

# Give a Big Hand for the Big Hole

Applauding the consensus-based, collaborative approach to conserving this premier southwestern Montana trout and grayling river. **BY TOM REED**



**STUNNING** The Big Hole Valley is so vast and scenic that it's impossible to ignore, even in a state where picturesque rivers are commonplace. The upper section, shown here, is characterized by a sea of pasture and hay fields bisected by one of the world's most famous trout rivers.

PHOTO BY KEN TAKATA

Those who live among beauty too often grow oblivious to the loveliness around them. Here in Montana, it's common for residents to drive along any of the state's famous trout rivers on a late summer evening and forget to look up from the road and past a windshield splattered by the evening's hatch. The water and mountains become peripheral, like the walls of a personal tunnel.

But one river is impossible to unconsciously ignore: the Big Hole.

You don't "drive up" or "drive down" the Big Hole Valley as on most rivers. You come into it, much as you'd enter a vast theater surrounded by a gawk-worthy IMAX screen. The vistas are equally spectacular to the east, north, south, and west. No matter how, or how often, you encounter the Big Hole, you pay attention every time.

On a map, the Big Hole is that giant open spot in the middle of southwestern Montana, a huge valley surrounded by mountains through which the river flows north, then south, then north again. The Big Hole's puzzling name, hardly indicative of the breathtaking scenery, came from trappers who worked the West's vast rivers in search of beaver and called some of these big valleys "holes."

Though initially settled by rugged individualists, the Big Hole's sustained success as a world-class fishery surrounded by a thriving ranching economy is primarily the result of communal action. Big Hole ranchers, anglers, outfitters, and others often disagree. But as on the Blackfoot, Musselshell, Clark Fork, and other Montana rivers where diverse interests find common ground, they acknowledge that protecting

*The author of Give Me Mountains for My Horses and several other books, Tom Reed lives with his family on their ranch outside Pony.*

the fishery and rural culture requires respecting each other's perspective and finding ways to work together. "What it ultimately boils down to is what those of us here call 'shared sacrifice, shared success,'" says Pedro Marques, executive director of the Big Hole Watershed Committee, a local conservation group.

#### "PLACE OF THE GROUND SQUIRRELS"

People have been visiting and living along the Big Hole River for thousands of years. There is no archaeological evidence that Indian tribes fished the river, but they certainly hunted bison, elk, and small game.



**EARLY HOMESTEADERS** By 1914, when this photo was taken, families had established themselves in the upper Big Hole Valley, attracted by abundant water and vast tracts of wild hay.

For hundreds of years the Flathead, or Salish, occupied the valley, which they called *Iskumtselalik Pah* ("the place of ground squirrels").

Lewis and Clark and other European-Americans first reached the valley in the early 1800s, and a Mexican trapper named Emanuel Martin brought the first wagons there in the early 1850s. Miners found gold and silver in Big Hole headwaters and arrived in force during the 1860s and '70s. They built impressive stamp mills and smelters, road networks, and small communities like Glendale—now a ghost town just west of Melrose. Cattlemen came here too, first in the lower valley and then, attracted by a sea of wild hay, to the upper valley. Eventually, a handful of homesteaders braved the area's long and brutally cold winters and settled. Many modern-day ranching families are descendants of those tough and determined pioneers.

Today, the Big Hole River and surrounding high mountain valley appear and function much as they did in those early pioneer days, thanks in part to the area's remote location and two traditional ranching practices—beaver-slide haystacks and flood irrigation—still used in this "Valley of 10,000 Haystacks." Credit also goes to local and regional residents, anglers, and outfitters who take deep pride in the river itself. The Big Hole remains one of the most pristine trout rivers in the West and, coupled with an unforgettable panorama, among



**HAIL TO THE CHIEF** No one was more central to Big Hole River conservation and fly-fishing than George Grant. The Butte native, born in 1906, advocated for the river throughout the 1970s with a newsletter he edited called the *River Rat*. The *River Rat* later became the official publication of Montana Trout Unlimited and helped raise public consciousness and support for water conservation issues on the Big Hole and other rivers. The "Chief Rat," as Grant called himself, was also an internationally known fly tier whose patterns combined woven-hair hackles with bodies of flat mono-nylon to replicate stonefly nymphs. The local Trout Unlimited chapter is named after Grant, who died in 2008.

the world's most famous.

Jim Olsen entered this storied landscape in 2008 as the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks fisheries biologist. "Honestly, I was a bit nervous about the whole prospect," Olsen says. "My first goal was simply not to screw anything up." This, after all, was the home water of angling and conservation legends like George Grant and Tony Schoonen, who spent their lives on the river, learning its mysteries and fighting to protect flows, water quality, and fish populations. Grant and Schoonen were conservation trailblazers who helped focus national attention from Trout Unlimited (TU) and other groups on the Big Hole and its tributaries.

Olsen says the Big Hole comprises three distinct sections as it flows roughly 115 miles from the Beaverhead Mountains southwest of Jackson to its confluence with the Ruby and Beaverhead Rivers near Twin Bridges to form the Jefferson. The upper river down to the Fish Trap Fishing Access Site is a mellow, high-meadow stream. Here anglers find brook trout, westslope cutthroats, and fluvial (river) Arctic grayling—a species once proposed for federal endangered species listing—and a few



browns and rainbows. From Fish Trap past Divide to Melrose, the Big Hole speeds up, challenging floaters with large rapids and granite boulders beneath steep cliffs. "Rainbows and browns dominate the pocket water in this stretch," Olsen says. The final reach from Melrose to what locals call "Bridges" slows a bit as the river flows through semiarid canyons and past pivot



**STEAKS AND SALMONIDS** The main issue in the Big Hole Valley is water allocation. In years past, portions of the upper river and key spawning tributaries went completely dry.

irrigators watering fields of alfalfa. Olsen says this lower stretch contains miles of remote river without access and offers anglers their best chance of hooking a five-pound rainbow or brown: "People catch some monsters down there."

#### WAKE-UP CALL

The Big Hole has a long history of conservation activism. In the 1960s, local ranchers and anglers galvanized to oppose the Bureau of Reclamation's proposed Reichle Dam, which would have inundated 18 miles of river. Big Hole advocates, mostly anglers from Butte, also helped pass Montana's Stream Protection Act (1963), Natural Streambed and Land Preservation Act (1975), and Stream Access Law (1986).

A pivotal year for Big Hole conservation was 1988. As Yellowstone National Park burned during the long, hot summer, parts of the Big Hole went dry for nearly a month near the town of Wisdom. Grayling numbers, already dwindling from stream habitat degradation and low water throughout the 1980s, plummeted. In one stretch near Wisdom, grayling numbers per mile dropped from 111 to 22.

One reason for the river's chronic low flows was drought; the other was diversion of water to irrigate pasture and alfalfa. For ranchers like Randy Smith, the severe drought in 1988 and another in 1994 were a wake-up call. "We didn't want to be blamed for diverting all the water and killing

all the fish, particularly grayling,” he says. Smith and other Big Hole ranchers decided to take steps to keep more water in the river. “We tried to come up with a plan to include other interests because there was a future in being able to talk about things and not piss each other off,” Smith says.

The result was the Big Hole Watershed Committee (BHWC), which today includes ranchers, business owners, outfitters, county commissioners, water utilities, and trout anglers. With a paid staff of five, the BHWC (motto: “Conservation Through Consensus”) coordinates restoration projects on headwater streams damaged by historic mining activity, works with the Montana Department of Environmental Quality on maintaining clean water, and monitors water flow and temperature.

The committee also maintains a phone-tree among ranchers who, when the river drops and warms in late summer and early fall, ask neighbors to use less water so fish can survive. New wells, drilled in part with federal conservation funds, provide stock tanks that keep cattle away from the river and tributaries, where they trample banks

and eat shade-producing streamside vegetation. “Right from the start we decided to do things by consensus,” Smith says. “We fashioned the process so if somebody had a problem with something, they needed to be part of the solution, too. The business of voting [with majority rule] and telling someone they lose just doesn’t work.”

The “shared sacrifice” philosophy embraced by BHWC members has meant that while ranchers are asked to voluntarily reduce irrigation withdrawals during critical low-water periods, anglers and outfitters are required to reduce or even stop fishing. “Everyone works together and gives up something to benefit the river’s fishery,” Olsen says.

#### BALANCING ACT

While the watershed committee focuses on maintaining healthy river flows, Olsen figures out ways to keep both native and non-native salmonid species healthy and as abundant as possible. “Sometimes there’s a conflict between the two, like when we have to remove non-native brook trout to restore westslope cutthroats in a tributary,” Olsen

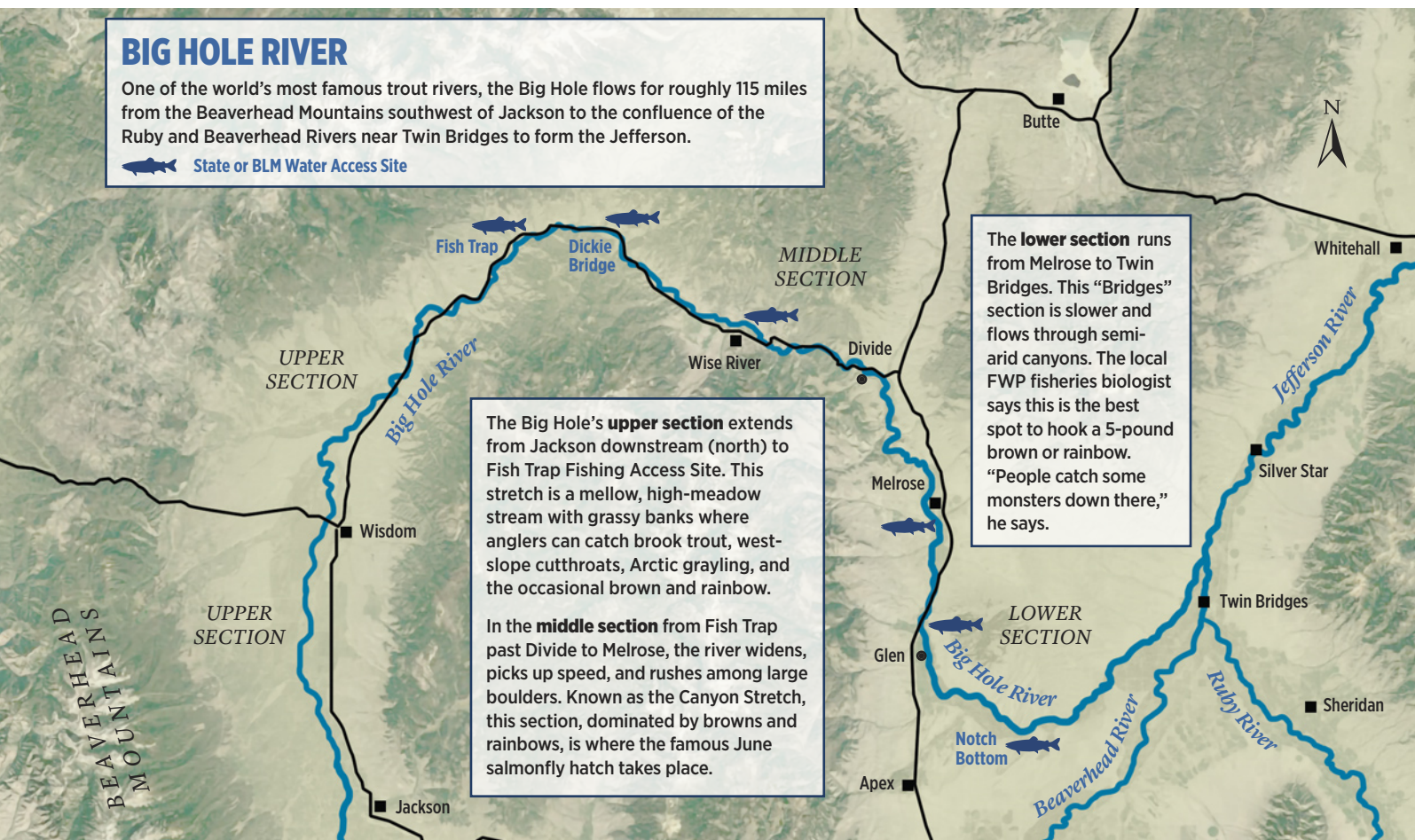
says. “But that’s only in a few streams.” Most of the time FWP has been able to manage both the rainbows and browns that anglers prize as well as the cutthroats and grayling that the Montana legislature mandated the department protect so they don’t become federally endangered.

The key to FWP’s management is tracking fish populations, using electrofishing and surveys of angler catches. “Rainbow numbers have almost doubled in the last few years from Glen downstream to Twin Bridges,” Olsen says. One reason may be the work FWP and cooperating landowners have done to boost water flows and restore spawning habitat on several Jefferson River tributaries. “We suspect that increasing numbers of rainbows are finding their way upriver from the Jeff to the Big Hole,” Olsen says.

In cooperation with the BHWC, FWP crews also protect and restore Big Hole spawning tributaries, which produce all of the water and most of the fish in the main river. One ranch in the valley that modernized its irrigation system now uses just 3 cubic feet per second (cfs) of tributary



**DELICATE JEWEL** The upper Big Hole holds the last population of fluvial (river-dwelling) Arctic grayling in the lower 48 states. Cooperative conservation agreements between the federal government and local landowners have kept enough water in the river to prevent extinction.



water instead of 15 cfs; the rest flows back to the Big Hole.

Another project restored a half-mile reach of French Creek. The project, championed by the Anaconda Sportsmen’s Club, re-routed the stream away from an area prone to bank erosion to one with abundant streamside vegetation and little erosion. The restoration benefited not only grayling and westslope cutthroats but also wildlife like moose and elk.

For westslope cutthroats, which occupy less than 6 percent of their historic habitat in the drainage, Olsen has focused on restoring headwater streams and lakes mainly in surrounding national forests. “Our goal is to get them reestablished in about 20 percent of their historic habitat,” he says. “We’re finding that the cutthroats are becoming more popular with high-country anglers because they are generally bigger

than brookies, and many anglers also like catching native fish in these small streams and headwater lakes.”

“Overall, they’ve increased somewhat in abundance. Given that they are a fish that lives almost exclusively on private streams, that’s very encouraging.”

#### AVERTING DOOM

The biggest fisheries challenge for Olsen and other coldwater conservationists in the Big Hole watershed is protecting Arctic grayling. The upper Big Hole holds the last remaining fluvial (river-dwelling) grayling population in the lower 48 states. Despite work by the BHWC and others, the drought

of the early 2000s appeared to doom the sail-finned salmonid. Then in 2006, Big Hole ranchers were given an opportunity to enter into federal Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAA) in

partnership with the state of Montana and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. In exchange for undertaking conservation measures, the agreements exempt landowners from several federal regulations in the future if grayling are listed as endangered. CCAA conservation measures include removing barriers blocking grayling migration, maintaining minimum river flows for fish survival, improving and protecting streamside habitat, and reducing the number of fish stranded in irrigation ditches, known as “entrainment.”

Olsen says the CCAs are helping stave off local grayling extinction, even in the face of warming temperatures due to climate change. “Overall, they’ve increased somewhat in abundance in the past few years,” he says. “Given that they are a fish that lives almost exclusively in streams running through private land, that’s very encouraging. It shows that fish conservation can be compatible with working landscapes.” In 2014, thanks in large part to landowner participation in CCAA water-conservation practices, the federal

LEFT TO RIGHT: LUKE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS; LISA BALLARD



**RESTORED TRIBUTARY** Above: On French Creek, a Big Hole River tributary, crews reconfigured 4,000 feet of stream channel away from an eroding hillside. They created new wetlands to store water and planted willows and other streamside vegetation that shades the water while providing browse for moose, elk, and other wildlife. Below: Landing a big rainbow near Wise River.

government deemed that listing the grayling was “not warranted,” Olsen adds.

**SHARED SACRIFICE**

Cooperation has also helped anglers, outfitters, and FWP manage increased fishing pressure and user conflict. Fueled in part by the popularity of the movie *A River Runs Through It*, fishing pressure on the Big Hole grew rapidly throughout the 1990s. During the famous salmonfly hatch in June, boats would crowd productive stretches, fraying tempers and degrading the experience of local anglers. After listening to outfitters, resident anglers, and local businesses, the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission restricted, on a rotating schedule, float fishing

by nonresident anglers and outfitters on certain sections of the Big Hole.

“It’s not perfect, but my dad was very much at the negotiating table, and he said, ‘Yeah, we need to sacrifice, too, and rotate our boats around, rest the river, and close sections,’” says Wade Fellin, co-owner with his father of the Big Hole Lodge.

Eric Thorson, co-owner of the Sunrise Fly Shop in Melrose, echoes the theme of individual sacrifice for the greater good that characterizes the Big Hole community. “The way that outfitters work to spread out the pressure makes a big difference,” Thorson says. “It takes a ton of coordination, but if that’s what we need to do to keep this river as it is, we’ll do it.” 🐾



TOP TO BOTTOM: BIG HOLE WATERSHED COMMITTEE; WADE FELLIN



**ALL TO THEMSELVES** On a rare day when few other boats create competition, three anglers fish the Canyon Stretch below Divide for browns and rainbows. During April, May, and early June, the upper river fishes best. But as water temperatures rise, many fish begin moving downstream and concentrate in the middle and lower sections. During fall, many fish move back upstream.

## Fishing the Big Hole through the Year

**Some dedicated anglers** are so desperate to fish the Big Hole they have been known to slide their boats over bankside ice as early as March, hoping to hit early hatches of *Skwala* stoneflies, midges, or *Baetis* mayflies.

As days lengthen and water levels rise, streamer fishing takes off. Eric Thorson, co-owner of the Sunrise Fly Shop in Melrose, likes to hit the upper river starting in April, fishing to the bank with streamers for big browns. He favors the Smoke ‘N’ Mirrors pattern tied by Dan Soltau of Dirty Water Fly Company. Traditional streamer patterns like Woolly Buggers work well, too, as longer daylight hours warm the water enough to wake up fish sluggish from winter’s near-freezing temperatures. Current lines along banks, side channels, and soft water at the head and tail of boulders are all smart spots to toss and strip streamers.

Spring is also a good time to fish for grayling on the upper river, when the small

salmonids are often looking up for early season mayflies and caddis flies. Anglers can’t go wrong using Adamses, PMDs or similar small dry flies.

The Mother’s Day caddis hatch happens in early May, when size 14 Grannom caddis start coming off. The fishing can be just as good as the Big Hole’s legendary salmonfly hatch, but with far less crowding.

That famous salmonfly action starts in late May or early June on the lower river and works its way up to Fish Trap Fishing Access Site above Wise River by late June. If you don’t mind competing with flotillas of boats, Thorson says you can try to fool big browns and rainbows into attacking oversized salmonfly imitations like the Sofa Pillow. Start at the Glen Bridge and working your way upriver, day by day, as the hatch progresses upstream.

Salmonflies—two-inch stoneflies—live most of their lives among large boulders in fast-moving rivers like the Big Hole, Madison, and upper



Sofa Pillow

Yellowstone.

One way to beat the salmonfly hordes is to fish early (from dawn to 9 a.m.) or late (from 6 p.m. to sundown). The major hatch doesn’t come off during those hours, but fish are often still looking up and will take a Chubby Chernobyl, Madam X, Kaufmann’s Stimula-

tor, or—a local fave—Cat Vomit dry fly flung toward the bank below overhanging willows. Yes, most fly patterns are named by men.

A popular combo fly that’s deadly before and after the hatch is the Turd and a Worm: a Pat’s Rubber Leg stonefly imitation with a San Juan Worm trailer.

Jim Olsen, FWP fisheries manager for the Big Hole, likes fishing the Sex Dungeon, a massive five-inch articulated



Sex Dungeon

streamer in olive and yellow invented by Kelly Galloup, of Madison River fame. “My favorite thing about the fly is it has a bright head that I can see under the water,” Olsen says. “So you get the heart-pounding thrill of seeing a brown trout come out from under a willow bush and chase after your fly.”



Cat Vomit

Most anglers fish the Big Hole from boats, but the river definitely is wadeable in its upper reaches and near the bank farther down, where it can be accessed from FWP fishing access sites. The water can be swift and the rocks slippery, so consider using a wading staff and cleated wading boots.

After the salmonfly hatch tails off, so does some of the boat traffic. During July and August and into the fall, the middle and lower Big Hole produce steady hatches of other insects and dependable fishing for all species. Many trout from the upper river move downstream to the cooler water in late summer, increasing fish

densities just as surface action on terrestrial insects like grasshoppers, ants, and beetles picks up. This is also when spruce moths, matched by a gray size 14 caddis (though hard to see, CDC caddis patterns are especially effective), start fluttering on the water surface.

Elk Hair Caddis



The tiny black-bodied Trico mayflies start coming off in mid-August and last through mid-September. Trout begin looking up to the surface starting at about 9 a.m., as the “spinners”—Tricos that died after mating in midair, not the

bright-bladed lures—drop to the water surface. When fall arrives, anglers transition back to streamers for big browns, which go on a feeding binge when water temperatures cool.

Unlike the Missouri below Holter Dam and other tailwater fisheries, the Big Hole becomes too cold to fish in winter and freezes over except in a few major rapids. Consider winter a season that gives both fish and anglers a well-deserved couple of months rest.