

BIG

(AND PLENTIFUL)

FISH ON THE PRAIRIE



Some anglers say there's no decent fishing east of Great Falls and Billings. Here are nine angling hotspots that say they're wrong (or lying)

BY ANDREW MCKEAN

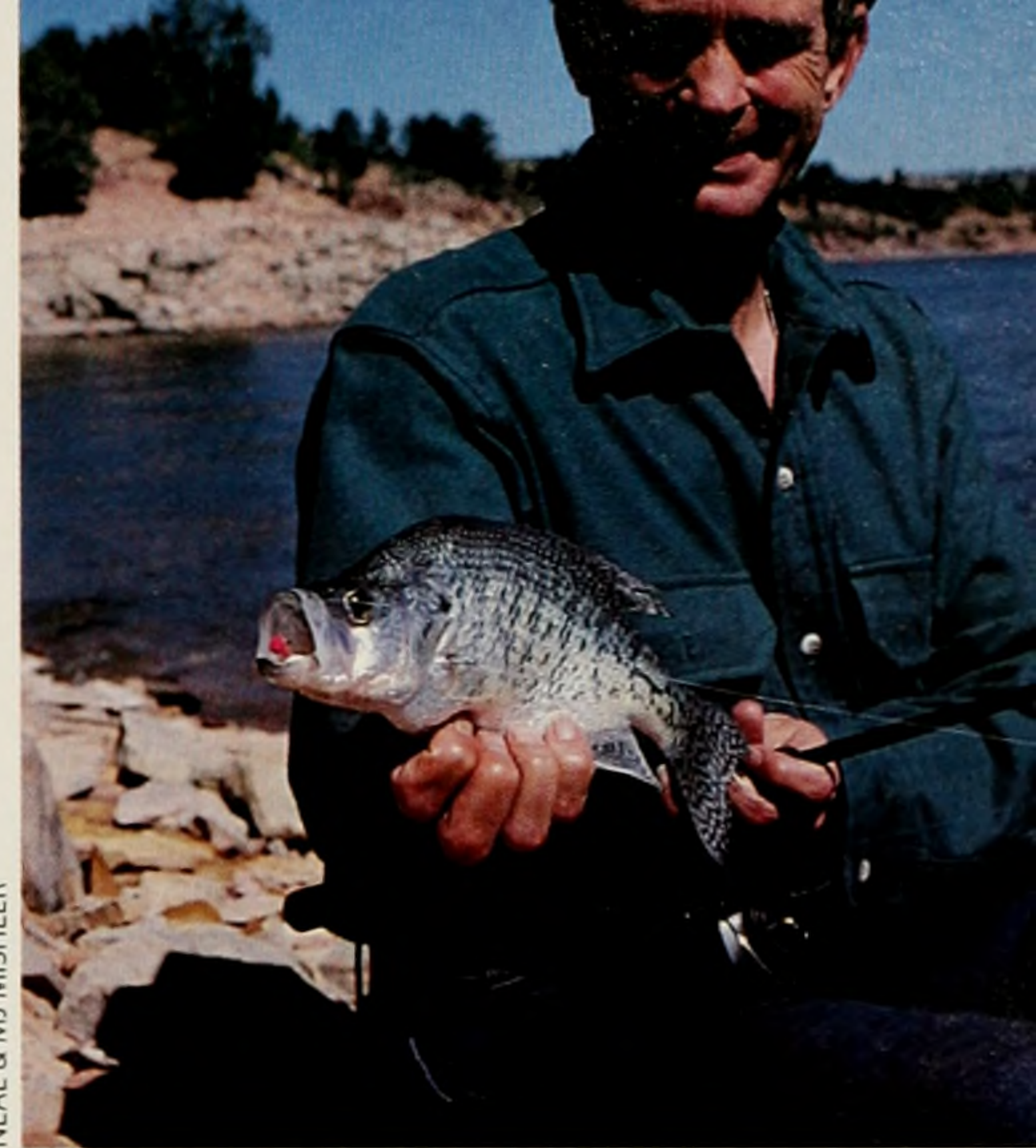
PITY THOSE WHO FISH IN EASTERN MONTANA. The flat, arid region offers few natural lakes, which, due to winterkill and drought, rarely hold fish for more than a few years. Reservoir fishing can be decent when there's water, but that hasn't been the case lately. The big, muddy rivers produce some good fishing, if you can handle the mosquitoes. But why would an angler want to risk catching something that looks like a living fossil, a fish that grubs the bottom with its hideous mouth and creepy, wormlike whiskers? A waste of perfectly good bait.

No wonder you seldom see eastern Montana featured on the cover of fishing magazines.

Fact is, most local anglers are happy to keep it that way. Eastern Montana's little secret is that, despite its reputation to the contrary, it offers some phenomenal fishing: scrappy smallmouth bass, trophy walleyes, tasty channel catfish, bench-sized paddlefish, prehistoric sturgeon, and more, including one of the nation's top trout fisheries.

In some waters you can catch a dozen or more different warmwater species. Others are famous for producing state records. All are places that will surprise anglers who think of Montana fishing only in terms of trout rising to mayflies on freestone rivers with snow-capped mountains in the background.

Here, then, are nine great fishing holes in the state's prairie region, listed in no particular order (and with apologies to eastern Montana anglers who thought they had these great spots all to themselves):



NEAL & MJ MISHLER

NOTHING LIKE THIS IN THE MADISON:

Looking for crappies and other tasty panfish? Load the family into the car and start driving east. Don't forget a fillet knife.

1 THE CONFLUENCE OF THE MARIAS, TETON, AND MISSOURI RIVERS

ONE OF THE FISHIEST SPOTS IN MONTANA sits beneath the khaki bluffs around Loma, 50 miles northeast of Great Falls along Montana Highway 87. This is where the Marias and Teton Rivers wed, run together for less than a mile, and then join the Missouri.

The knob overlooking the confluence, Decision Point, is one of Montana's historic crossroads. For nearly a week in June 1805, Lewis and Clark camped near here and debated whether the Marias (then swollen with runoff) or the Missouri was the real route to the Pacific Ocean.

Today the Marias is controlled by Tiber Dam, 35 miles upstream, which keeps the river flowing at just a fraction of the Missouri's rate, even after runoff. The Corps of Discovery leaders struggled here to find the Northwest Passage. Visitors to the site today mainly struggle over which of dozens of fish species to pursue and what bait or lure to use.

Decisions, decisions.

"Confluence areas are always rich, biologically speaking," says Bill Gardner, local FWP fisheries biologist. "We have documented 47 species in that area. That's about as rich as it gets in Montana."

The confluence is one of the best spots in Montana to catch a shovelnose sturgeon (the aforementioned "living fossil"). Plan a trip here in late May, when thousands of the mud brown, shark-tailed fish push up the Marias in search of spawning gravel. Though strange looking, these prehistoric relics are strong as salmon and taste wonderful. (The endangered pallid sturgeon also swims here, so anglers should learn to tell the two species apart.)

May is also the time to catch sauger, a cousin of perch, which Gardner says migrates up the Missouri for more than 100 miles to spawn on the tributary's gravel bars. Bonus fish for springtime anglers are goldeye—a scrappy species delectable when smoked—as well as channel cats, northern pike, walleyes, smallmouth bass, and

even resident brown and rainbow trout.

"Fishing the confluence can be a little like Christmas," says Gardner, who recommends fishing a plain old worm on the bottom for most species here. "You never know what you're going to get."

Other catchable fish include redhorse, longnose suckers, bigmouth and smallmouth buffaloes, river carspsuckers, freshwater drum, stonecats, and carp.

"One of the noteworthy things about fishing at the confluence is how many people come here from elsewhere in Montana," says Gardner. "I have friends from Missoula and Bozeman who make an annual trip just to get their warmwater fishing fix. This is about the closest place where western Montana anglers can have consistently good fishing for species that don't exist where they live."



GARY LEPPART

WARMWATER GRAB BAG: Where the Marias, Teton, and Missouri Rivers meet, anglers can be sure of only one thing—they will have no idea what fish species is attached to the end of their line.

2 BEAVER CREEK PARK

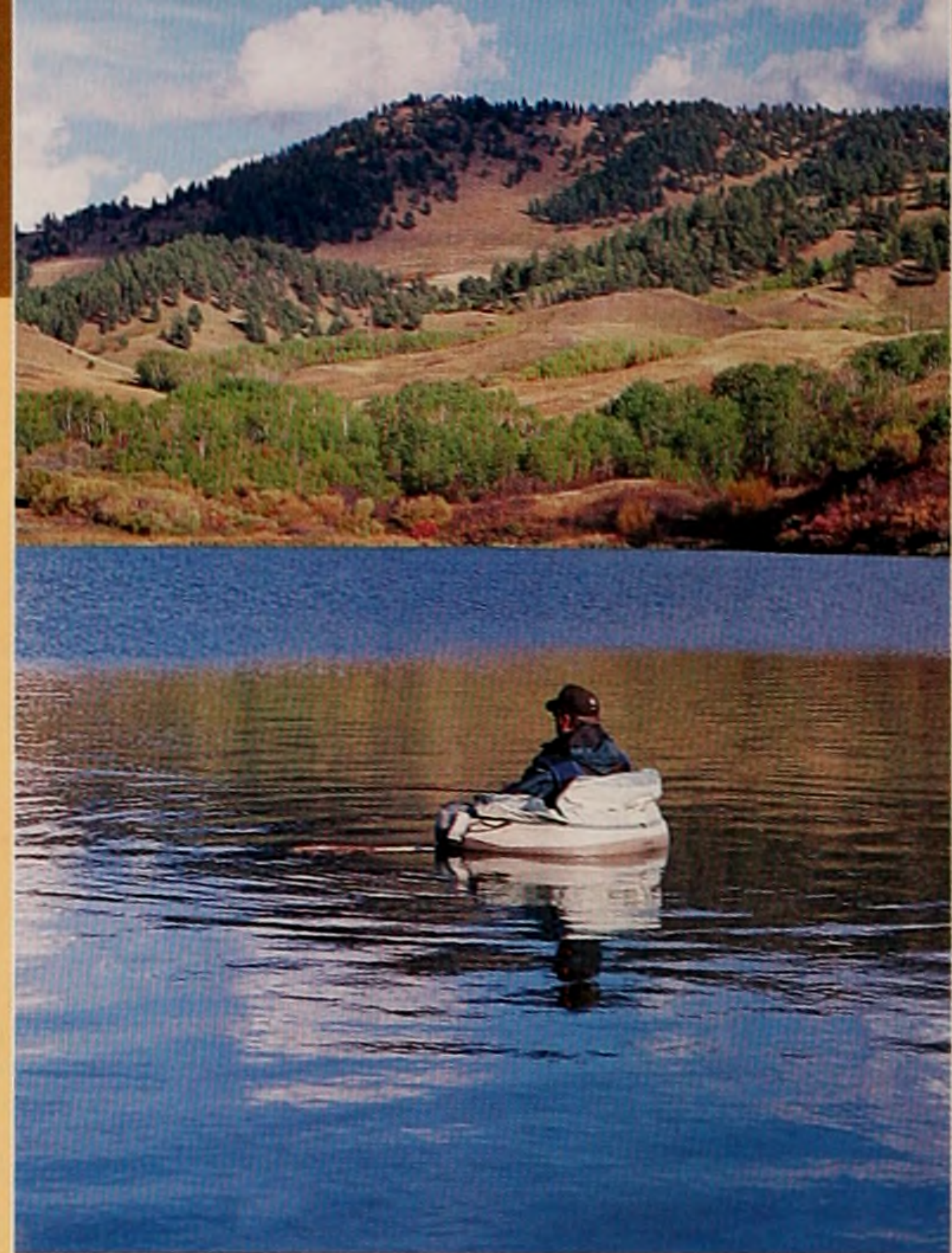
WHERE CAN YOU TROLL spinner rigs for walleyes one minute and then cast dry flies for cutthroat trout the next? In one of the nation's largest county parks, just south of Havre.

"People are always surprised they have this variety, and that it's almost all on public land," says FWP fisheries biologist Kent Gilge of the fishing in Hill County's Beaver Creek Park. "You can start at the head of the park up in the Bear Paw Mountains and fish for brookies, then fish for Yellowstone cutthroats, rainbow trout, and smallmouth bass in Bear Paw Lake (known locally as Upper Lake), then catch rainbows and browns in the middle section of Beaver Creek. A little farther downstream, Beaver Creek Reservoir (known locally as Lower Lake) has pike, smallmouth bass, and all the perch you want to catch, plus good numbers of

walleye and rainbow trout."

The abundant fish grow large here, too. "We've caught walleye up to 15 pounds in our sampling nets," says Gilge. "And that was in the fall, when the females didn't have eggs. With all the crayfish and perch in Beaver Creek Reservoir, the walleye and smallmouth are in great shape."

To reach the 10,000-acre Beaver Creek Park, head south from Havre on Route 234 roughly 10 miles until you reach the foothills of the Bear Paw Mountains. The visitor center is another 10 miles into the park. Entrance fee is \$5 per day per car. Bring a tent for overnight stays; the park offers more than 100 campsites available year-round. But boats aren't necessary. There's plenty of creek to walk, and anglers can fish effectively from shore at either lake. Call the Beaver Creek Park office at (406) 395-4565 for details.



CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM

QUIET CASTING: A fly angler fishes from a float tube in Bear Paw Lake. To maintain the peaceful setting, no motors are allowed here, so the only way to ply the depths is from a float tube or canoe. Downstream, Beaver Creek Reservoir does allow boats, but the park imposes a 10-horsepower limit and a no-wake regulation.

3 NELSON RESERVOIR

THEY OUGHT TO CALL IT LUNKER LAKE, because more state record fish have been caught in this prairie reservoir east of Malta than in Fort Peck Reservoir, Flathead Lake, or anywhere else in Montana.

Bear in mind, the species caught in Nelson Reservoir don't exactly trip off the tongue of most Montana anglers. The record behemoths include the bigmouth buffalo (57.75 pounds), carp (40.20), goldeye (3.18), smallmouth buffalo (32.63), and white sucker (5.33)—not

exactly travel-brochure species. But for anglers who want to catch lunkers, and especially those after a state record, this fish factory merits attention.

"Nelson is very, very productive," says FWP biologist

Kent Gilge. "It's the end of the line for the entire Dodson South Canal system, so it functions as a nutrient sink. All that irrigation return water, which tends to be high in organics and nutrients, ends up in Nelson. Because it's not on a live stream, those nutrients aren't flushed out, so they sit there and grow fish."

The reservoir holds northern pike, yellow perch, walleyes (including, at one time, the state record), and the occasional crappie, but most of the species in Nelson are classified as rough fish, which means a species that has no limits and can be caught year-round.

Rough fish are rarely targeted by anglers, so advice on catching these species is hard to come by.

According to Rob Buffler, a national rough fishing expert, intentionally catching a bigmouth buffalo is nearly impossible because the fish are pelagic feeders that swim through the water column with their mouth open, straining zooplankton in their gill rakers.

"They could be anywhere in the lake," says Buffler.

Carp and smallmouth buffalo, on the other hand, can be caught on the bottom, often near shore in early summer. Buffler recommends light (6-pound-test) line and small baits, such as maggots or a piece of nightcrawler, on small (size 8) bait-holder hooks. Corn or small balls made of dough also work well. He also says carp can be taken on white dry flies such as a small White Wulff. The fly resembles cottonwood seed fluff, which in early summer blows across the lake surface and attracts carp, which eat the seeds.

Andrew McKean is an FWP regional information officer in Glasgow.

SMALLMOUTH BUFFALO BY ERIC ENGBRETSON



4 THE MOUTH OF THE MILK RIVER

ANOTHER CONFLUENCE RICH in fishing opportunities is where the serpentine Milk meets the huge Missouri southeast of Nashua, just a few miles downstream of Fort Peck Dam. Channel catfish are plentiful here throughout the summer, but those who hit the multi-species spawning runs in late April through mid-June might also catch a shovelnose sturgeon, sauger, walleye, northern pike, or one of the many overlooked native nongame fish species, such as the rare blue sucker.

“The remarkable thing about the Milk River is that it’s a relatively intact ecosystem, considering the severe irrigation withdrawals, at least for the first hundred miles or so upstream from the mouth until you hit Vandalia Dam near Hinsdale,” says Bill Wiedenheft, FWP fisheries manager for northeastern Montana. “The water out of Fort Peck Dam is cold and relatively clear, but most of the fish in the lower Missouri evolved in warm, turbid water, and they still find that in the Milk. It’s one of the most important spawning tributaries on the lower Missouri.”

JAN FINGER/REDPINE



THE CAT’S MEOW: Where the Milk meets the Missouri is one of the best spots in Montana to catch channel catfish. The powerful and tasty fish are easily distinguished from round-tailed bullheads by their deeply forked tail. Catfish stick near the bottom, where they will take any number of baits. The often-aggressive fish will also chase crankbaits, jigs, and even Woolly Buggers and other streamer flies.

5 FORT PECK RESERVOIR

ITS WALLEYE FISHERY IS NATIONALLY KNOWN, but Fort Peck Reservoir’s superb smallmouth bass angling is a secret shared by relatively few anglers. The state record smallie, which weighed 6.66 pounds, was caught in Fort Peck last summer, and biologists say they’re sure larger ones swim in the 240,000-acre reservoir.

“We’ve been stocking smallmouth bass on and off since 1981, and every year since 1993,” says Mike Ruggles, FWP’s Fort Peck fisheries biologist. “They’ve done very, very well here. They’re nesters, so they tend to have higher natural production than walleye, which lay their eggs and then leave.”

Ruggles adds that silt will often cover and suffocate walleye eggs in Fort Peck, but smallmouth eggs survive much better because the adult fish continually sweep the silt off with their fins.

What’s more, smallmouth bass are more suited than walleyes to the way the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers manages water levels in the reservoir.

“In May, when walleye spawn, the Corps is releasing water, which lowers water levels in the reservoir and can expose their eggs to air,” Ruggles says. “But by June, when the bass are nesting, the Corps keeps water levels somewhat consistent, so those eggs aren’t as likely to be exposed.”

Smallmouth bass are a highly regarded sport fish in much of the United States, though less so in the trout-minded West. The pugnacious bass attack lures with abandon and fight like a roped steer.

The best smallie fishing spots at Fort Peck are between Rock Creek and McGuire Creek in the upper Big Dry Arm, along the face of the dam, and farther west along rocky points from Hell

JEFF HENRY/ROCHEJAUNE PICTURES



NO BOAT NEEDED: Fort Peck Reservoir is one of the nation’s top spots for smallmouth bass shore fishing. Try Rock Creek, the dam face, the breakwater, or any public dock (above). Crankbaits and jigs work well, as do small minnows and leeches. The shore fishing is good throughout the summer, says FWP’s biologist for the reservoir.

Creek to Devils Creek. Cast minnow-imitating crankbaits or surface plugs, jig along submerged rock piles, or troll a spinner rig baited with a worm or leech. Smallmouth fishing is good throughout the summer, though earlier is better. Don’t be surprised to hook a walleye, because both species ingest the same baits and lures.



CHUCK HANEY

6

MEDICINE LAKE NWR

Rabenberg says the lake averages only 6 feet deep, making it susceptible to winterkill, which occurs when thick ice and snow prevent sunlight from reaching underwater aquatic plants. When the plants die, they decompose and use up oxygen, suffocating many of the pike.

“We lost our fish in the winter of 1996-97, and then restocked in 1998,” he says. “We’ve had no winterkill since then, and we’re continuing to stock pike, so this year we should be seeing some nice fish in the 4- to 6-pound range.”

Plan a trip for May, when spawning pike are in weedy shallows or concentrated near any moving water in canals and water-control structures. Cast topwater lures, spinnerbaits, spoons, or crankbaits. Flyrodders can do well casting a big Dahlberg Diver and then stripping in the fly quickly.

Most of Medicine Lake is a federally managed wilderness, so only nonmotorized boats and ice augers are allowed here. Also note that the lake is closed to all recreational use from September 15 through November 15, during the fall waterfowl flight. For more information, call the wildlife refuge at (406) 789-2305 or check its website: <http://medicinelake.fws.gov>.

A PLACE PIKE LIKE: Northern pike were stocked in Medicine Lake to eat carp, which can muddy shallow lakes by rooting bottoms for food. The pike thrive in the fertile water and are now reaching 6 pounds.

THERE’S RARELY ANY DOUBT about what’s on the end of your line if you’re fishing Medicine Lake, in Montana’s extreme northeastern corner. It’s almost always a northern pike.

This prairie lake south of Plentywood is one of the most productive nesting sites for waterfowl in Montana. The cattails, weedy islands, and shallow-water sloughs that attract mallards and geese are also well-suited to pike. The toothy predators were first stocked in this lake, part of the Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge, in the late 1960s to reduce numbers of carp, according to Mike Rabenberg, deputy refuge manager.

7

LOWER YELLOWSTONE RIVER

GEOGRAPHERS SOMETIMES ARGUE over whether the Missouri River is a tributary of the Yellowstone River or the other way around. For most of the year near the confluence, it’s a toss-up. Both rivers are huge and moody, sculpting sand bars and carving channels. But in the springtime, when the Yellowstone roars with runoff that fell as snow on the nation’s first national park to the southwest, it appears to be the mother stream.

That runoff triggers one of the strangest spawning runs in North America, as gigantic paddlefish in North Dakota’s Lake Sakakawea swim against the chocolate-colored current in search of gravel bars. The first barrier they meet on the Yellowstone is the Lower Yellowstone Diversion Dam at Intake, 13 miles northeast of Glendive, where snaggers await.

Prehistoric throwbacks, paddlefish can grow to over 100 pounds, so 60-pound-test line and stout rods resembling pool cues are required. Experienced snaggers sweep the water with a fist-sized treble hook in the hopes of slamming it into the side of a paddlefish. Then the real work begins. Lugging one to shore can take a half-hour or more.

Though it sounds unsporting, snagging is the only way to catch paddlefish. Because the fish feed on tiny zooplankton they strain from water with gill rakers, they don’t go after traditional lures or baits. Biologists say snagging hooks usually catch the fish in the fins or tail and likely cause the paddlefish no more stress than if the fish were hooked in the mouth by traditional angling methods.

If snagging lacks appeal or seems like too much work, try jigging a minnow for sauger or drowning a worm for channel catfish. The fishing for both species is good from Glendive to the North Dakota line.



SMALLMOUTH BASS BY ERIC ENGBRETSON

WARMWATER FISHING BASICS

Anglers accustomed only to freestone stream trout can be intimidated by a muddy, warmwater prairie river. Which species swim here? Where do you fish? What do you use? When’s the best time?

The answers to all four can be learned quickly at local bait shops. There you can find out what’s hitting, which baits and lures work best, and any other noteworthy information, such as where private land isn’t clearly marked.

However, before walking in the door and coming across as a complete warmwater greenhorn, here are the basics:

SPECIES: Reservoirs and warmwater rivers have greater species diversity than trout rivers. Often it’s hard to target a specific fish, such as a walleye, and not catch any number of other species, such as drum.

WHERE TO FISH: Here the strategy is similar to that for trout, though warmwater species generally hold in slower water than trout do. Fish current seams, eddies, and the dropoffs below riffles.

WHAT TO USE: The bread-and-butter warmwater rig is a spinning rod and reel, 6-pound-test line, a size 8 bait-holder hook tipped with half a nightcrawler, and a small split shot pinched on about a foot above the hook. Toss the offering into the current, and let it drift along a seam and rest on the river bottom. Keep the bail open and your finger on the line. Wait until you feel a tap. Let the fish take the bait for three or four seconds. Flip the bail, and slowly reel until you feel tension. Set the hook, and then start looking for your net.

—Tom Dickson



8

BIGHORN RIVER

THE MOST PRODUCTIVE TROUT FISHERY in Montana is miles from the nearest snow-capped peak or stately stand of fir. The Bighorn River, which holds roughly 6,000 trout per mile, flows through the arid scabland south of Hardin. Though a world-class trout fishery, this stretch of the river looks more like a place to catch sauger, suckers, and catfish, which was actually the case not too long ago.

“Before Yellowtail Dam was finished in 1966, this was a slow, meandering prairie stream with strictly a warmwater fishery,” says FWP fisheries biologist Ken Frazer. The dam pools the river in the limestone canyon south into Wyoming. Trout, at first stocked and now reproducing naturally, thrive in the water released from the bottom of the dam, which is consistently cool, clear, and rich in productive minerals.

“In terms of producing biomass, the Bighorn is one of the most productive streams in the United States, but it’s in a part of Montana that just doesn’t look anything like trout country,” says Frazer.

That doesn’t seem to bother anglers, who crowd the upper 13 miles of the river below the dam and fish—primarily with fly gear—to catch brown and rainbow trout that average 15 to 19 inches long. In terms of angling pressure per mile, the Bighorn is one of the busiest fisheries in Montana.

“Historically it’s been predominantly a brown trout fishery,” says Frazer, “but that’s changing. In the early 1980s, the ratio of browns to rainbows was about nine to one. Now it’s more like three to one, and I’m guessing that when we emerge from this drought cycle, rainbows may come out on top. In this river, they seem to handle low water better than the browns do.”

DARREN JOE IRONS

THICK WITH THICK TROUT: So productive is the Bighorn River trout fishery that first-time anglers often stand dumbstruck in the water looking down at the 18-inch browns finning in their wake. Even bigger (though relatively fewer) trout lurk downstream of Saint Xavier.

9 TONGUE RIVER RESERVOIR

FOR SOME FOLKS, A MEMORIAL DAY without fishing Tongue River Reservoir is like an Independence Day without fireworks. The anglers are after crappies, and the spring holiday weekend is traditionally the “official” start of the panfish action at the reservoir, located just north of the Wyoming border, 100 miles southeast of Billings.

However, the crappies start biting much earlier. In April, as ice leaves the reservoir, the fish come shallow to spawn on submerged vegetation and rock piles.

Early in the season, you can catch fish from a boat or from shore. The hands-down favorite bait-lure combination is a crappie jig tipped with a small minnow, though a worm below a bobber will work, too, and some boaters do well trolling small spinners or tiny minnow imitations. Though crappies are the most common catch at Tongue River Reservoir, and limits of fish are filled regularly, anglers also pick up plenty of smallmouth bass, walleyes, catfish, and carp.

By July, the panfish are scattered and suspended over deep water, so they can be hard to catch. If you come in the summer, try targeting bass, walleyes, or catfish instead. 🐟

CHILD’S PLAY: Like so many fisheries across eastern Montana, the Tongue River Reservoir consistently provides great fishing even for the Snoopy rod crowd.



TIM EGAN