



MONTANA'S

FLY FISHING FORECAST

Though ongoing drought has hurt some Montana trout fisheries, the outlook for 2005 on most major rivers looks good

BY GREG THOMAS

ANGLERS ARE EITHER PESSIMISTS OR optimists, and these days it's easy to distinguish their affiliation. It seems everyone in Montana with a stake in fishing has an opinion about the prolonged six-year drought and how it affects the state's top trout fisheries.

On the one extreme are anglers who recall the glory days of abundant water and swollen trout populations in the 1990s. They say drought has atrophied rivers and decimated trout populations to the point where some waters no longer merit an angler's time. In contrast, some fly shop owners and guides are telling prospective clients that the fishing on local waters has never been better, seemingly ignoring the obvious.

No matter which camp you belong to, there's no denying that the drought has changed the face of Montana's fishing scene. But not necessarily all for the worse.

For example, though overall trout populations on some rivers have declined, the average size of those fish has risen. Where streams have seen changes in hatch timing and density, anglers may see fewer but more intense hatches than in years past. Also, drought has diminished the length and severity of spring runoff, which means more fishable days in April, May, and June when Skwala stoneflies and salmonflies emerge.

Despite those occasional benefits, the drought has definitely harmed many trout fisheries and continues to jeopardize fishing seasons on many waters. Some river levels have dropped alarmingly low in midsummer, while water temperatures have risen dangerously high. Anglers should check for emergency closures before visiting any Montana streams this season.

Here's a look at Montana's major trout streams and how they are being affected by the current drought, with notations on what anglers may expect there during the 2005 summer and fall seasons.



DESPITE THE DROUGHT Yes, Montana is in its sixth year of drought, snowpack in some regions was far below normal, and the lack of water is harming some trout fisheries. But Montana is still the nation's top state for trout fishing opportunities. The Madison, for example (far left), is fishing extremely well due to healthy trout numbers and steady water flows from Hebgen Reservoir. Cutthroat fishing on the Gallatin (above) continues to be strong, as is the rainbow fishing on the Missouri below Holter Dam. One effect of the low and warm water in some rivers is that anglers may have to pay more attention to fly selection (left).



BIGHORN RIVER

Anglers agree that the drought-stricken Bighorn isn't the trout stream it used to be. What they can't seem to agree on is whether the 'Horn is actually a better fishery now than it was during the 1990s, when it offered more than 6,000 mature trout per mile and several national sporting publications labeled it America's best trout stream.

While the Bighorn's trout population has diminished significantly, the river has an abundance of large trout—"the healthiest we've ever seen," says Ken Frazer, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks fisheries biologist in Billings.

"People who are used to catching 30 fish a day on the Bighorn just aren't going to do that right now," Frazer says. "But the fish they catch will be in terrific shape."

By that Frazer means big, fat, and strong. While the number of large trout in the Bighorn has grown, the river's aquatic insect hatches and the opportunity those insects provide for fantastic summer dry-fly fishing have diminished.

"I think it's the siltation of the river that has really put a dent in our PMD (pale

morning dun) and *Trico* hatches," says Duane Schreiner, who runs Bighorn Fly and Tackle in Fort Smith. "We used to see the highest angling pressure in July and August. Now our best dry-fly fishing and our busiest time on the river runs from mid-April through May, when people are matching *Baetis* and midges."

Though anglers find good surface options during spring, they may have to probe under the surface in summer and early fall to find fish. Many of the river's mature trout take advantage of the river's crustacean smorgasbord, courtesy of the increased siltation caused by a lack of strong current. (Historically, spring floods flushed sediment from the river bottom.)

"Siltation has been a boon to scuds and sow bugs," Schreiner adds. "My theory is that a trout getting hit in the face with a protein shake every few seconds has no reason to go up top and risk its life for a caddis or mayfly. That hurts the dry-fly fishing."

No matter when you fish the Bighorn, you're likely to find fewer anglers than in past years. According to Bob McFarland, who monitors statewide angling activity for FWP, pressure on the Bighorn dropped

from a high of 116,000 angler-days in 1999 to 81,000 in 2003—a trend that doesn't look to change any time soon.



BIG HOLE RIVER

Anglers who plan to hit the Big Hole this summer or fall may want to concentrate on the river's middle section between Wise River and Divide, where water conditions and rainbow trout populations are consistent.

"The rainbow trout stronghold is above Divide," says Dick Oswald, FWP biologist in Dillon, though he adds that the Melrose area also has good numbers of mature rainbows. "There are canyons between Wise River and Divide, lots of tributaries, and little irrigation withdrawal. The flows and water temperatures hang in there a little better than in other places. The aquatic system, including macroinvertebrates, is functioning better there than anywhere else on the Big Hole."

Browns, once abundant in the lower Big Hole, have declined. Anglers still find some browns below Glen, but not in the numbers or sizes they previously encountered.

"Our browns are the hardest hit from this drought," Oswald says. "In the Maiden Rock



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TIPS FOR 2005 TROUT

Experts predict the Yellowstone, which fares well in drought, should again produce some great 'hopper action (above). On the Kootenai River (near right) anglers will be looking for high spring flows to reduce floating mats of algae. On the Big Hole (far right) fish the deep canyon stretches where shade helps trout beat the summer heat.



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slot-limit area, we recorded the lowest density of 18-inch-and-larger brown trout since special regulations went into place in 1981. Between Glen and the Notch Bottom Fishing Access Site, we've seen an 80 percent decline in the number of fish 18 inches and larger."

The best fishing on the Big Hole this year will be in June, during salmonfly and PMD hatches, or during fall when water temperatures cool and *Baetis* and *Trico* mayflies bring fish to the top.



KOOTENAI RIVER

This big river's rainbow population is at least stable and may be increasing, say FWP biologists, and the average size may be growing. But the fishing for those trout is dictated by water flows, determined by releases from Libby Dam. Because no one can predict more than a few days ahead of time what those flows will be, Mike Hensler, FWP biologist in Libby, recommends that anglers planning a trip to the Kootenai call local fly

Greg Thomas, of Ennis, is author of several western fly fishing guides and Tight Lines, a yearly Rocky Mountain fly fishing forecast.

shops before heading to the river.

"What wade anglers like best are flows around 4,000 cfs (cubic feet per second)," he says. "What the float anglers seem to prefer are flows from 8,000 to 9,000 cfs. That opens up more areas for boats, but makes it tougher for wading."

Hensler adds that a big concern now on the Kootenai is the growing amount of a gelatinous algae. "If we see a constant low flow through the season, anglers will be dealing with growing amounts of algae that attaches to rocks and can form large, dense mats," he says. "The algae gets on leaders and makes nymph fishing difficult."

Hensler adds that last year many anglers complained that fishing was tough early in the season. "But as we got into summer and fall, fishing and catching improved considerably," he says. "Given decent flows, I'd expect to see that again."



MADISON RIVER

The word is definitely out that the Madison is fishing well despite the prevalence of whirling disease. The "50-mile riffle" holds an abundance of rainbow and brown trout

ranging between 16 and 18 inches, and these fish are fat and willing takers. What's more, the Madison is fed a constant supply of water from Hebgen Reservoir, making it one of the most dependable rivers in southwestern Montana.

That said, anglers should expect lots of fishing pressure in June, July, and August. In recent years, the Madison has become the most heavily fished stream in the state, and its trout are acting like they resent the fly fishing armada. Last year, local anglers and guides alike reported skeptical fish and lots of boat traffic.

According to Arrick Swanson, who runs Arrick's Fly Shop in West Yellowstone, anglers found fishing on the Madison more challenging last year than the year before, requiring more exact presentation. "It seems like I'm selling more small flies for the Madison these days," he says. "Is that because the fish are becoming more conscious of anglers, or is it related to certain water conditions? It's a debate around here."

As in most rivers, the crowds begin to thin in September. October and early November typically offer perfect conditions and solid *Baetis* and mahogany dun hatches.



BITTERROOT RIVER

The Bitterroot is surviving Montana's brutal drought as well as any stream in the state, thanks to some well-timed summer rains and timely, controlled flows from Painted Rocks Reservoir.

Anglers, biologists, and guides report a steady increase in cutthroat and rainbow trout populations. Average size is increasing, too, and aquatic insect hatches are better than ever. Offering solid hatches of PMDs, caddis, golden stoneflies, green drakes, *Tricos*, mahogany duns, *Hecuba*, and *Baetis*, the Bitterroot should provide desirable results through this summer and fall.

"The fishing here is just darn good," says Chris Clancy, FWP biologist at Hamilton. "And it's a nice river to fish—big enough to float but small enough to wade." Clancy says that in 2004, water levels dropped significantly, "but then the skies opened up and it rained and we had water everywhere."

The only sour note on the Bitterroot system is the presence of whirling disease in the east fork. "We have seen declines in rainbow trout numbers in the upper Bitterroot," cautions Clancy. "Though we can't

say for sure it's related to whirling disease, I am suspicious."

For now, anglers can continue to expect good action on the river's west fork and its entire mainstem. Clancy adds that the cutthroat trout population has been increasing steadily for the past ten years and that cutts are most prevalent in the upper river.



BEAVERHEAD RIVER

The good news from Beaverhead country is that the river's rainbow trout are prospering and anglers are catching and releasing some true hogs—bows ranging between 17 and 22 inches—in the upper reach between Clark Canyon Dam and Pipe Organ Bridge.

The bad news is that extended drought has reduced the river's 20-inch-and-larger brown trout by 83 percent and 18-inch-and-larger brown trout by 55 percent from the peaks of the late 1990s. Fortunately, the system has decent numbers of smaller browns and, according to FWP biologist Dick Oswald, probably reached its low point in 2003 or '04 and now is on the rise.

"Anglers are still having a good time on the Beaverhead," Oswald says. "Many of

them are beginners, and if they catch a couple of decent brown trout and maybe a big rainbow in a day, they are real happy."



LOWER CLARK FORK

On the stretch of the Clark Fork from the mouth of Rock Creek to the confluence with the Flathead River, drought and whirling disease may be harming juvenile rainbow trout recruitment. But that hasn't seemed to influence catch rates or overall angler satisfaction.

FWP biologist Ladd Knotek expects quality fishing this summer and fall on the Clark Fork, which has roughly 300 catchable (8-inch-plus) trout per mile.

"We are seeing the onset of whirling disease and some long-term effects of drought, with lower redd counts for bull trout, and populations of rainbows and cutthroats dropping down to the lower end of their range," Knotek says. "But I don't think that affects catch rates significantly. When water is low, the fish congregate and anglers find them more easily. I expect 2005 to be a typical year on the Clark Fork."

That means excellent fishing early and late in the season, with September and October the top months. “There’s no question that the second and third weeks of September are the best,” says Drew Miller, head guide for Grizzly Hackle Fly Shop in Missoula. “You still see fish eating ’hoppers, and we also are getting hatches of mahogany duns, *Baetis*, *Tricos*, and October caddis.”



YELLOWSTONE RIVER

The Yellowstone has maintained solid flows throughout the drought, resulting in robust populations of rainbow, cutthroat, and brown trout.

That’s the word from Jim Brungardt at Yellowstone Angler in Livingston, who predicts outstanding fishing this season.

“Our ’hopper fishing was excellent last year, some of the best I’ve seen in 20 years,” Brungardt says. “It started early and ended late in the season. Overall, fishing was good, except from mid-September to mid-October, when for some reason everyone was having problems. Then the fishing picked up again and lasted well into November.”

Attractor patterns should be the ticket on the ’Stone this summer. Try a foam hopper, Parachute Madam X, or Turck’s Tarantula. For huge browns, try bouncing a weighted Muddler Minnow or Double Bunny along the bottom rocks through the deepest pools.

“There are some good fish in the river,” Brungardt adds. “Last year the fish were in great shape, and they’ve been that way for several years. I would expect the same quality trout this season.”



MISSOURI RIVER

There’s a rumor that the Missouri’s rainbow trout population is about to tank due to the effects of whirling disease and drought.

But that’s been the rumor for six years. And for six years anglers have continued to catch lots of rainbows in the river’s premier stretch between Holter Dam and Cascade. They should continue to enjoy good fishing again this year, though maybe not like in the heyday a few years ago.

“Our fall estimates showed the number of rainbows near average or just slightly below average in our two sampling sections,” says FWP biologist Travis Horton.

“We have seen a notable decline in rainbows 17 inches and longer. Those fish went from an average of 2,300 per mile in 2002—which was three times the long-term average—to 1,500 per mile in 2003, to 900 per mile in 2004, which is right about the long-term average for 17-inch-plus rainbows in the Missouri.”

Even with that decline, Horton notes, the Missouri is an amazing fishery containing 2,000 to 3,000 trout per mile. “And lots of those older fish that have died off were in bad shape—skinny, hook-scarred, and suffering from a parasite on their gills,” he says. “The fish now in the river are healthier in general and more vigorous.”



BLACKFOOT RIVER

The Blackfoot River and its rainbow trout population are suffering severely due to ongoing drought conditions. However, summer rains saved the river last year, and anglers caught decent numbers of brown trout and a few cutthroats and rainbows during several great big-bug hatches.

“Three hatches stood out last year,” says George Kesel, who runs Kesel’s Four Rivers Fly Shop in Missoula. “The salmonflies came off really good in June and July, the green drakes were strong in early July, and the golden stones were present through all of July. In addition, we had great streamer fishing, with black Woolly Buggers and tan sculpins working best. I’m hoping we’ll see a similar situation this year.”

Last year’s rains also influenced the river in an unexpected way. The wet weather kept the lower river’s fleet of innertubers off the water, allowing anglers a chance to fish below Johnsrud Park without competition from recreational floaters.

“I warn fishermen to stay off the lower river when the weather is nice,” Kesel says. “But last year innertubers didn’t come out in the rain, and we caught some good browns through that stretch. Hopefully, it will rain again this season.” 🐻

EDITOR’S NOTE: *As this issue went to press, in late April, snowpack in many Montana mountain ranges was extremely low, which could result in low flows and even closures to some river stretches. Anglers should call ahead to fly shops to check current conditions.*



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