caught it. This past summer, I saw photos of six different 30-plus-inch walleye caught by workmates or friends fishing Montana reservoirs. One FWP colleague hooked and landed a 31-incher from shore at Canyon Ferry on the Fourth of July while his kids splashed in the shallows nearby.

Montana's walleye catch rates are equally remarkable. Nationwide, the average is 0.15 fish per hour, about one fish per seven hours of fishing. Rates topping 0.3 are considered excellent. Anglers on Lake Erie, considered the world's best walleye fishery, average 0.2 fish per hour. But catch rates on Montana's top walleye waters—Fort Peck, Canyon Ferry, Nelson, Holter, and Tiber—often equal or even surpass that.

The smaller and more slender sauger, a close cousin to the walleye, can post even better catch rates in the Milk, Powder, lower Bighorn, lower Missouri, and lower Yellowstone Rivers.

Few people think of blizzard-prone Montana as a channel catfish hotspot, yet fishing for these whiskered bottom-dwellers can be fantastic on the Milk, lower Yellowstone, lower Missouri, and lower Bighorn Rivers, to name a few waters. In 2019, an angler caught a state record channel cat topping 35 pounds in Castle Rock Lake near Colstrip.

As for smallmouth bass, Matthew Lothspeich, general manager of Riverside Marine in Miles City, says the fishing for bronzebacks in the lower Yellowstone is so good it's even boosting boat sales. "People want to get out on the river and fish. We'll tie into 20 to 30 smallies in a single pocket, and bass topping three pounds are not uncommon," he says. Dozens of lakes and reservoirs east and west of the Divide also produce smallmouth, and similar opportunities are on offer for largemouth bass.

Anglers can target tiger muskies (muskellunge x northern pike hybrids) at Horseshoe Lake and, east of the Divide, a half-dozen

HOOKING KIDS To introduce children to Montana's amazingly varied fisheries, FWP works with civic groups to stock dozens of community fishing ponds, many set aside for kids only. FWP also provides fishing instruction to thousands of Montana children each year in partnership with grade schools, community clubs, and groups like Trout Unlimited and Walleyes Unlimited.

EVERY TEMPERATURE Left: Trout fishing, especially with flies, is what put Montana on the international angling map. But the state is also home to top-notch warmwater fishing, including for walleye, sauger, paddlefish, shovelnose sturgeon, and, shown at far right, smallmouth bass and yellow perch.

LEFT TO RIGHT FROM TOP: SHUTTERSTOCK; SHUTTERSTOCK; PHIL FARNES; SHUTTERSTOCK; SHUTTERSTOCK; JEREMIE HOLLMAN; JUSTIN CRIPPEN; JEREMIE HOLLMAN; ERIC PETERSEN; JEREMIE HOLLMAN; SHUTTERSTOCK; JEREMIE HOLLMAN; JEREMIE HOLLMAN; PATRICK CLAYTON/ENGBRETSON UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY

MONTANA
FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

kin to saltwater cod that is hooked mainly through the ice on Canyon Ferry, Clark Canyon, and Fort Peck Reservoirs.

lakes and reservoirs. They can fish for pike in dozens of waters statewide, including Tiber and Pishkun Reservoirs to the east and the lower Bitterroot River and Upper Thompson Lake to the west.

Those more interested in supper than sport can catch yellow perch on lakes and reservoirs statewide. Crappies and sunfish are available on hundreds of ponds stocked by FWP and open to the public.

If that isn't enough, Montana offers opportunities to catch fascinating, out-of-the-ordinary game fish species like shovelnose sturgeon, a prehistoric denizen found in the lower Missouri and lower Yellowstone Rivers; paddlefish, another ancient species, caught by snagging in the same waters; and burbot (ling), a freshwater

THEY GET IT FWP fisheries employees from across Montana are shown here fishing by themselves or with family members. "Just like everyone, we get frustrated when fish aren't biting," says Eileen Ryce, FWP fisheries chief. And just like everyone, she adds, her staff love to share the joy of fishing with their kids. "That's what we discuss first thing on Monday morning: Where did your family go over the weekend?"

VARIED AND ACCESSIBLE

Granted, much of that remarkable fishing opportunity is spread out—sometimes *way* out. It takes four hours to reach Canyon Ferry's walleye nirvana from Kalispell, and six to drive from Miles City to the storied Beaverhead River. But given Montana's massive size and relatively sparse population, all or even most of Montana's game fish species can't be right next door to everyone. "We provide a wide range of fishing opportunities across the state, but it's not possible to produce everything in every community, like some anglers ask," Ryce says.

One reason for Montana's mind-boggling angling abundance is its widely varied geography. The Treasure State is home to both snow-packed mountains that keep trout streams and rivers chilled well into summer, and fertile prairie rivers where warmwater species thrive under the hot summer sun. Several laws passed in the 1960s and '70s, including the Montana Stream Protection Act and the Water Use Act, help protect streams and rivers from de-watering, highway construction, and other damaging development.

Montana also contains a dozen hydropower dams that create "tailwater" trout fisheries, where water temperature and food abundance remain relatively constant year-round, producing steady rainbow and brown trout growth. By impounding rivers, the dams also create reservoirs that trap nutrients and produce varied fish habitat for game fish and non-game prey species.

Then there's our unparalleled public access. Montana's nationally recognized 1985 Stream Access Law secures public use of water and streambeds regardless of ownership. Because the law protects access only via bridges and public lands, FWP buys, from willing landowners, small parcels where anglers can launch boats or wade to reach public waters. Today the department's Fishing Access Site Program has 339 sites across the state. Two-thirds have boat ramps, many strategically spaced along the most popular rivers to reduce crowding. "We also advocate protecting the Stream Access Law and we explain to anglers how public access in Montana works so they respect private property rights," Ryce says.

FWP also manages fishing and other water recreation on the popular Blackfoot, Big Hole, Madison, West Fork Beaverhead, and Bitterroot Rivers to reduce crowding and ease tensions among various fishing and floating constituencies.

To bring angling recreation closer to families, the department manages 64 statewide community fishing ponds, working with

ALL PHOTOS PROVIDED BY FWP FISHERIES STAFF

towns, cities, counties, and community groups to stock and maintain these small angling waters, many set aside for kids only. FWP also provides fishing instruction to thousands of Montana children each year in partnership with grade schools, community clubs, and groups like Trout Unlimited and Walleyes Unlimited.

FWP's extensive hatchery system helps feed the state's insatiable demand for game fish. It's true that Montana stopped stocking *rivers* in the early 1970s, switching to wild trout management. But 5 million trout produced by the department's eight coldwater hatcheries are stocked each year in nearly 500 ponds, reservoirs, and mountain lakes that lack natural spawning habitat.

What's more, each year FWP's three warmwater hatcheries produce 33 million walleye, sauger, northern pike, crappies, tiger muskies, channel catfish, largemouth bass, and smallmouth bass, which are planted in more than 120 lakes, ponds, and reservoirs.

FANATICAL FISHERIES TEAM

"One reason we're so passionate about fisheries management—whether it's on the Madison, Fort Peck, Canyon Ferry, or wherever—is because all of us in the Fisheries Division came into this work out of our love of fish and fishing," Ryce tells me. "It's our entire life. During the day we work to preserve and protect fish, and then after work we go and try to catch those fish."

Their own fishing fanaticism, Ryce says, ensures her employees never lose sight of regular anglers' concerns. "Just like everyone, we get frustrated when fish aren't biting," she says. "We get it." And just like everyone, FWP staff want to share the joy of fishing with their kids. "That's what we discuss first thing on Monday morning: Where did your family go over the weekend?" Ryce says.

Helping fellow anglers is one reason FWP developed FishMT, a feature on the department's website documenting decades of FWP fish stocking, research, and other management work. It's why fisheries biologists make presentations to dozens of angling and conservation groups statewide each year. It's why FWP partnered with Montana State University to create the free *Fishes of Montana* ID cell phone app. And it's why FWP established its playful "Fisheries Friday" postings on Facebook and Instagram to share angling and fisheries management information.

Better fishing is also a major driver behind FWP's extensive habitat, aquatic invasive species control, and native fish conservation programs. "When we maintain tributary flows, keep zebra mussels out of reservoirs, and restore native Yellowstone cutthroat, that's not just good for the environment, it's also good for Montana's fishing and fishing economy," Ryce says.

So, does Montana really have the nation's most diverse freshwater fishing opportunities? I concluded there's really no way to measure that claim. But without a doubt, Montana offers some of the best and most varied coldwater and warmwater angling in the country. It's so good, in fact, it's turned at least one overseas visitor into a fishing fanatic.

Ryce tells me the story of how her mother, who lives in Scotland, first learned to fish during her regular visits to Montana to visit her daughter, son-in-law, and granddaughter. "We live on Canyon Ferry Reservoir, and one day a few years ago, my mum walked down to the water's edge and caught a 28-inch walleye. I mean, right from shore. She'd never been interested in fishing, but now she fishes all the time back in Scotland—and of course whenever she visits us here in Montana."

To find additional fishing information on waters mentioned here, check out FWP's FishMT app. Located on the FWP website at fwp.mt.gov.fish/, the app provides easy access to stocking records, access sites, maps, research data, regulations, and more for all streams, rivers, lakes, and reservoirs.

LEFT TO RIGHT FROM TOP: JEREMIE HOLLMAN; CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM; THOM BRIDGE; TOMMY MARTINO; PAUL QUENEAU; EILEEN RYCE; ALLEN MORRIS JONES; JEREMIE HOLLMAN; CHRIS MCGOWAN; JESSE VARNADO

HOOKED The fisheries chief's mother and daughter with a big walleye the Scotswoman caught from shore.

BETTER ANGLING FOR ALL FWP fisheries management aims to protect and restore fish habitat and conserve native species like pallid sturgeon and bull trout. But equally important is how the work produces better fishing and greater angling opportunities. FWP manages 339 fishing access sites and annually produces 5 million trout and 33 million warmwater species like walleye, northern pike, and channel catfish for stocking in hundreds of ponds, reservoirs, and mountain lakes statewide. Stream habitat improvements through the Future Fisheries Program improve trout numbers. Programs that protect and restore native species like sauger and westslope cutthroat trout don't just preserve Montana's natural heritage, they also enhance fishing for those species.

FWP fisheries crews in action, clockwise from top left: tracking trout fitted with radio transmitters on the Flathead River; feeding young rainbow trout at Big Spring Hatchery near Lewistown; incubating genetically pure westslope cutthroat fry at the Sekokini Springs Hatchery near West Glacier; looking for invasive species at Holter Reservoir; using a backpack electroshocker to monitor trout populations near Missoula; measuring rainbow trout during night fish monitoring on the Missouri River near Craig; using seining nets on Fresno Reservoir to monitor growth of young-of-the-year walleye and other species; kokanee salmon fingerlings at the Flathead Lake Salmon Hatchery in Somers; monitoring willows planted along a tributary of the East Gallatin using funds from FWP's Future Fisheries Habitat Improvement Program in partnership with Trout Unlimited.