

Panfish

ON THE

Prairie

Eastern Montana's fishing ponds may not draw the tourists that mountain trout rivers do. That's fine with local anglers, who are happy to have places to catch abundant, tasty fish all to themselves.

By Jack Ballard

It's not what you'd expect to hear from a fisheries manager in a state heralded for its world-class trout streams, where anglers from across the country flock to fish snow-fed rivers for rainbows, browns, and cutthroat. "I'd like our region to lay claim to being the panfish capital of Montana," says Steve Dalbey, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks regional fisheries manager in Glasgow. "We have some of the state's best fishing for crappie, bluegill, and perch in this region, and we're proud of that."

Panfish?

Dalbey's proclamation underlines the contrast between fishing opportunities in Montana's two halves. As you cross the state from west to east, trout rivers and streams peter out

just as the mountains do. But hundreds of ponds and several major reservoirs dot the rolling prairie landscape east of a line from about Shelby southeast to Broadus. The big waters—Fresno, Nelson, and especially Fort Peck—offer top-notch angling well known to Montanans and a growing number of nonresidents. But few people are aware how essential small ponds are for providing fishing opportunities to local anglers.

"People in eastern Montana like to fish just as much as the people who live in Bozeman and Dillon and Hamilton," says Dalbey. "But they can't go out to a Gallatin River, or a Beaverhead, or a Bitterroot. In many cases, these ponds are the only fisheries that small communities have."



NICE EATER Yellow perch are mainstays for eastern Montana pond anglers of all ages. The fish are found throughout the region, bite readily, and are delicious.

SHUTTERSTOCK

OPPORTUNITIES

Though Montana’s fishing ponds (including small reservoirs, sometimes called “stock dams”) garner far less attention than the state’s storied trout streams, they provide no less in the way of recreation. Found in all of FWP’s seven regions but most abundantly in the state’s eastern half, ponds often offer more fishing diversity than cold-water streams. In addition to panfish, the prairie waters may contain rainbow trout, northern pike, bass, and channel catfish. Because sunshine and shallow water create fertile conditions, the fish often grow large. They’re good to eat, too. Most river trout anglers in western Montana fish only for sport, releasing their catch. But the majority of fish taken from prairie ponds end up filleted, dredged in flour, and fried to a golden brown.

What’s more, pond fishing is easy and relaxing. Many waters are small enough to fish from shore or a float tube—no big boat or trailer required.

OPEN TO PUBLIC ACCESS

In its two eastern regions (Region 6, the northeast, and Region 7, the southeast), FWP stocks 200 fishing ponds ranging from 1 to 100 acres open to public access. About half the ponds in Region 6 are on federal, state, or city holdings. In Region 7, roughly 40 percent of the ponds are on public property.

On private land, FWP provides fish and conducts population surveys every few years in exchange for landowners providing reasonable levels of public fishing access. “It’s an old-school handshake approach. That’s how ranchers like to do things out here,” says Mike Backes, FWP regional fisheries manager in Miles City. Permission from the landowner is needed each time an angler goes fishing, but that usually requires no more than a phone call. Anglers can obtain

Jack Ballard, a writer in Red Lodge, has written several books on natural history.

the names of landowners who have ponds stocked by FWP by calling the regional headquarters (see “Get the guides,” on page 39.)

Many pond fishing opportunities were created by FWP in partnerships with local communities and conservation groups. For instance, Home Run Pond in Glasgow is “highly supported by the town and heavily

“In many cases, these ponds are the only fisheries that small communities have.”



SUNNY FORECAST Bluegills, a species of sunfish, are stocked in deeper ponds where FWP establishes multi-species fisheries. Other fish include bass, crappie, northern pike, perch, and, in larger waters, catfish.

used by kids,” says Dalbey. A recently acquired fishing access site on 70-acre Bailey Reservoir—a lake 25 miles southwest of Havre that supports northern pike, yellow perch, rainbow trout, and crappie—was purchased with fishing license dollars and a donation from the Great Falls Chapter of Walleyes Unlimited. “It’s an incredibly popular ice-fishing destination that gets a lot of use in the summer as well,” Dalbey says.

THE SHALLOWNESS PROBLEM

The biggest challenge in managing pond fisheries is keeping fish alive in the harsh prairie environment. Summerkill occurs when the shallow water becomes too warm to hold sufficient dissolved oxygen. Winterkill is

when deep snow blocks sunlight from underwater plants. They die and stop producing oxygen, while microbes that consume the decomposing vegetation use what oxygen remains. Because shallow ponds are more susceptible to summerkill and winterkill, Region 6 requires them to be at least 13 feet deep before it will establish a multi-species fishery. Minimum depth for the multi-species ponds in Region 7, which receives less snow, is 11 feet.

Adding to the shallowness problem is sedimentation. After several decades, ponds fill with soil eroding from surrounding lands. Many eastern Montana ponds are 40 years or older. “Some are getting to the point where they are just too shallow for fish to survive,” says Backes.

FWP helps some vulnerable pond fisheries with wind-driven aerators that pump oxygen into the water. “The objective is to give fish a fighting chance to survive winter in the ponds that have marginal habitat,” says Dalbey. FWP has installed and maintains roughly 20 aeration systems in eastern Montana. The Bureau of Land Management helps with aerator installation and maintenance on ponds on federal land.

In what are known as “put-grow-and-take” ponds, FWP stocks rainbow trout every few years. “The trout grow very fast,” says Backes. “If a 2-inch fingerling planted in spring survives one winter, it could very well be a 2-pounder by the end of the following summer.”

Backes acknowledges that summer- and winterkill can be management headaches, “but even so, it amazes me how often trout survive three or even four years out here,” he says. “And when they live that long with all the forage these ponds have, they grow like gangbusters, getting up to 5 or 6 pounds.”

Almost all rainbow trout planted in eastern Montana ponds are reared at FWP’s Fort Peck, Miles City, Bluewater Springs, or Big Springs Hatcheries. “Many ponds are now

stocked via helicopter, which lets us plant fish sooner in spring, when roads are still muddy and impassable,” says Backes. “It’s less expensive and more efficient than having to drive trucks all over eastern Montana.”

In multi-species fisheries, FWP stocks a combination of fish that may include smallmouth or largemouth bass, northern pike, crappies, bluegill, perch, and, in larger waters, channel catfish. Unlike trout, which need moving water to spawn, many cool-water and warmwater species can reproduce in most ponds or reservoirs and maintain their populations.

While state hatcheries provide the cold-water trout, the fish that FWP stocks in multi-species ponds mainly come from other ponds. “We trap and transfer through a very careful process,” says Dalbey. “If Pond X has lots of bluegill and it tests negative for aquatic invasive species, we’ll trap some fish and test them for disease. If they are healthy, we’ll transfer them to Pond Y. That’s the most cost-effective way to jumpstart a fishery.”

Dalbey warns that moving game fish from one pond to another should be done only by trained fisheries biologists. “There’s potential for spreading disease or invasive species, so it’s critical to follow the strictest protocols,” he says. “This is not something landowners or anglers should ever do on their own.”

Keeping tabs on ponds from year to year is another challenge. “We don’t have staff to check on every pond and see if it winterkilled or has some other problem,” Dalbey says. His region has set up “creel boxes” at many ponds where anglers can submit notes on problems, good fishing, or anything else they encounter. Both regions also rely on anglers reporting pond conditions by phone or e-mail.

CLOSE TO HOME

Dalbey and Backes acknowledge that eastern Montana’s fishing ponds will never attract anglers from Seattle or Minneapolis the way Fort Peck Reservoir or the Madison River do. That’s fine by them. “The typical angler on our ponds is coming from less than an hour away,” says Backes. “The ponds provide a local resource for fishing in a region where

there aren’t many other opportunities.”

That’s true for adult anglers and youngsters alike, adds Dalbey. “Conservationists are made, not born. If you want kids to care about a healthy environment, which we very much do, then you need to give them opportunities to be outside and enjoy outdoor

recreation like fishing,” he says. “We do what we can with the resources that are available. These ponds are just as important to eastern Montanans as the Big Hole or Gallatin Rivers are to western Montanans. The girl or boy who catches that first trout or perch in a pond could get hooked on fishing for life.”



WHO NEEDS A MOUNTAIN STREAM? Clockwise from top left: Though smallmouth and largemouth bass are catchable from shore, a canoe or float tube allows pond anglers to cover more water; rainbow trout grow quickly in the fertile waters of eastern Montana; many fishing access sites were created as partnerships between FWP and local communities or sportsmen’s groups; some towns hold kids’ fishing derbies at their local ponds, which are often the only angling opportunity for many miles.

Get the guides

FWP’s Regions 6 and 7 publish annual pond fishing guides. The booklets, available each spring in April, include maps, directions, and the latest sampling and stocking information. Obtain a guide by calling the Region 6 headquarters (406-228-3700) or Region 7 headquarters (406-234-0900). The Region 6 guide is also available online. Click the brown “Regions” tab at the top of the FWP homepage (fwp.mt.gov), then click on “Region 6” and scroll down for the link to the guide.



Twin crappies

ROBERT MICHELSON

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JACK BALLARD; JOSHUA BERGAN; JACK BALLARD; SHUTTERSTOCK; NEIL & JAMES WISHER