

HIGH-ALTITUDE TROUT

What backpackers and hikers have discovered about the state's fish-rich alpine lakes. **BY MIKE RAETHER**

The long hike in was paying off like Apple stock. As I released yet another gullible westslope cutthroat and rinsed my hands in the chilly waters of the mountain lake, I wondered how many trout I had caught during the sun-drenched afternoon. Was it 30? 40? I couldn't remember, and it didn't matter. It was just another great day of fishing one of Montana's alpine treasures.

Later, at my campsite, I savored the splendor of the wild surroundings while enjoying a meal of fresh-caught cutthroat. Had I died and gone to heaven?

Many outdoors magazines this time of year carry articles featuring Montana's blue-ribbon trout rivers. What you rarely read about is our incredible mountain trout lake fishing. What a shame. Far above the crowded rivers and their persnickety trout are hundreds of little lakes packed with eager fish. An invigorating summer hike or backpacking trip through Montana's backcountry often yields excellent fishing surrounded by breath-snatching natural beauty. All you need is an accurate map, a willingness to walk for an hour or two, and a desire to catch trout—lots of trout.

ABOVE THE CLOUDS

"Once you put your feet on the trail, it's like discovering the real Montana," says Pat Saffel,

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks regional fisheries manager in Missoula. "You climb that last switchback and then the lake comes into view—it's like going back in time. The fishing is usually good and catch limits are liberal, so it's okay to keep and eat some of your catch." Saffel agrees that one of the greatest benefits of fishing alpine lakes is a meal of fresh trout, which often have delectable pink meat that comes from eating zooplankton and scuds (freshwater shrimp).

According to Jim Vashro, FWP regional fisheries manager in Kalispell, Montana contains more than 1,000 mountain lakes that hold productive trout fisheries. Many were barren of fish until the department began stocking trout. "The first plantings, about 100 years ago, were carried out by horse packers or hikers sturdy enough to pack in fingerlings in milk cans," says Vashro. "We called them the 'milk can brigades.'" Fish planting by fixed-wing aircraft followed, but swooping a small plane in and out of steep-sided alpine lakes was challenging. Vashro says some fingerlings ended up in treetops rather than in lakes. "Next we used helicopters," he says. "They proved safer and more successful, and up to eight lakes could be planted in one flight."

As a result of this work, many mountain lakes now have self-sustaining trout populations. Lakes where trout can't naturally repro-

duce receive periodic stocking to maintain the fishery. FWP primarily stocks lakes most accessible to and popular with anglers, planting fish every three to six years. Vashro says the management target for most alpine lakes is 100 fingerlings stocked per surface acre.

Low water fertility and long alpine winters make it tough for mountain trout to grow as quickly as their brethren in the warmer valley rivers. Three years following a planting, trout in mountain lakes run 8 to 10 inches long. They continue to grow until age six, when they reach 14 to 16 inches. After that most die of old age.

According to Vashro, some people don't believe stocking is appropriate in historically fishless lakes because the trout might alter

SWIMMING IN AIR The crystalline water of backcountry lakes reveals fish and bottom substrate with startling clarity. Trout like this cutthroat often cruise close to shore, making them easy targets for beginners unable to cast far. Flies, lures, and bait all work well for mountain trout.

SCOTT HANSEN



indigenous communities of plankton, insects, and amphibians. Some oppose stocking in a designated wilderness because it manipulates the area's natural state. "Even though there's criticism of stocking in wilderness, surveys show that fishing is one of the most desired activities of most backcountry hikers. Those stocked lakes are definitely appreciated and used," says Vashro.

Out of respect for wilderness values, planting trout is allowed only where the practice was established before the area was officially designated as wilderness. FWP only uses traditional methods of transporting fish such as horses and even backpacks, just like a century ago. "Most wilderness lakes are intentionally left fishless," says Vashro.

Montana's greatest concentration of alpine lakes is in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness southwest of Billings, straddling the Montana-Wyoming border. These popular lakes contain a salmonid diversity that includes Yellowstone cutthroat trout, golden trout, and arctic grayling, says Ken Frazer, FWP regional fisheries manager in Billings. Like elsewhere in Montana, some of the Absaroka-Beartooth's roughly 300 trout lakes produce trout naturally and some are stocked. The 114 stocked lakes are planted with trout every three to eight years.

TREASURE HUNT

Half the fun of fishing mountain lakes is finding them. I start my research by explor-

ing U.S. Forest Service and wilderness maps for likely destinations. These are available at any Forest Service office or can be purchased on-line (see sidebar on page 39). After finding a few potential lakes on a map, I search for information about trails leading to the waters. I've had my best luck calling or visiting area Forest Service offices, which usually have valuable information about trails and destinations—as well as important safety tips.

A few years ago while preparing to hike to a pair of alpine lakes, I decided at the last second to call the local Forest Service office to see if they had any new information. I learned that a rowdy bear had ransacked a hiker's backpack near the lakes just a few

days before, convincing me that a trip to another lake would be a safer choice.

Other great resources include the many books on Montana hiking and backpacking found at libraries, bookstores, or on-line.

FWP provides abundant resources for the alpine angler. I never visit any new mountain lake without first checking out the department's website. FWP's Montana Fishing Guide search page has specifics on every mountain lake that contains trout, including species present and stocking history. With this information I can usually predict the size and relative abundance of trout in a particular lake. FWP's website also offers a free downloadable guide to many of the lakes in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness (see sidebar on page 39).

HOW TO CATCH ALPINE TROUT

Anglers have three options: fly-fishing, spin-fishing, or bait fishing. My pick for fly gear is a 3-weight rod with floating line, 7.5-foot leader, and 6X tippet. I often pack a second reel spooled with sink-tip line for when fish are deeper. I usually use terrestrial patterns such as ants and grasshoppers, nymphs such as a #12 or #14 brown Hare's Ear (with or without the bead head), and #12 or #14 pink scuds. Royal Wulff and Elk Hair Caddis dries also do well. Flies are lightweight, so I always bring plenty.

For spin fishing, try a #2 Mepps Aglia, #1 or #2 Blue Fox, or 1/8- or 1/4-ounce Rooster Tail. John Fraley, a mountain lake fishing expert who works for FWP in Kalispell, suggests using a 1/4-ounce Kamlooper spoon, which he calls "the best cutthroat trout lure ever made." For spinners, I prefer the more somber color combinations with silver or bronze blades. My favorite is the 1/8-ounce black Rooster Tail with a silver blade, but if that fails I try different color combinations until something starts catching fish.

Many mountain lakes have steep or brushy shorelines, making fly casting difficult. In those cases, a better way to get flies to

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trout is with an ultralight backpacking rod paired with an ultralight spinning reel filled with 4-pound-test monofilament line. Thread the end of the line through a clear plastic spin-fishing bubble, leaving about 5 to 6 feet of line, to which you tie the fly. If you need to fling the fly out even farther, add water to the bubble to increase casting weight. Usually I start with a nymph and sometimes add a small split shot sinker about 18 inches up the line to pull the fly down closer to where fish feed, especially if the water is choppy. The retrieve should always be a slow crawl.

Ultralight spin-fish outfits make catching small fish fun and larger fish a heart-stopping thrill. A few years ago while fishing a lake in the Bitterroot Mountains, my nymph was inhaled by an energetic cutt-bow (cutthroat x rainbow hybrid) that turned out to be 18 inches long. Immediately after I hooked it, the fish made a powerful 30-yard run across the lake. It took several minutes to work the trout back toward me, only to have it surge away two more times. Finally the fish tired and I was able to slide it up onto shore.

For anglers who prefer bait, try half a night crawler on a single hook without any additional weight. Use the casting bubble to get some distance. Cast it out and let the bait sink gradually. Bear in mind that fish caught by bait are often hooked too deep to release unharmed. I suggest using a #10 straight shank circle hook, which catches fish in the mouth instead of the throat or gullet, allowing for easy and harmless release.

Regardless of the fishing method you choose, keep your lines and leaders light: 4- or 6-pound-test. Otherwise fish can see the line in the clear water and will stay away from your offering. Alpine fish are not especially bright, but they can be line shy.



DAN B. TAYLOR

My favorite way to cook trout is by poaching. Into my lightweight 7-inch titanium frying pan I place two or three small trout, gutted and with heads and tails removed. I add an inch of water, place the pan over a backpacking stove, and heat. The trick is to *simmer* the trout for a few minutes. Be careful not to let the water come to a rolling boil or it will break the fish apart and you'll end up with trout stew. Use a small, plastic spatula to gently press the fish flat as they cook and carefully turn them once.

The fish are done when the dorsal fin comes out with a light tug, usually after about ten minutes of cooking. Slide the trout gently onto a small plate, sprinkle with salt and pepper, and enjoy a meal only alpine lake fishing can offer. 🐟

Want to help FWP preserve and manage alpine trout lakes? Take part in the Angler Fishing Log Program. Participants write down their mountain lake angling activities in a logbook provided by FWP and then send it to the department at the end of the year. Jim Vashro, FWP regional fisheries manager in Kalispell, says he and other fisheries managers and biologists use the records to learn what's occurring at mountain trout lakes so they can decide how best to manage the fisheries. Sign up on-line at fwp.mt.gov/fishing/guide/fishingLog/default.html, or call FWP at (406) 444-2545.

LAKESIDE Left: Many mountain lakes are ringed with dense brush, making casting a challenge and bear encounters more likely. Right: Though the highest alpine lakeshores are barren of trees, reaching prime fishing spots is hard due to steep talus banks. Fortunately, the trout are usually eager to take a fly or lure, and fishing from a single spot will often spell success.



JOHN FRALEY/FWP

Mountain Fishing Lakes Resources

- ▶ USDA Forest Service: www.fs.fed.us/maps/
- ▶ USDA Forest Service, Northern Region: (406) 329-3511
Montana office: Federal Building, 200 East Broadway, P.O. Box 7669, Missoula, MT 59807-7669
- ▶ FWP Fishing Guide: fwp.mt.gov/fishing/guide/
- ▶ FWP Absaroka-Beartooth Mountain Lakes Guide: fwp.mt.gov/regions/r5/mountainlakes.html
- ▶ *Fishing the Beartooths*, by Pat Marcuson
- ▶ *The Montanans' Fishing Guide, Volume 1*, by Dick Konizeski
- ▶ *Fly-Fishing the Rocky Mountain Backcountry*, by Rich Osthoff

