

GATEWAY TO FORT PECK LAKE

At Hell Creek State Park, visitors find a portal into one of Montana's great water recreation areas

By Mark Henckel

My wife must worry a lot about me starving to death when I camp and fish at Hell Creek State Park.

"Did you remember the food cooler?" she always asks.

"Yes, I packed the food cooler."

"Do you have eggs, bacon, coffee for breakfast, and enough meals packed for dinner?"

"It's all packed."

"Got the butter, bread, some lunch meat, and diet pop?"

"It's all there, and the cooler weighs about 100 pounds!" I tell her.

The thing is, she doesn't need to worry. I hardly need a food cooler on my trips to Hell Creek State Park. The other people camping there are so hospitable, it seems I just snack my way from one campsite to the next, having a cold beverage here, a fish supper there, and a piece of cake on the way back to my camper.

If Hell Creek isn't the friendliest place in the entire Montana state park system, it must come awfully close.

Maybe that's due to the park's remote setting, on the shores of Fort Peck Reservoir, north of Jordan, near the end of a 25-mile-

long gravel road. Or maybe it's because the park is a destination point, where everybody packs huge amounts of food and drink for several days of camping.

Or maybe it's because Hell Creek just seems to bring out the best in people. The park is a gateway to good fishing, superb boating, comfortable camping, and spectacular scenery. And the hills of



the surrounding C. M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge and the 1,500 miles of lake shoreline (longer than the entire California coast) offer the peace and solitude that let a person truly relax, reflect, and feel more neighborly toward others. And offer them food—loads of food—as they wander past.

THE BIG DRAW Walleyes are the main attraction at Fort Peck Lake, drawing anglers from across the United States. FWP originally stocked the tasty fish in the 1950s, but not until the mid-1990s did the lake become a major walleye angling destination.

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A family destination

Old-time Hell Creek regulars say the site has always been hospitable. Families have come here for decades to enjoy fishing, camping, getting away from it all, and making friends. Karmie Lockie, postmaster at Sand Springs in western Garfield County, is a third-generation Hell Creek regular who still spends as much time as possible at the nearby family cabin. She recalls that, in the 1950s, the road from Jordan to Hell Creek was entirely gumbo. "When I was a kid, we couldn't go home when it rained," Lockie says. "The road was that bad. We had to stay at the lake—which was fine with us kids."

John Little, who grew up in Glasgow, also has fond memories of visiting Hell Creek as a youngster. His family boated there from its cabin at the Pines, an area with campsites, cabins, and a boat ramp located 25 miles east of the park.

"After striking out for Hell Creek on a Saturday morning, we'd all bet whether the boat would make it there or not," says Little, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks regional state parks manager in Miles City since 1990. "Sometimes the motor quit, and

ing predator species to quickly put on pounds. "We stocked ciscoes to improve the overall size and condition of walleyes, and we figured they'd also help northern pike, lake trout, Chinook salmon, and maybe smallmouth bass," says Mike Ruggles, FWP's fisheries biologist for Fort Peck.

Before the cisco introduction, Ruggles says, the few Fort Peck walleyes that reached more than 24 inches long were relatively thin fish that grew slowly. But once the walleyes had ciscoes for supper, they began growing longer, stouter, and faster. By the early 1990s, local anglers took notice, and within a few years the word was out nationwide.

"Fort Peck has developed into a trophy walleye fishery," Ruggles says. "It's one of the few lakes right now regularly producing walleyes over 10 pounds."

As predicted, other game fish also have benefited from the cisco introduction. Five-pound smallmouth bass are not uncommon, and each year anglers catch northern pike and lake trout over 20 pounds and Chinook salmon up to 30 pounds.

Ruggles notes that fish populations rise and fall on Fort Peck based on the amount

walleyes closer to shore where they could be more easily caught by anglers who now struggle to find fish in Fort Peck's depths.

A bigger, better park

Changes in the lake's walleye population have spurred changes at Hell Creek State Park. As the Fort Peck fishery improved, angler use steadily grew, until the lake now has become the most heavily fished water in Montana. Park use has increased rapidly, too. In 1995, roughly 9,300 people visited the park; by 2003 the number of visitors had nearly quadrupled.

Little says he and his staff have responded not only to increased numbers, but also to new Hell Creek visitors who aren't local. People camping at the park now hail from the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Minnesota as much as from Miles City, Billings, and Great Falls. Rather than sleep on the beach or in a boat like Little and his folks did, the out-of-staters roll into the campground with travel trailers or motor homes, most with a high-tech walleye boat or pleasure craft in tow. They stay for extended weekends, an entire week, or even longer.

That has required some major improvements at Hell Creek, and Little quickly ticks off the long list.

"We improved both the main and the Boy Scout Point boat ramps, and extended the main parking area," he says. "Then in the 1990s, we put in a drinking water treatment plant, re-did the roads, and put in camper pads in the campground. The last 5 miles of road on the CMR National Wildlife Refuge to the park was improved and graveled. And in 2000, we teamed up with Walleyes Unlimited to put in a fish-cleaning station."

The fishing group also put in a kids' playground, Little adds, and in 2001 FWP installed an RV dump station. The following year, the agency built a new shower facility with washrooms and restrooms.

"Then, last summer, we planted dozens of trees and installed an underground watering system," Little continues. "And in the fall, FWP and Garfield County received federal and state money to add additional gravel to another 12-mile segment of the road from Jordan."

Little points out that rumors the Hell

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—JOHN LITTLE, FWP REGIONAL PARKS MANAGER

sometimes it didn't. If we got there, we kids would sleep on the beach and our folks would sleep in the boat."

The walleye boom

Little took his FWP job just as the walleye fishing at Fort Peck began to boom. Due to lack of forage and spawning habitat, the lake's walleye population languished until the mid-1980s. That's when Walleyes Unlimited of Montana teamed up with FWP to stock Fort Peck with ciscoes, a cousin of trout. The oil-rich salmonids are the fish equivalent of double cheeseburgers, allow-

of habitat and prey available. The current ongoing drought, which has helped drop the lake's water level to record lows, has hurt the fishery.

"Biologically, we need fluctuations in the water levels," Ruggles explains. "We need years when the water is lower, so vegetation can grow on the exposed shoreline, and then we need years of high water to flood that new vegetation. Northern pike, in particular, need flooded vegetation to spawn on, and the young of all fish species hide in vegetation. An extended drought like we have now is hard on fish populations."

Ruggles adds that higher water would also provide more habitat for shiners and perch—both walleye prey—thus drawing

Avid walleye angler Mark Henckel is the outdoors editor at the Billings Gazette.



ANGLER OASIS Hell Creek State Park (above) offers fishing families everything they need: campsites, boat ramps, picnic tables, an RV dump station, shade trees, showers—even a playground. Though walleyes (right) and northern pike (left) are the featured species, the lake also offers fishing for smallmouth bass, ling, lake trout, and even salmon.



Creek boat ramp no longer reaches Fort Peck's low water are untrue. "We extended the boat ramp last year and again this past winter," he says. "Boats have no problem reaching the water."

As extra insurance, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is installing a new, low-water boat ramp in the spring of 2005.

The privately owned Hell Creek Marina also has expanded its operation. In addition to on-the-water gas pumps, mooring dock slips, and pontoon rentals, the marina sells fishing tackle, groceries, beverages, and bait. It also rents air-conditioned motel units.

The marina serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner, but the staff will also cook your freshly caught and cleaned fish fillets for just \$2.50. The marina is open year-round, serving anglers in spring and summer, mule deer and elk hunters in fall, and ice anglers in winter.

Meeting future needs

As more and more people visit and camp at Hell Creek, FWP's state parks staff has had to scramble to provide the high level of services demanded by park visitors. Doug Monger, who heads the department's State Parks Division, knows firsthand of the changes at Hell Creek, having previously held the regional manager position.

"When I started, Hell Creek was a tough place to get to," Monger says. "But that's all different now, and I can see the park getting even better for visitors in the future."

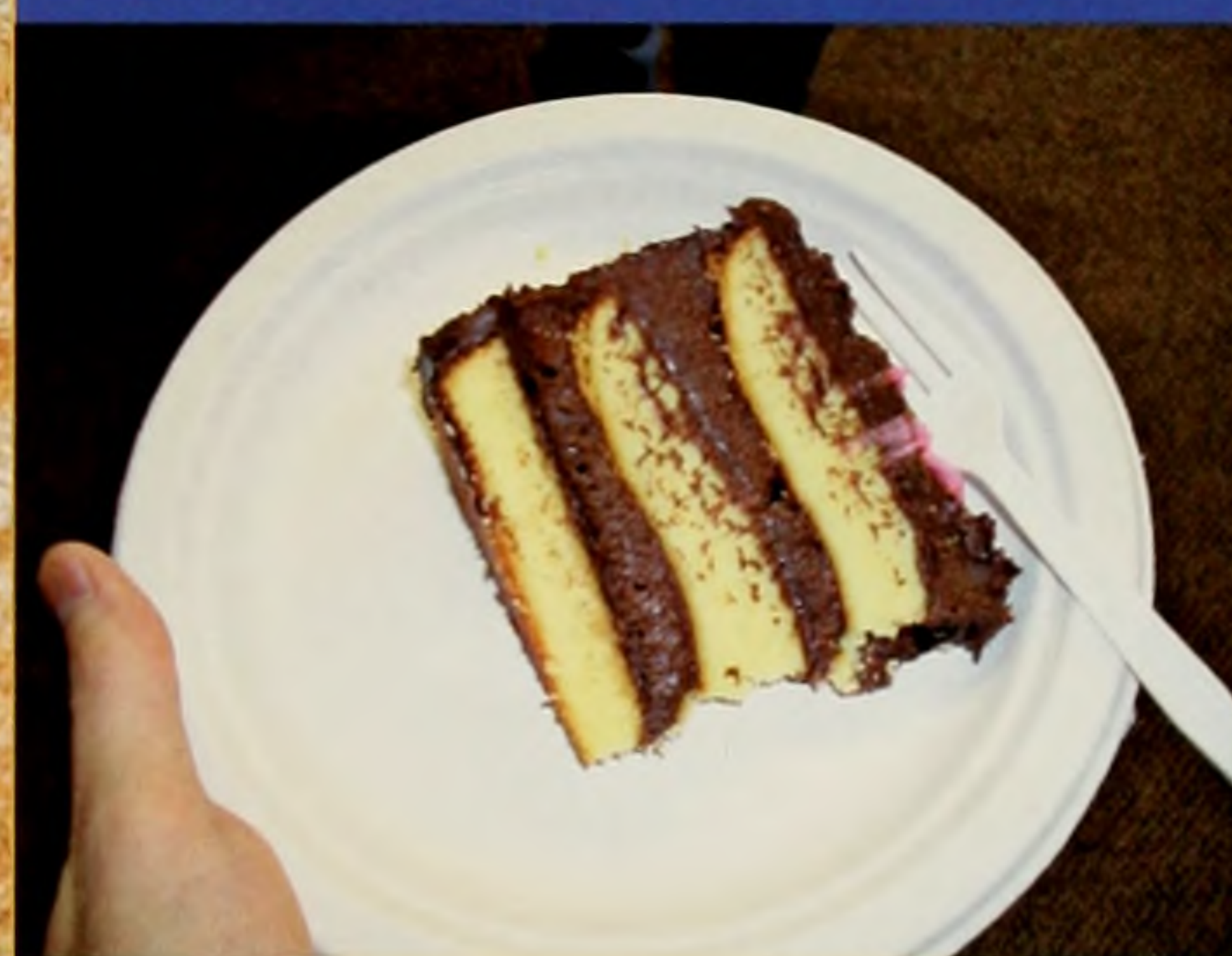
State park employees are starting to kick around the idea of paving the road north from Jordan. "Maybe a mile or two every few years," says Monger. "It would depend a lot on what type of funding we could get. But it makes sense. Gravel disappears into the clay, and we constantly have to pay to have it re-graveled. A paved road is more expensive, but it stays."

Another proposed improvement is electricity. "It's hot there in the summer," says Monger. "People want to run an air conditioner in their camper, or, if they don't have air conditioning, they don't want to hear gas-run generators going all day. People also want to recharge their boat batteries."

Currently, no Montana state park has electricity. "But if electrical hookups are what people want at Hell Creek, we should at least look into it," Monger says. He adds that no solid plans are in place for either the road-paving or electricity proposals.

Despite all the changes at Hell Creek, one thing that has remained the same in the 20 years I've been going there is the park's aura of hospitality. People—including the folks at FWP—seem to love Hell Creek and will do whatever it takes to make it a better place to visit. That could mean someday paving the road from Jordan. It could mean extending the boat ramps. Or it could be nothing more than offering someone a cold beverage, a fresh-caught walleye dinner, or a piece of cake—causing yet another cooler to return home much, much too full. 🐻

Hell Creek State Park



CHRISTOPHER MASTO

IF YOU GO

Open: Year-round, 24 hours a day.

Location: 25 miles north of Jordan on graveled Hell Creek Road.

Services: Fishing, swimming, boating, wildlife watching, 55 graveled camp pads, group campsites, 60 fire rings, 120 picnic tables, hot showers, RV dump station. Marina (406-557-2345; hellcreekmarina.com) has lodging, restaurant, groceries, bait, boat rental, fishing gear, and firewood.

Special events: Several fishing tournaments are held in spring and summer. Call (406) 234-0926 for details.

For more information: Call the FWP regional parks office at Miles City, (406) 234-0900, or go to the state parks page of the FWP website (fwp.mt.gov). Get the latest information on fishing, walleye management, and lake conditions at the Walleyes Unlimited of Montana website (walleyesunlimited.com).