

A SECRET NO MORE

The word is out: Most of Montana's 334 fishing access sites are open to public hunting.

BY BOB GIBSON

The purple-and-crimson flash at Grant Marsh Fishing Access Site on the Bighorn River meant this was going to be a good day for the two sportsmen stepping out of their pickup truck. But not for fishing. Instead of a leaping rainbow trout, the splash of color came from a rooster pheasant, and the two fellows were hunters, not anglers. With chaps attached and shotguns in hand, they quickly disappeared into a labyrinth of Russian olives and marsh grass behind an energetic springer spaniel. For an entire afternoon they plied 42 acres of fields, fence lines, and dry cattail sloughs without ever leaving the fishing access site.

Montana sportsmen and sportswomen have discovered that many fishing access

sites comprise rich riparian bottomland and nearby upland grasslands—ideal habitat for white-tailed deer, sharp-tailed grouse, doves, wild turkeys, sandhill cranes, waterfowl, and pheasants. In late fall and early winter, hunters actually outnumber anglers at many fishing access sites.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks has established 334 fishing access sites on rivers, creeks, ponds, and lakes across Montana. The sites provide free public access to the state's waterways for fishing and other water-based recreation. They range from the sprawling 601-acre Henneberry Fishing Access Site on the Beaverhead River to the Yellowstone River's Corwin Springs site, no bigger than a suburban residential lot. The access sites usually contain a cement boat ramp and a vault latrine. In addition to fishing, they provide places for people to hike, camp, and watch birds.

The hunting can be tremendous. Because they abut water, fishing access sites often provide great waterfowling opportunities. Many also offer hunting for ringnecks and whitetails—two game species that prefer thick, dense cover near water.

Hunting opportunities and regulations vary widely from site

IN THE THICK OF IT Pheasants and white-tailed deer burrow into the densest cover they can find, often along river bottoms. Fishing access sites throughout Montana, especially those on large rivers such as the Yellowstone, are rich in riparian habitat. Though many hunters don't know it, most of these public sites are open to hunting.





to site. Some are closed to hunting because they are too small to offer meaningful opportunities. Others, next to towns or neighboring farm buildings, limit hunters to shotguns or archery equipment. But hunting is legal on most fishing access sites. Hunters can learn about restrictions from signs posted at entrance roads and in the free “Fishing Access Site Field Guide,” available at FWP regional offices, major sporting goods stores, and online at fwp.mt.gov. Hunters may also call FWP regional offices for hunting restrictions on specific sites.

Despite the great wildlife habitat there, fishing access sites are not purchased for their hunting potential. Allan Kuser, FWP’s fishing access site coordinator in Helena, says the department’s primary goal is to provide public access to water for angling. The department looks for sites where there is also room for a boat launch, latrine, parking, and

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shore fishing. But because the sites frequently include adjoining acreage in the purchase agreement, the public ends up with places for both fishing and land-based recreational access. “The hunting, hiking, and birding are bonus features,” Kuser says.

For example, the 172-acre Clarks Fork of the Yellowstone Fishing Access Site was purchased in 2008 to give people a place to hand-launch boats, fish, float, and play in the water along a mile of river frontage south of Bridger. The property also came with two irrigated farm fields, water rights, and a wide swath of bottomland thick with cottonwoods, willows, and cattails. One corner of the tract climbs into rimrocks and sagebrush benches where mule deer live. A local farmer plants the cultivated acreage with small grain crops each spring, which keeps noxious weeds under control and provides additional food for wildlife. Because of the rich, diverse habitat, visitors may see wild turkeys, white-tailed deer, red foxes, raccoons, and pheasants. Bird watchers love the site for the many

resident and migrating species, and hikers enjoy the solitude.

Also along the Yellowstone River, the new Holmgren Fishing Access Site provides a stopover for rafters and anglers floating between Reed Point and Columbus. A mile of riverbank providing access to streamside fishing holes is flanked by a wide strip of river bottom that holds game birds, waterfowl, and deer.

Downstream from Billings, nearly every fishing access site along the Yellowstone River includes at least a patch of brush, a fence line, or an overgrown back channel—all containing game birds and deer. Old wooden tree stands at many sites are testament to the fact that hunters used the properties long before FWP bought them for public fishing.

Kuser says hunters can find game on fishing access sites across Montana. “They’re often overlooked by hunters because they’re designated for fishing,” he says. “But people should know they can hunt on most of these sites. It’s public land.” 🐾

GET READY Above: Upland hunters wait for a rooster to erupt from ideal pheasant habitat at a fishing access site along the Bighorn River. Right: a successful hunter shows off his birds at a site along the Yellowstone. In addition to pheasants, fishing access sites hold sharptails, doves, wild turkeys, and, especially late in the season, ducks.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: BOB GIBSON; TOM DICKSON; MICHAEL FURTMAN

