

Boosting opportunities for warm-weather fun



Milltown State Park's delightful river frontage

The first warm days of spring always send me daydreaming about the best ways to spend time outdoors in the months ahead. Pretty soon I'm sitting at my calendar planning adventures, which for my family often begin with a visit to an FWP fishing access site (FAS) to enjoy one of Montana's many incredible lakes and rivers.

The iconic signs that mark those sites never fail to make me smile—in part because the classic logo is a fish biting an *unbaited* hook—and because of how it welcomes you in to stop and explore.

I now also experience a rush of pride since I was appointed as FWP director almost a year and a half ago. I drive a lot for my job, and I'm amazed that no matter where my travels take me in the state, I seem to pass a dozen or more FAS signs along the way. We have 350 of these sites spread across the state, and once they open to the public, they instantly become a treasured spot to generations of Montanans.

And we need more of them. The closer I get to our cities, the fuller FAS parking lots become. One of our priorities is finding opportunities to work with private landowners and public agencies to open new entry points in the “access deserts” along Montana rivers, where there are long stretches without a public put-in. Governor Greg Gianforte made this a priority well before I started as director. Working with the Montana Legislature, he has helped set aside millions of dollars in state funding so we can move quickly when a good opportunity arises.

Last summer FWP partnered with the Bureau of Land Management to open the Redwater FAS at the confluence of the Missouri and Redwater rivers south of Poplar. It includes a boat ramp, parking and picnic areas, and great fishing right from the riverbank. The coolest part to me, though, is that it creates a new

public portal into an 80-mile stretch of river that previously had no spot to actually access the water.

FWP is also searching for new ways to expand existing sites to help ease crowding. The Sha-Ron FAS in East Missoula is plenty popular with anglers, but in the heat of summer you'll see 100 inner tubes for every fishing rod in the hands of those who come there to access the Clark Fork River. Over the past two decades it grew so popular that on some days the parking overflowed down the sides of Highway 200 for hundreds of yards in either direction, creating a dangerous situation for pedestrians and an annoyance to neighbors.

In response, FWP worked with Missoula County, the Montana Department of Transportation, and others to build a new parking lot with additional river access east of Sha-Ron. Since opening in 2023, it has helped relieve crowding on busy days.

Fishing accesses are just one of many ways FWP is working to increase the options for public recreation sites across the state. Less than three miles away from Sha-Ron, FWP opened the 635-acre Milltown State Park in 2018, which includes several miles of river frontage right at the confluence of the Clark Fork and Blackfoot rivers. It also protects diverse habitats including restored river bottoms, mature cottonwood stands (read more about those on page 20), and a forested bluff that's great for viewing spring wildflowers (see page 11).

All this makes me happy. I understand the deep pride that FWP's northwestern region parks manager David Landstrom feels when he sees the public enjoying our state lands, which he writes about on page 5 of this issue. He's busy working on some exciting new access opportunities near Kalispell, and I can't wait to see the smiles those places will bring.

—Christy Clark, Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks