



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

SEASONAL FISHING GUIDE

May 2012

1. Spring

- ☛ Snow is melting, spring rains, days getting longer
- ☛ Water is cold, slowly warming, may be high and muddy
- ☛ Fish are sluggish, some spawn in spring
- ☛ Spring spawners: rainbow, cutthroat trout, bass, perch, northern pike, sunfish, bullheads

Rivers: High, dirty water, strong current. Fish will be holding in side pockets and eddies out of current. Lots of worms, aquatic nymphs in water. Trout will be spawning on gravel tail-outs at bottom of pools, gravel bars.

Fishing: Fish bait in slower water, use lures, spinners with lots of flash or vibration in dirty water. Fish slow and near bottom. Eggs are deadly on spawning trout.

Good Spots: Thompson River, South Fork Flathead and Kootenai rivers below dams (high but clear), small streams.

Lakes: Slowly warming, north shallow bays will warm first. Water column all about same temperature, lots of oxygen due to turnover so fish are spread out. Bass, sunfish fan out redds nearshore; pike and perch spawn over vegetation.

Fishing: Fish feed heavily before and after spawning, defend nests. Fish bait throughout period, smelt or cut bait for pike. Grubs, jigs and plastic worms for bass. Fish slow and deep at start, speed up as water warms. Trout will be cruising near shore, move deeper as water warms. Worms and marshmallows or powerbait, spinners and flies can be good for trout.

Good Spots: Echo Lake (bass), Stillwater Lakes (pike), small lakes (Beaver, Murray, Foys, Thompson Chain, Carpenter, Tetrault, Lion, Triangle Pond) for trout.

2. Summer

- ☛ Water continues to warm, days are long
- ☛ Lots of insect hatches, terrestrial insects (grasshoppers, ants, etc.) as summer wears on
- ☛ Small fish hatch and disperse through summer

Rivers: Water drops, clears and warms. Highest oxygen and most insects at tail of riffles, head of pool. Fish most active early and late in day when water is cooler, light levels lower. Fish metabolism high and fish are active.

Fishing: Use flies, “match the hatch.” Use plugs to imitate minnows or lures, spinners to trigger strikes. Fish near cover, broken water that provides cover. Fish will hold in heavier current that brings food, oxygen near head of pools. Hoppers bring up some of biggest fish of year.

Good Spots: Kootenai River, Flathead River and all 3 forks, lower Thompson River, Yaak River.

Lakes: Water warms and stratifies. Thermocline sets up, moves deeper with summer, depths lose oxygen. Fish may be shallow early and late in day, go to depths or cover during mid-day. Perch and pike are coolwater; particularly big pike go deeper as water warms. Bass are warmwater; get more active as water warms.

Fishing: Fish shallower early and late in day, deeper at mid-day. Match the food source or use lures with flash, vibration, etc. to trigger strikes. Lures, grubs, spinnerbaits: fish moderately fast to fast for pike, bass. Fish grubs or worms deeper for bass. Trout will be nearshore for food early in season but will quickly move deeper to escape heat. May suspend in mid basin around thermocline along with kokanee to get best combination of temperature, light and oxygen. Use controlled depth (lead core, downriggers) to fish suspended fish or vertically jig lures, leadhead jigs for fish on bottom. Cowbells and wedding rings can be good for kokanee. Fish may get muddy tasting in late summer.

Good Spots: Flathead Lake (lake trout, lake whitefish), Noxon Rapids Reservoir (bass), Lake Mary Ronan (perch, kokanee), Lake Koocanusa (kokanee), Thompson lakes (kokanee, perch, bass, pike).

3. **Fall**

- ☛ Water cooling, days shortening, vegetation dying
- ☛ Insects still hatching, young of year fish getting big
- ☛ Flows are low, oxygen will increase slowly
- ☛ Brown, brook, bull and lake trout, whitefish and kokanee are fall spawners

Rivers: Flows are low but temperatures dropping, vegetation breaking loose, leaves falling. Fish start feeding actively, may feed all day. Spawning trout will be building redds on pool tailouts, gravel bars.

Fishing: Use flies; go to more wet flies, nymphs, streamers as hatches slow. Fish are still active, aggressive on redds, fish lures with lots of flash, vibration to trigger strikes.

Good Spots: lower Thompson River, Flathead River (trout, lake whitefish), Kootenai River (rainbows).

Lakes: Water cools down, will turn over at some point. Bass start to slow down, pike and trout become more active. Most fish go on feeding spree before winter. Fish lures with flash, vibration early, slow down and go deeper as water cools.

Good Spots: Flathead Lake (lake trout), McGregor Lake (lake trout, rainbow), Thompson lakes (perch, bass, pike), Swan Lake (pike).

4. **Winter**

- 🐟 Water cools, then freezes
- 🐟 Lake stratify by depths, lose oxygen in depths
- 🐟 Hatches (rivers) slow way down
- 🐟 Fish metabolism slows, some bass go inactive

Rivers: Water is cold; most fish go to slow, deep holes to winter.

Fishing: Slow down presentations, downsize, fish near bottom in slack water. Fish bait or something like a spinner that can be fished slow and deep. Most rivers closed to fishing.

Good Spots: Flathead River (lake whitefish, lake trout), Kootenai River (rainbow), Thompson River.

Lakes: Lake ices over, starts losing oxygen in deeper water. Snow and ice cover cuts light penetration, vegetation dies. Fish may move higher in the water column in late winter to get more oxygen.

Fishing: First and last ice is usually best but be careful. Fish for pike with smelt, first and last ice best, slow at mid winter. Bigger perch migrate to 30 feet deep on big flats. Small tube jigs with perch eyes good for large perch. Trout and salmon fairly active, trout nearer shore and shallower, kokanee suspend in mid lake above thermocline. Glohooks and maggots under a flasher good for kokanee, jig a lot. Glohooks or small jigs good for trout. Jig, but slow down action, downsize.

Good Spots: Smith Lake (perch), Thompson lakes (kokanee, perch), Hubbart Reservoir (kokanee, rainbows), Foy's Lake (rainbow, kokanee), Carpenter Lake (trout), Lion Lake (trout, perch), Beaver Lake (kokanee), Little Bitterroot Lake (kokanee).

General Considerations For All Seasons:

- 🐟 Spawning fish are aggressive and concentrated so it is easier to catch a lot of adult fish. These fish are already under stress, handle them carefully and limit your catch.
- 🐟 Practice selective harvest. Harvest mostly smaller fish, release most big fish to reproduce, maintain quality. It is fine to eat fish but limit your kill, not kill your limit. Harvest just what you can use within a short time.
- 🐟 Learn to identify fish species.
- 🐟 Know fishing regulations for the water you are on.
- 🐟 Be safe, have fun. Take a kid fishing.