

TROUT



JOHN FRALEY

ABOVE THE CLOUDS

Tips on finding and catching trout in Montana's scenic mountain lakes

By John Fraley

ONE OF THE MAIN reasons I love high-mountain lakes—besides the scenery, wildness, and solitude—is that anglers of any age can often catch beautiful trout using simple fishing techniques. At times, even a young, novice angler can feel like an expert.

Some say high-mountain trout are dumb. I wouldn't go that far, but I will admit they can be naive. Once, while fishing along the shoreline of a remote lake in the Great Bear Wilderness, I watched a 13-inch cutthroat leap out of the water and grab a lure dan-



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■ LOCATING GREAT LAKES

Left over from my college years at the University of Montana is a tattered remnant of an early edition of *The Montanans' Fishing Guide*, written by my hydrology professor, Dick Konizeski. Back then, in the early 1970s, my friends and I would pore over the book, figuring out which lakes to fish and how to get there. The western Montana volume, now completely updated and revised by Bill and Michele Archie, is still the most complete single source of information on fishing Montana mountain lakes. (A separate edition for east of the Continental Divide was updated by Jim Derleth in 1982).

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is another great source for mountain trout lake information. The department's regional offices provide lists of alpine lakes and the planting schedule for the lakes that receive hatchery fish. (On the Internet, go to fwp.state.mt.us, click on "Fishing" and then "Fish Stocking Info.") In northwestern Montana, the popular list includes 125 lakes periodically stocked with westslope cutthroat trout.

Stocked lakes aren't necessarily the best fishing waters. Many lakes where trout naturally reproduce provide excellent fishing. Also, just because a lake was stocked in spring doesn't mean it will have lots of hungry fish when you arrive there in August. Some lakes are stocked with catchable (7- to 11-inch) fish, but most are stocked with fingerlings or even mosquito-sized fry, which won't be interested in anglers' offerings for at least a year or two.

A good way to find an alpine lake for fishing is to scan a topographic map of an area you plan to visit. After locating some

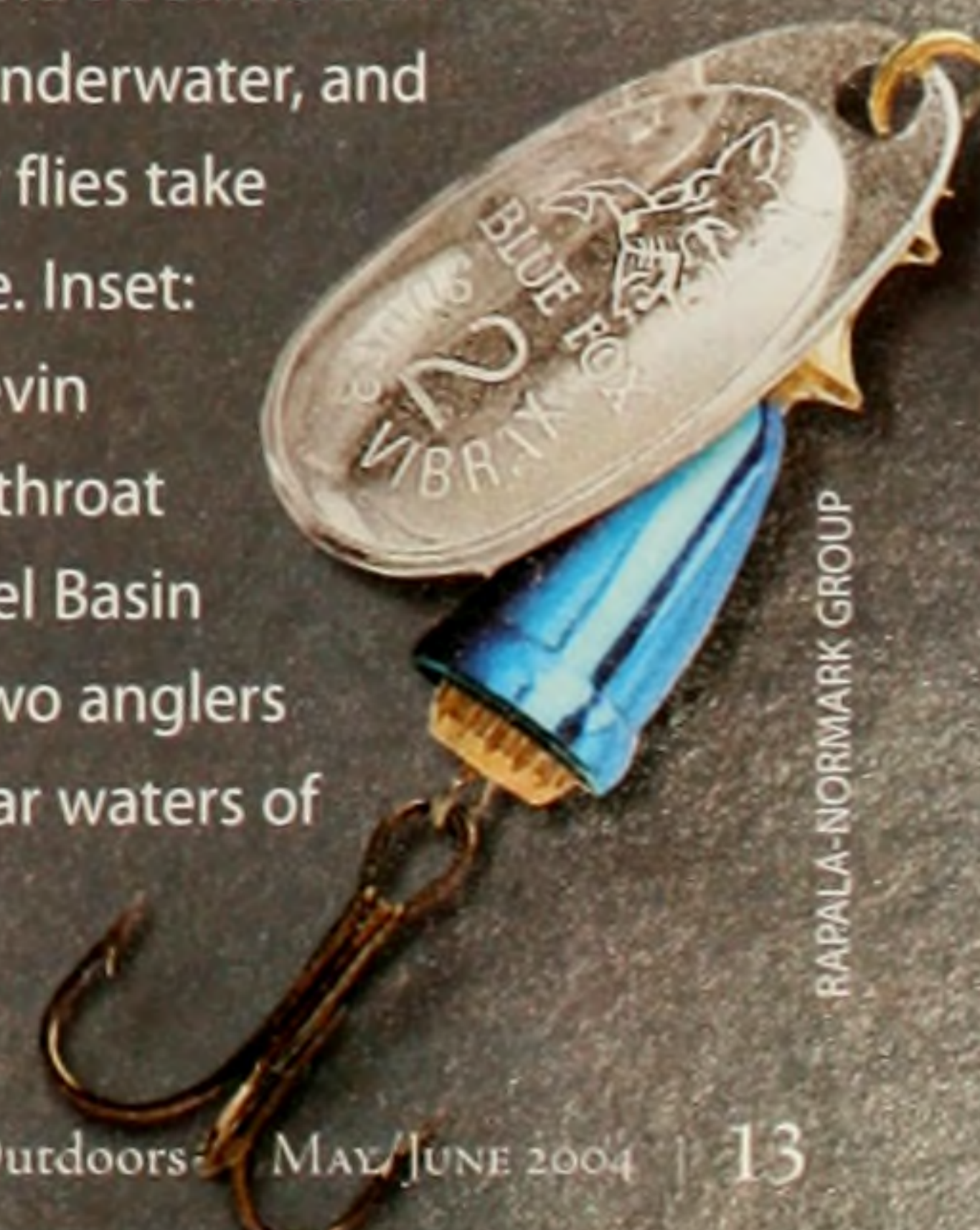
gling from a friend's fishing rod. And I've often seen high-country cutthroat strike at bobbers and casting bubbles.

More than 1,000 mountain lakes in Montana support productive trout fisheries, mostly in the state's central and western regions. Most of these alpine lakes have self-supporting trout fisheries; the rest are stocked periodically. Mountain lakes contain primarily cutthroat, rainbow, and brook trout, though some hold arctic grayling and even golden trout. The majority of the fish caught are under 12 inches, but

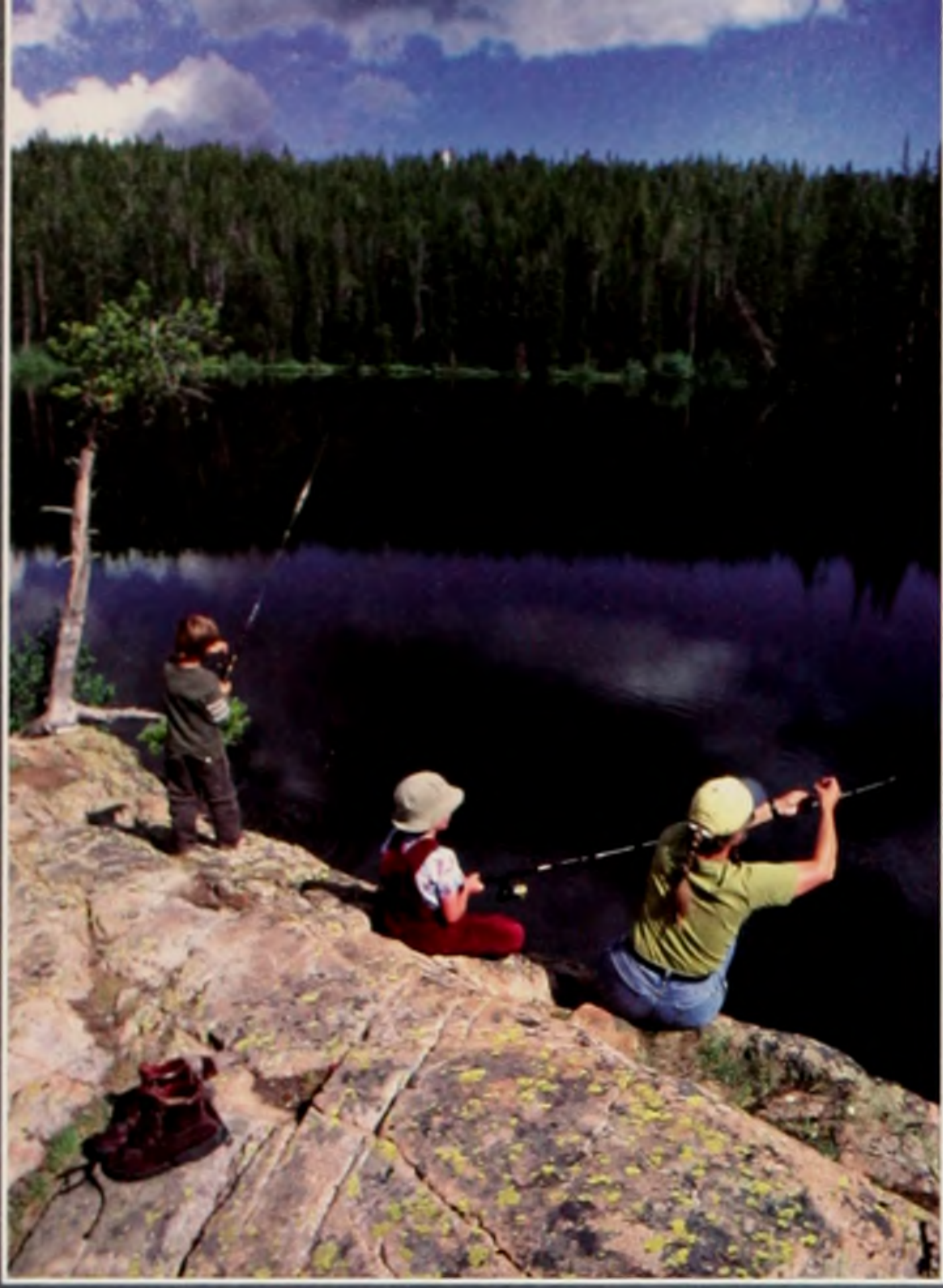
large mountain trout over 20 inches are caught every year.

Alpine trout lakes are extremely popular with anglers who have the time and energy to hike, one of the few ways to reach these remote waters. But hiking to a mountain lake doesn't necessarily mean you'll catch fish there. If you want to add to your wilderness experience by catching and eating this high-mountain soul food, you need to know where to go, when to go, and which fishing gear and techniques to use.

RARELY FUSSY When it comes to lures and flies, high-country trout aren't too finicky. Spinners, spoons, and streamers all work equally well underwater, and a wide range of dry flies take trout on the surface. Inset: The author's son Kevin with a 4-pound cutthroat at a lake in the Jewel Basin Hiking Area. Left: Two anglers cast flies on the clear waters of Fairy Lake.



PAPALA-NORMARK GROUP



JEFF HENRY

WEATHER OR NOT When the sun shines, fishing from a warm rock on a mountain lake can be the most pleasant fishing experience in Montana. But the weather often runs foul at high altitudes, and snow is not uncommon even in midsummer. Backcountry anglers should always prepare for cold, wet conditions. Bottom: Originally from California, rare golden trout can be caught in several Montana mountain lakes.



JIM HERRLY



JOHN FRALEY

potential lakes, you have several options: look them up in *The Montanans' Fishing Guide*, in other reference books, or on FWP lists; ask local anglers or the local FWP biologist about the lake; check with a nearby fly shop or sporting goods store; or just hike in and hope the lake supports fish.

The most valuable tips come from someone who has recently fished the lake you plan to visit. A lake that fished well for you last year may be a dud this year. Most high-quality trout lakes have a reputation that's hard to hide, so by asking around you can usually find ones worth the effort. The best lakes require a long and difficult hike, which prevents them from being overfished.

It helps to be flexible and ready to take off at a moment's notice. When the mysterious set of climatic conditions comes together to produce hot fishing in a mountain lake, take advantage of it. Last fall, an angler whose opinion I trust told me he had recently caught many trout in a wilderness lake I previously had visited. Immediately, I began planning a trip there with my son, a friend, and his son for the next day we were all free. Sure enough, we had great fishing from the first cast, catching roughly 200 westslope cutthroat (nearly all of which we released) in just four hours.

That's not to say every hot tip plays out. Mountain lake fishing often earns its fickle reputation. So be sure to enjoy the hike, scenery, solitude, and huckleberries when you head up to a "sure thing," because many times that is all you are going to get.

■ SLIM SEASON

Weather dictates the fishing season at alpine lakes. In most years, June through October is ice-free, but you can't count on that. Once in mid-October, I hiked into a lake in the Great Bear Wilderness to fish for cutthroat trout and was disappointed to find it covered with an inch of clear ice. At the other end of the season, many higher lakes are still frozen over in June. That's why the most reliable time to fish high-mountain lakes is from July through September. Often, September can be the best month, because trout react to

declining water temperatures by feeding vigorously in order to build fat reserves to get them through the winter.

For the hard-core skier or snowshoer, there's always the obscure sport of high-elevation ice fishing. But you need to consider a few things before strapping an auger onto your back and heading out. First, remember that it will take a lot longer to get to the lake in the winter than it did during the summer, and you should prepare for extreme winter weather. Also, the access road may be snowed in, which means you may have to park farther from the trailhead. Finally, based on my experience, a typical ice auger will not be long enough to drill through the ice and reach the water. Usually after you've made your hole you still have to find a log and smash through several feet of soft ice and slush.

■ GET YOUR ACT TOGETHER

Backpacker's anxiety is the worried feeling on the first day of a backpacking trip that you have forgotten something important. One solution to this common malady is to prepare for your mountain lake trip a week in advance. Get everything loaded in your pack as if you were leaving the next day. Then you have the next several days to locate items you forgot to pack or couldn't find the first time.

As on any backcountry trip, take an emergency kit containing a flashlight, fire starter, rope, knife, rain gear, survival blanket, and high-energy food. And don't go without a good map and a compass.

It's great having a secret lake, but you don't want it to be so secret that no one can find you if you run into trouble. Always tell someone exactly where you are going and when you will be back. If you plan to stay overnight, take a tight tent and a warm sleeping bag, because it can be cold in the high country even in summer.

■ HOW TO CATCH TROUT

There are no surefire guidelines for fishing mountain lakes. Sometimes the fish are deep. Sometimes they are shallow, cruising the shoreline. Sometimes it seems they are in neither location. If I had to pick one place on a mountain lake where I consis-

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tently catch trout, however, it would be where a tributary stream flows in.

Fishing gear depends on your preferences. Fly fishing on alpine lakes can be spectacular. Often you can cast to a visible rising or cruising fish and watch it take the fly, the ultimate experience for most dry-fly anglers. Reliable dry flies include the Royal Wulff, the Elk Hair Caddis, and various ant and grasshopper patterns. Wet flies can be effective, too, either fished just under the surface to imitate an emerging insect, or fished deeper. Mountain trout seem more likely to follow and strike a wet fly stripped in slowly rather than quickly.

Because high-altitude trout are usually less wary than front-country fish, they often provide encouraging action for beginning fly anglers. If you're just getting started or have a beginner in the family, mountain lakes are a great place to learn the craft.

Because it can be difficult to fly cast around brushy shorelines, sometimes a spinning rod is the best way to get a fly out onto the water where the fish are. Tie on a casting bubble, leaving about 3 feet or so of line, to which you tie a wet or dry fly. The bubble, a clear bobber that doesn't scare fish, provides enough weight for you to fling the tiny fly to rising fish without having to backcast.

A standard spinning lure works well, too, though you need to select one heavy enough to cast 50 feet or more. My favorite is the ¼-ounce Kamlooper spoon, which I maintain is the best cutthroat trout lure ever made. Before your trip, make sure to spool up plenty of fresh 6-pound-test line so the lure casts easily.

A proven spin-fishing mountain lake method is to use a live grasshopper on a size 6 or 8 hook suspended roughly 3 feet below a bobber with a small split shot. This is a great option for kids. Sometimes fish will hit this setup when they won't take anything else. Worms also work well in some lakes. I always tell people to take a variety of tackle, because you never know what will attract trout at a given lake at a given time.

■ FOR THE PAN

There's nothing wrong with keeping a few trout to eat. In fact, that's one of the highlights of mountain lake trout fishing. Be

sure to clean the fish as soon as possible and keep them cold in a spring or snowbank. Dispose of the head and entrails by tossing them as far out into the lake as possible. There they will sink and eventually re-enter the lake's food chain. Don't leave fish guts on shore or in the shallows. And never pack them out, because the smell is known to attract bears.

High-mountain trout are delicious and often have pink, salmonlike meat acquired by eating pigmented zooplankton and scuds (freshwater shrimp). In my opinion, the best trout cooking methods are either to roast them in aluminum foil with onion and lemon or to fry them in light oil (with or without a light breading). Try cooking a few fish with either method. If you have kids along, they'll know what to do with the results.

The joy of eating fresh-caught fish is just one reason mountain trout are so appealing to backcountry users. In the landmark wilderness textbook, *Wilderness Management*,

MICHAEL J. WOLFF



HIGH FLIERS Mountain lakes hold special appeal for fly anglers happy to leave finicky lowland river trout behind for a day or two. Although most lake fishing is from shore, those willing to haul a float tube uphill a few miles can paddle out to deeper waters, where mountain trout often lurk in midsummer.



MIKE BARLOW

ALWAYS NEVER THE SAME In the first edition of *The Montanans' Fishing Guide*, Dick Konizeski writes, "The fishing potential and access routes to high mountain lakes and streams can and often do change radically in a single season due to a variety of causes." What never changes, however, is the setting of mountain lakes (scenic), the taste of fresh-caught fish (fantastic), and the reaction of kids when a fish is brought to shore (fascination).

J. C. Hendee and other authors report on the long tradition of fishing wilderness lakes. They note that fishing ranks high on the list of backcountry activities and that for many wilderness visitors "fishing, like hunting, can achieve its finest quality in wilderness." High-mountain lakes, they say, are a place where a visitor can indulge in the "primitive

myth" of living off the land.

The idea of surviving on our own in the wilderness may very well be a myth. But when my kids and I are sitting on a mountain lake shore, a pan of crackling hot cutthroats frying in the fire, what we're doing and experiencing seems like the most real thing on earth. 🐻

Mountain Lakes Matter

FWP recognizes high-mountain lake fishing as an enormous recreational resource. The Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness, for example, supports thousands of visitor-days per year, mostly from backpacking anglers.

"We consider it one of the most important fisheries in south-central Montana," says Jim Darling, FWP regional fisheries manager in Billings. "Most wilderness visitors say that if it weren't for the fish, they wouldn't be there."

In addition to providing recreation, mountain lakes are important refuges for native Montana species such as cutthroat trout, which are declining in stream environments. The lakes also support important trout transplanted from other states, such as the rare golden trout, originally from California, and Wyoming's DeSmet rainbow, which may contain genes resistant to whirling disease.

For each trout lake in the Absaroka-Beartooth, FWP biologists maintain records of surface acreage and depth, stocking schedules (if any), catch-rate goals, and other information. The department also provides information on catch data, average fish size, locations of access sites, and campsites. Roughly 200 lakes in the Absaroka-Beartooth have self-sustaining trout populations; trout are planted in the other 114 lakes.

FWP lacks funds and staff to individually manage every one of the roughly 250 mountain trout lakes in northwestern Montana. But pressure on these lakes continues to grow, as more and more anglers head to backcountry areas to catch native cutthroats and other trout.



NELSON KENTER

"If you look at the lakes collectively, they generate as much use as some of our largest fisheries, such as Flathead Lake," says Jim Vashro, regional fisheries manager in Kalispell. "And for solitude and beauty, our mountain trout lakes are probably the region's best fishing spots."

Fish populations in about half the lakes in northwestern Montana are maintained by stocking, while the rest are self-sustaining. Many of these lakes support native westslope cutthroat trout, the only species that is stocked.

—John Fraley



TIM EGAN

More on mountain lakes

■ **Wilderness and roadless areas outside national parks:**

Number greater than an acre in size: **6,281**
 Number that are fishless:..... **5,306 (84%)**
 Number that support fish: **975 (16%)**

■ **Glacier and Yellowstone national parks (within MT):**

Total number of mountain lakes:..... **737**
 Number that are fishless:..... **709 (96%)**
 Number that support fish:..... **28 (4%)**

■ **Most common fish species, in order of abundance:**

1. cutthroat trout
2. rainbow trout
3. brook trout
4. arctic grayling
5. golden trout

■ **Other species:**

- | | |
|--------------|-------------|
| hybrid trout | brown trout |
| bull trout | suckers |
| lake trout | minnows |
| sculpin | whitefish |

Compiled by Jeff Hutten, FWP programmer/analyst.

