



FWP's popular Fishing Access Site Program lays out a welcome mat to the state's scenic public lakes and rivers.

BY DAVE CARTY

Come on in,



On a blustery October morning, the Black's Ford Fishing Access Site (FAS) on the Madison River is nearly empty. Same for the Cameron Bridge FAS on the lower Gallatin River, as well as the hugely popular Cherry River FAS on the East Gallatin just north of Bozeman. From June through September, these areas are packed with cars, boaters, hikers, and anglers. But on this fall day, with a storm moving in, nobody is interested in fishing.

Well, almost nobody. Just above Black's Ford, Harrison Trask of Bozeman prepares to lead a group of buddies on an expedition into the teeth of the approaching storm. He stops to talk, the tip of his fly rod swaying in the strong wind.

"For me, it's all about fishing," says Trask,

who looks like the quintessential Montana trout angler (or cowboy, for that matter): tall and lanky, with a craggy, windburned face. Trask moved to Montana 16 years ago from St. Louis specifically to fish. He rattles off a list of fishing access sites he's used over the years on the Madison, Yellowstone, Gallatin, Beaverhead, and other famous trout rivers. Trask knows that he can indulge his love of fishing largely because Montana's stream access law and ongoing acquisition of access sites allow him to fish waters he otherwise wouldn't be able to. "Stream access is the thing," he states emphatically. "That should never change."

Montana residents hold sacred their opportunity to wade, drift, and boat along the state's 41 rivers and 52 game fish lakes. And access to trout water is the number one draw for tens of thousands of anglers who pack

resorts, lodges, hotels, and restaurants across Big Sky Country from Memorial Day to Labor Day. In response to that demand for access, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks has established 320 fishing access sites on flat and moving water across Montana over the past three decades. But the access sites are getting harder, and more expensive, to come by. The story of how those access sites were acquired—many involving contentious meetings with neighboring landowners—illuminates Montana's ongoing struggle to balance public and private property rights. It also speaks to the passion that anglers have for spending time on Montana's scenic rivers and reservoirs in search of fish.

PORTALS TO PUBLIC WATER

Under Montana's Stream Access Law, all Montana streams and rivers are public, as are



the water's fine

GREAT DAY AHEAD Montana's 320 fishing access sites, like Otter Creek FAS on the Yellowstone River, provide anglers and boaters access to the state's abundant public waters.

the river beds up to the high-water mark (the natural mark on banks showing where the river runs highest during normal years). However, anglers and other recreationists may only gain access from public bridges, with permission from a landowner whose property borders the water, or from public lands such as a fishing access site.

Managed by the FWP Parks Division, fishing access sites are public lands, ranging from 1 acre to 600 acres, along rivers and lakes where anglers and other recreationists can wade or launch their boats. The sites usually contain a boat ramp and vault latrine, many have camping areas, and most are also used for hiking, bird watching, camping, and hunting. Some sites are on lakes and reservoirs; most are on rivers and streams. No state tax dollars go to the FAS Program. All acquisitions, improvements, and maintenance are funded by fishing license fees, matching federal dollars, and money from state vehicle registration fees.

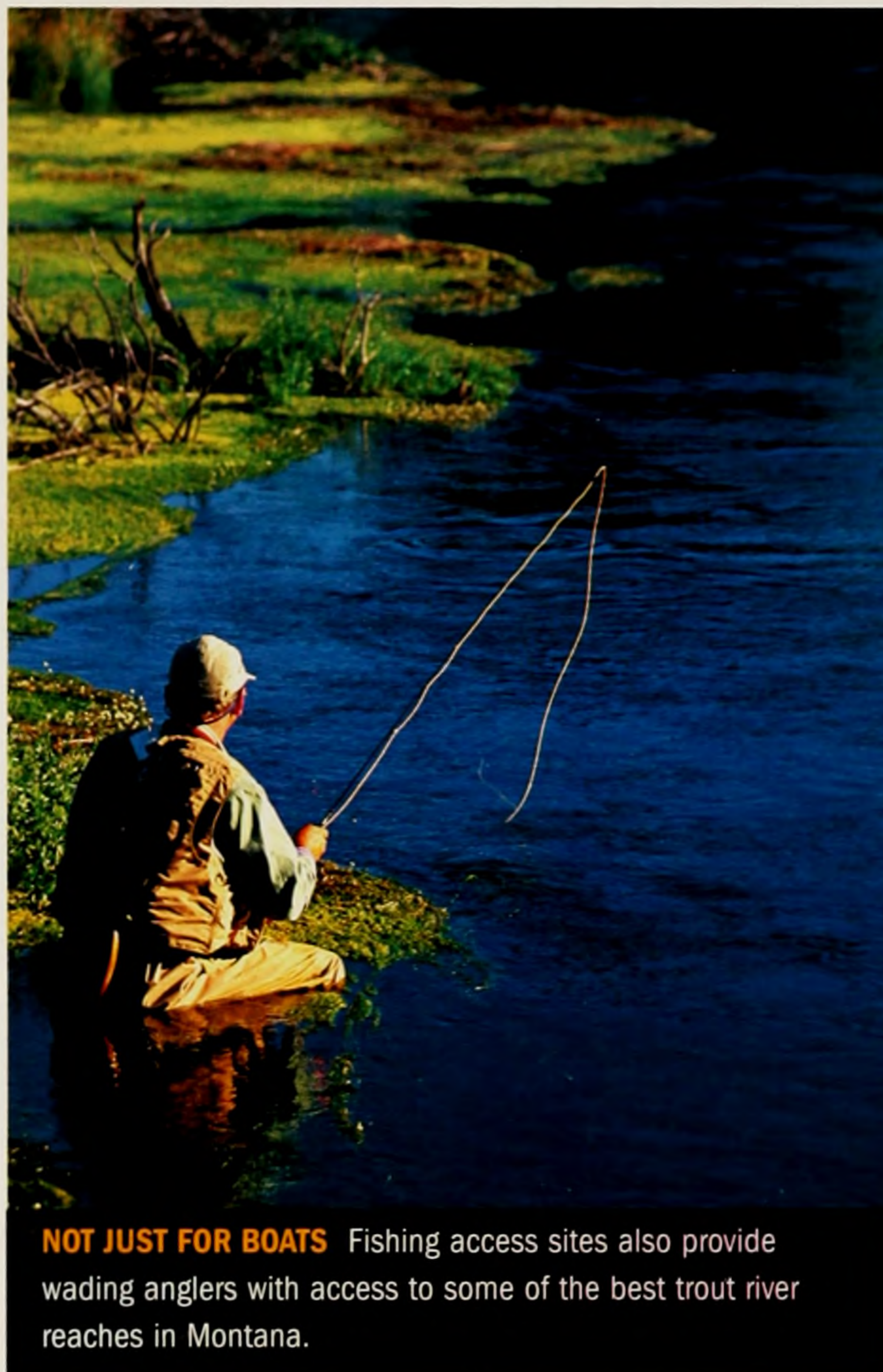
Because river property has always been valuable, FWP has paid a premium for fishing access sites since the program's inception in the 1970s. But starting in the 1990s, as the trickle of new landowners from out of state became a flood, land prices have skyrocketed. FWP often finds itself competing with multimillionaires for prime streamside parcels. According to Dick Oswald, FWP fisheries biologist at Dillon, the price for an acre of irrigated ranch land in the Ruby River Valley during the 1990s went from \$1,500 to \$5,000 in just a few years. "Immediately, our fishing access program for the Ruby became the poor kid on the block," he says.

In recent years, the Montana Legislature has approved an average of \$750,000 per biennium for FAS acquisitions. That may seem like a lot of money until you consider that FWP recently paid more than a half-million dollars for a single 5-acre FAS on Echo Lake near Kalispell.

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"In years to come, we'll consider that a bargain, because it's a hugely important site on a great fishing lake close to a major urban area," says Allan Kuser, who coordinates the FAS Program. "But it also used up more than half our entire acquisition budget for two whole years and kept us from pursuing other important sites."

In addition to acquisition costs, fishing



NOT JUST FOR BOATS Fishing access sites also provide wading anglers with access to some of the best trout river reaches in Montana.

we acquire a new fishing access site, we have to increase our budget for developing and maintaining it. Right now we're struggling to find that balance."

WORKING WITH THE NEIGHBORS

FWP acquires three to six fishing access sites per year. "The main thing we try to do with new acquisitions is fill access gaps on lakes and rivers," Kuser says. Another factor is whether a site has a willing seller. If it does, and once the wheels are in motion for an acquisition (most of the state's fishing access sites are fee title rather than leases), the big question becomes: What will the neighbors think? Many people who might otherwise support the concept of public access to rivers are less than thrilled—often for good reason—when a fishing access site is planned for next to their home. In the last decade, traffic at some sites near the state's urban centers has increased dramatically, creating problems that did not exist when the program began 30 years ago.

"The neighbors around some of these sites can become frustrated," Bastian says. "Their driveways and gates can get blocked, there can be more garbage and litter around the area, and sometimes they have vehicles speeding past their homes."

Whenever possible, FWP meets with landowners next to a proposed fishing access site and tries to address their concerns. "We had a situation like that with a site in the upper

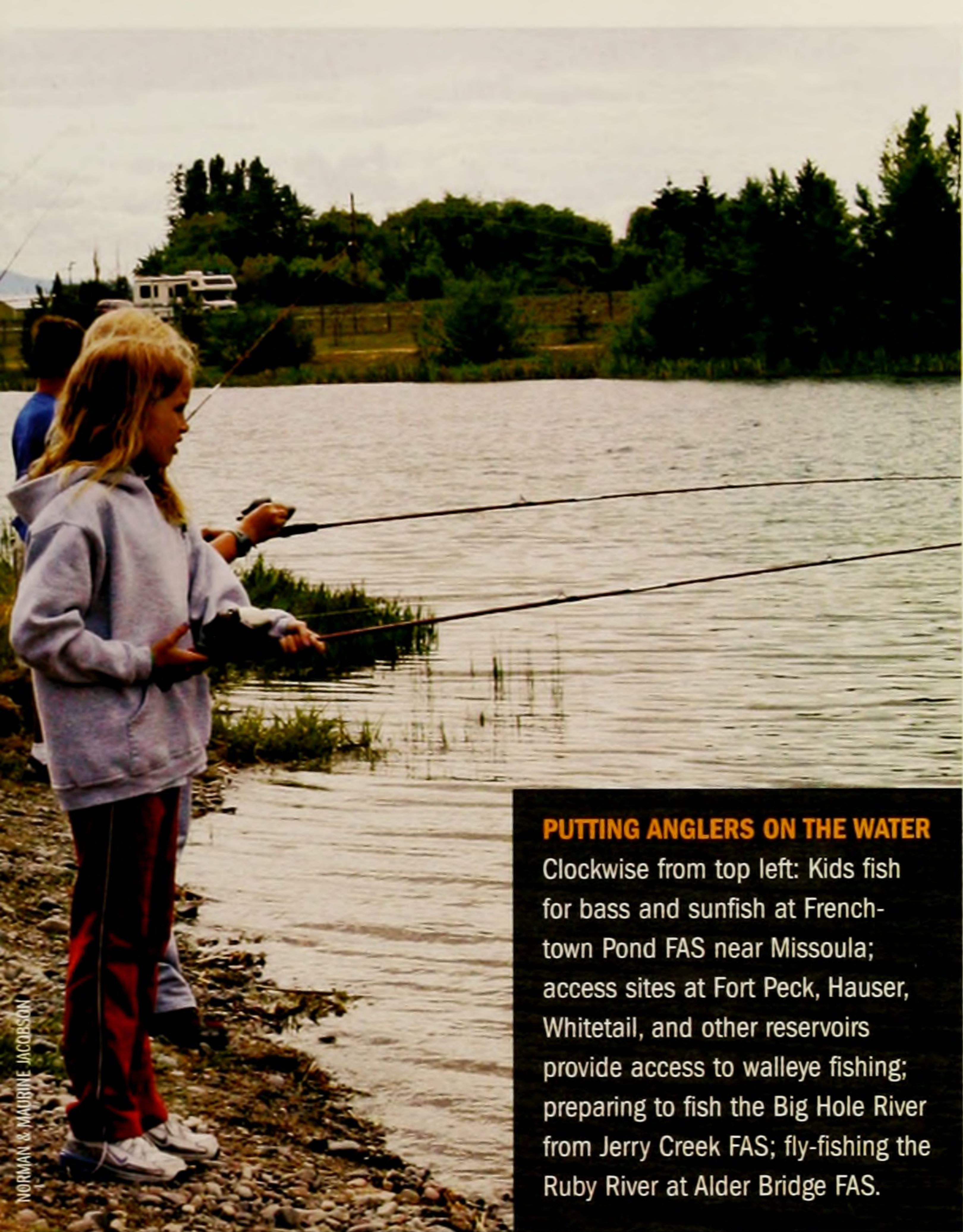
Bitterroot Valley," Bastian says. "A landowner was willing to sell us the property, but we had several neighbors concerned about dust the increased traffic would create on the gravel road, the visual impact of a vault latrine, and inappropriate behavior such as kids partying there at night."

FWP met with the homeowners and agreed to pave several hundred yards of road to control dust. And instead of a permanent latrine, the department installed smaller, portable ones painted to blend in with the environment. "We also planted a row of

access sites require the installation of boundary fencing, roads, parking areas, boat ramps, signs, and latrines. The sites also require regular road grading, trash pickup, ramp repair, weed control, caretaker services, and other general maintenance.

FWP managers struggle over whether to put their limited funds into buying new access sites or managing existing ones. "It's a tough decision," says Missoula region park manager Lee Bastian. "A few years from now, land will be priced so high we can't afford anything." And yet, adds Kuser, "every time

BARRY & CATHY BECK



PUTTING ANGLERS ON THE WATER

Clockwise from top left: Kids fish for bass and sunfish at Frenchtown Pond FAS near Missoula; access sites at Fort Peck, Hauser, Whitetail, and other reservoirs provide access to walleye fishing; preparing to fish the Big Hole River from Jerry Creek FAS; fly-fishing the Ruby River at Alder Bridge FAS.

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trees as a visual barrier, and we agreed to manage the site for day-use only—no overnight camping,” Bastian says. “Most residents in the area seem to be satisfied with what we’ve done.”

Another thorny public access conflict emerged on the Ruby River in the mid-1990s. Several new landowners were opposed to public floating on the productive trout river. Tired of being shut out of a public river, anglers began illegally crossing private land to reach the Ruby. The situation got so hot that then-Governor Marc Racicot intervened and appointed a citizens’ task force to resolve the issue. Based on the task force’s recommendations, FWP purchased one fishing access site and leased another five. The six new sites opened up miles of fishing water and have drastically reduced trespassing on private land.

FWP and landowners often work out mutually beneficial arrangements. On the Beaverhead River’s 600-acre Henneberry FAS, for example, Oswald found a way to increase public access and also provide additional grazing for a rancher whose property abuts the FWP holdings. “The landowner supports public access,” says Oswald, “so we worked out an agreement that allows him limited cattle grazing on the public land in early spring and late fall, when fishing traffic is relatively light, and then he allows public access on his land year-round.”

On some rivers, more public access is not always desirable. For example, the lower Blackfoot River over the past decade has seen rising use by anglers, floaters, and especially inner-tubers. Recreational conflicts on the river have grown, as have trash and traffic problems. “That’s a river already seeing way too much use,” says Bastian. “Adding more fishing access sites could worsen the problem

by making it easier for even more people to get on the river.”

Increased use is a never-ending challenge. In the mid-1980s, fishing access sites received roughly 1.6 million visits per year. By 2005, the number had soared to 4 million visits, with no letup in sight. At some sites, the increase has fueled conflicts between landowners and FAS visitors. “We try to

“That’s a river already seeing way too much use. Adding more fishing access sites could worsen the overcrowding problem.”

find ways to manage these conflicts,” says Kuser, “but the only way this system will work with the ever-growing use is if recreationists respect the rights of landowners, and landowners acknowledge the rights of recreationists.”

Increased FAS use has also led to more vandalism. Each year FWP crews replace shot-up signs and latrine doors, burned picnic tables, and other destroyed facilities. “That’s labor and money that could be going to other maintenance, such as grading roads,” Kuser says.

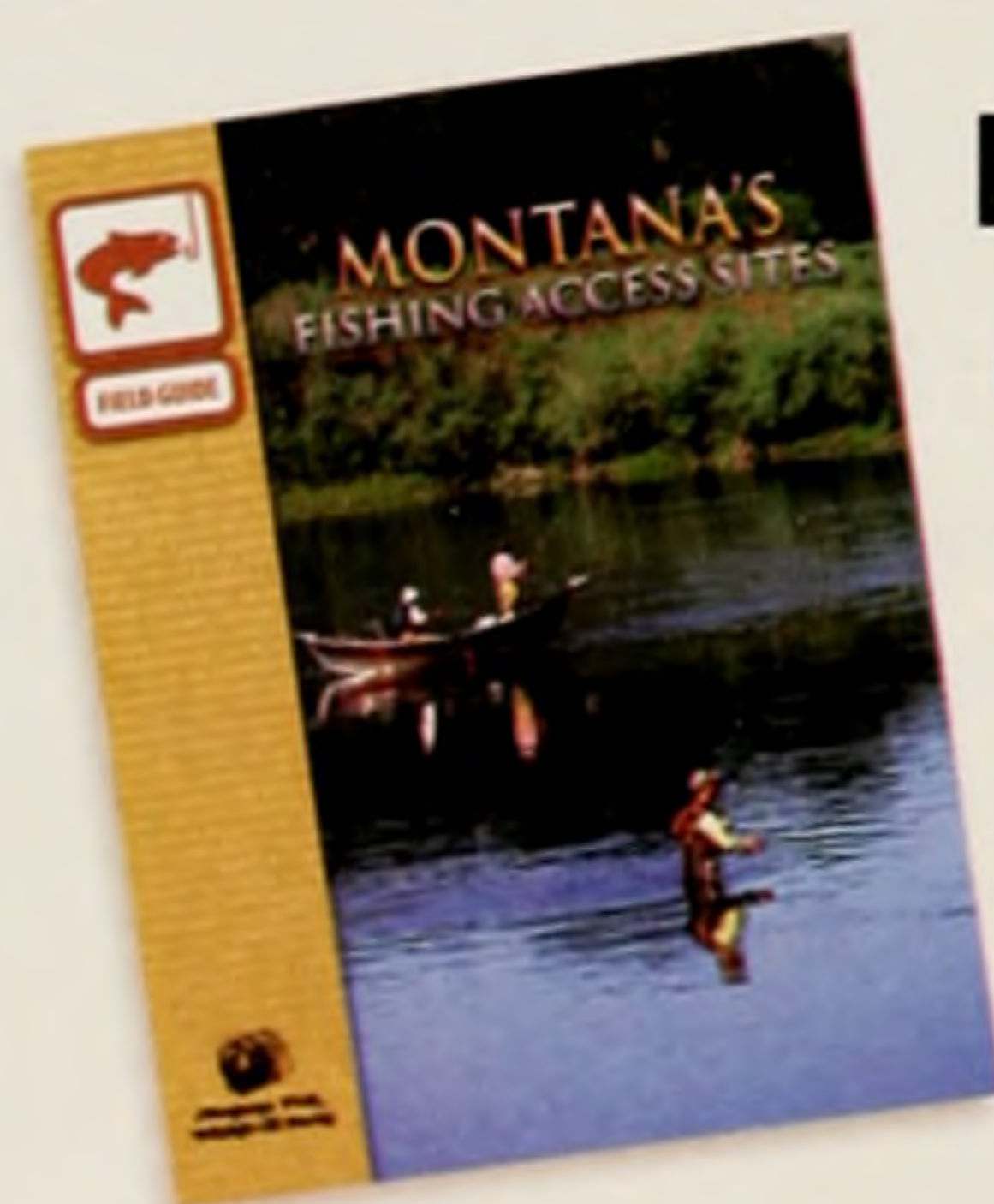
Though vandalism continues to grow, most visitors would never think of abusing a FAS. Trask says he and many other anglers regularly pack out trash they find at the sites.

Public support for fishing access sites shows up in other ways. Missoula developer Michael Priske and his business partner Todd Peters purchased a 10-acre plot of land along the Clark Fork River roughly 4 miles west of Missoula to subdivide. Under state subdivision law, a developer has the option of providing a portion of the land to the county for public park land or paying the county a cash equivalent. The developers worked with FWP and Missoula County officials on a plan that established park land next to a small piece of county land. The county leased its existing and newly acquired land to FWP, which the two entities jointly developed into Kona Ranch Bridge FAS.

“The reason I moved to Montana is because I love all the freedoms we have here, including good access to public land,” Priske says. “Cutting off access to the river just didn’t seem right to us.”

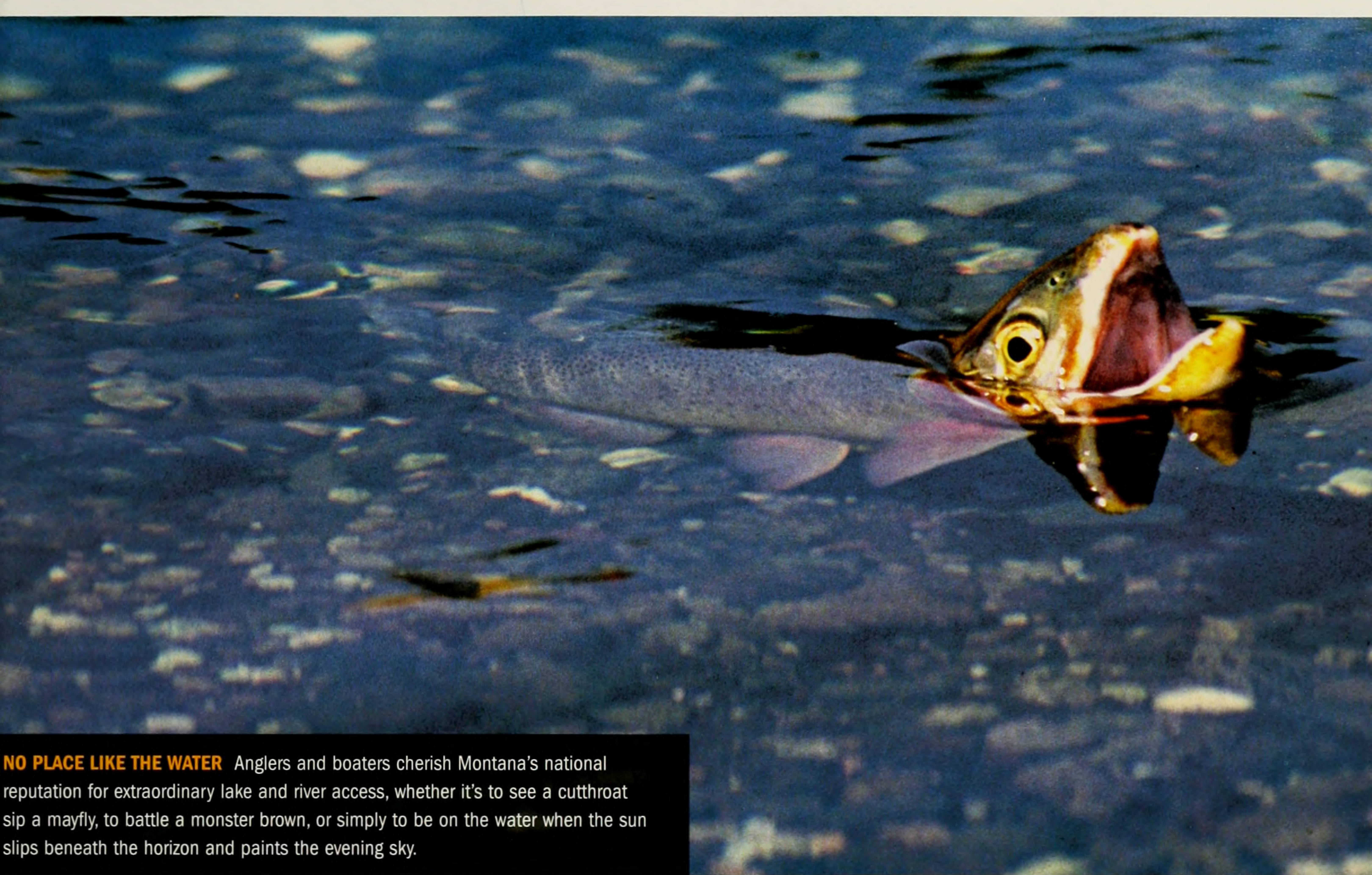
Kuser says that over the history of the program, several landowners have even made outright donations of land to be used as fishing access sites. Few anglers have such opportunities, but all anglers, through their fishing license dollars, contribute to Montana’s beloved system of lake and river fishing access sites. And in doing so, they have provided themselves with opportunities to fish, wade, and float lakes and rivers legendary across North America.

“What’s really remarkable about Montana’s fishing access sites,” says Trask, the Bozeman angler, “is how they allow an angler of modest means to go out and fish the same pristine and scenic waters as the richest guys in the world.” 🐻



FREE NEW FAS BOOKLET NOW AVAILABLE

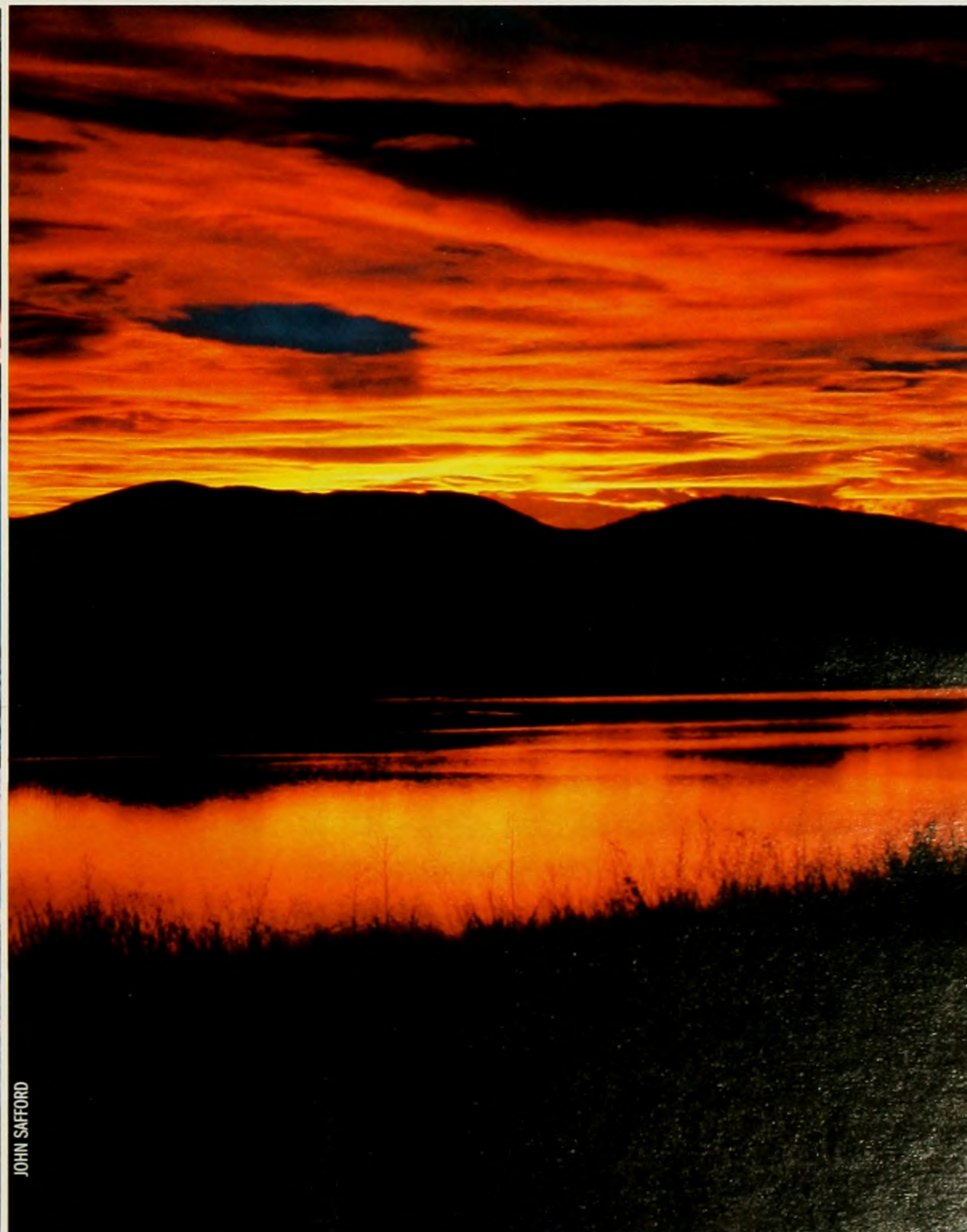
Get your free copy of FWP’s new *A Field Guide to Montana’s Fishing Access Sites*. The booklet describes Montana’s 320 fishing access sites across the state, including maps, photos, and detailed information about access, accommodations, and opportunities to fish, hunt, and watch wildlife. Order yours by calling (406) 444-2535, or pick one up at the nearest FWP office. To learn more about Montana fishing access sites on-line, visit fwp.mt.gov and search “find fishing access site.” There you’ll find the locations of all fishing access sites, including information on accessibility for people with disabilities, RV access, directions from the nearest town, FAS size, camping availability and fees, fish species present, and more.



NO PLACE LIKE THE WATER Anglers and boaters cherish Montana's national reputation for extraordinary lake and river access, whether it's to see a cutthroat sip a mayfly, to battle a monster brown, or simply to be on the water when the sun slips beneath the horizon and paints the evening sky.



JEFF HENRY



JOHN SAFFORD