

The PRICE of POPULARITY

Anglers, kayakers, boaters,
and inner-tubers love the scenic,
sunny, trout-filled Madison River.
That's the problem. BY BEN PIERCE

THE PEACE OF PARADISE Alone in the waning light, an angler waits for an evening hatch on Baker's Hole, near the Yellowstone National Park boundary just north of West Yellowstone.

PHOTO BY KEN TAKATA

Each spring when snowmelt cascades down from the Gravelly Mountains, water levels on the Madison River rise and a flurry of life erupts. Newly emerging adult caddisflies, midges, and mayflies flutter on the water surface while golden stonefly and salmonfly nymphs crawl out from beneath the bowling ball-sized substrate up onto streamside willows, where they metamorphize into adults and dry their wings in the sunshine.

The wave of life sweeping up the Madison River ushers in a season of bounty for trout that fed little in the cold water of winter. Spoiled for choice, the rainbows and browns now feed on the protein-rich bugs drifting in the current and—to a dry-fly angler's delight—floating on the water surface. The insect abundance draws anglers back to the Madison year after year in the hopes of the ultimate reward: a big trout breaching the surface to swallow a big dry fly, followed by a reel-ripping run and then the sight of the fish's sparkling flanks in the bottom of the landing net.

"The Madison is what so many anglers think of when they think of the West—wide-open spaces, big mountains, stunning backdrops, and lots of big fish," says outfitter Sean Blaine of Bozeman.

For decades, the Madison River has made honest men of anglers known for telling tall tales. But all those stories of unbelievable hatches, postcard-worthy scenery, and large trout have come with a cost.

Today the Madison is one of the most pressured fisheries in Montana. In addition to anglers, increasing numbers of boaters, kayakers, and float-tubers enjoy the river's beauty and mostly gentle, easily navigated current. Like on so many Montana rivers, the growing use creates conflicts. Now anglers, boaters, landowners, and others are trying to figure out how much use the Madison can sustain while providing the recreational experiences so many people seek. "For the health of the trout fishery and to maintain the quality of experience, something needs to change," Blaine says. "I think

Ben Pierce is an editor at large for the Bozeman Daily Chronicle.



BIG BUG Abundant aquatic insects like this salmonfly, shown nearly life sized, bring trout to the surface of the Madison River, creating some of Montana's best dry-fly-fishing.

the Madison is in danger of being loved to death."

Yellowstone Park to Quake Lake

The Madison is a river of majestic origins. The Gibbon and Firehole Rivers, excellent trout streams in their own right, flow west and north, respectively, across the Yellowstone Caldera before joining to form the Madison River in the heart of Yellowstone National Park. From there, the Madison winds west through meadows and low hillsides covered with stands of torched timber from the Yellowstone fires of 1988. The park section of the Madison is popular with tourists throughout the summer and with locals who hike in to the legendary Baker's Hole and Barnes Pool.

The Madison exits the park north of West Yellowstone and dumps into the Madison

Arm of Hebgen Lake. Montana Power Company built Hebgen Dam in 1914 to regulate downstream flows to Ennis Lake, formed in 1901 by the creation of Madison Dam. Before the dams and the introduction of rainbow and brown trout, the Madison supported native populations of westslope cutthroat trout, Arctic grayling, and mountain whitefish. Though some whitefish and cutthroat remain, today the fishery is composed mainly of non-native browns and rainbows.

In 1959, a 7.5-magnitude earthquake centered 15 miles north of West Yellowstone set off an 80-million-ton landslide that blocked the flow of the Madison River two miles below Hebgen Dam. The landslide, barreling at an estimated 100 miles per hour, killed 28 people camping downstream. The slide formed Quake Lake, which holds a healthy population of trout, some enormous, that venture up the river to Hebgen Dam. In 2006, Bob Jacklin, owner of Jacklin's Fly Shop in West Yellowstone, landed a 10-pound brown trout in the short stretch of river between the lakes. "I consider the Madison below Hebgen Dam the best half mile of river in Montana," Jacklin says. "It's loaded with fish."

Jacklin says nymphs take most of the trout in the fast water below the dam. Small caddis patterns produce good numbers of rainbow and brown trout throughout the year. In February and March, rainbows move up from Quake Lake to spawn in the shallow riffles below Cabin Creek. They're often followed by large browns that can be caught on egg patterns and streamers.

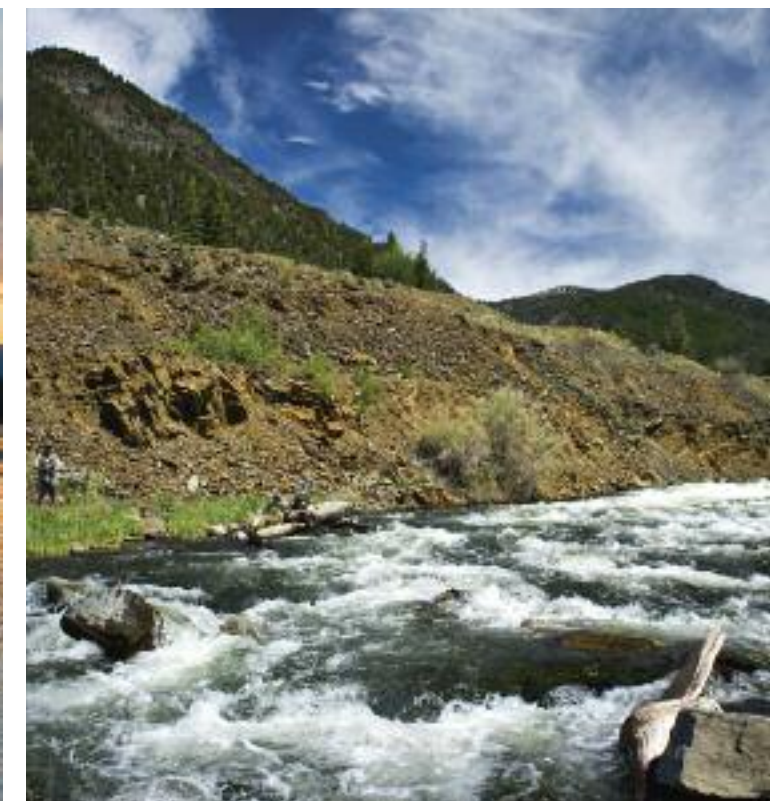
Quake Lake to McAtee Bridge

The Madison River exits Quake Lake in a torrent of whitewater better suited to kayakers than anglers. Though anglers can catch trout below boulders and in the slack water along the banks, the Slide, as it's known, is a challenging if not dangerous place to fish.

From Lyons Bridge downstream, the Madison starts to slow a bit and widen, turning into its nickname: the "50-Mile Riffle." Continuing down to Ennis, the Madison's steady gradient, varied habitat, and well-oxygenated flows are responsible for the river's prolific insect hatches. "The mix of



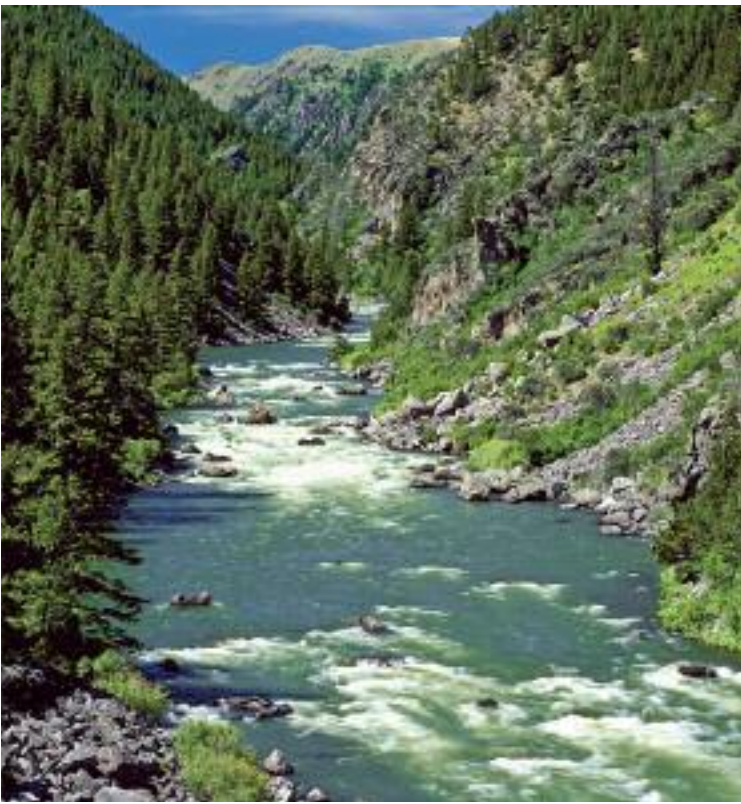
WELCOME BACK Top: After declining during the 1990s from whirling disease, the Madison River's rainbow trout population has rebounded to previous high levels. Rainbow trout and brown trout numbers are now about equal. Below left: Anglers catch huge trout in Hebgen Lake, an impoundment just north of West Yellowstone near the border of Yellowstone National Park. Below right: The Slide area below Quake Lake, created in 1959 when a massive earthquake send a landslide into the Madison, is fishable but dangerous for wading. The fast water in this upstream stretch is used mostly by kayakers.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: STEVEN AWE; WILL JORDAN; JOSHUA BERGAN; JOHN JURACEK



A CLASSIC Above: Madison River scenes like this, near Ennis, are what many people envision when they think of Montana trout water. Below left: Farther downstream, the river narrows as it flows between the towering granite walls of Bear Trap Canyon. Though anglers need to watch for rattlesnakes and black bears in this mostly wilderness stretch, they will rarely run into much competition. Below right: “Another way to get away from the crowds,” says Bozeman fishing guide Sean Blaine, “is to fish in early season or late season, or time your launch or wading for before or after the majority of guide trips have headed out.”



“The appeal for me has always been that the river is wadeable in most places, with the potential to catch a large fish in an absolutely spectacular setting.”

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: CHUCK HANEY; LIME DURAN; MONTANA OUTDOORS; VICTOR SCHEIDT; JOHN LAMMING

cobble bottom, boulders, areas of fast water, braids, and runs create little microhabitats with a lot of habitat variability for insects and fish,” says Dave Moser, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks fisheries biologist in Bozeman.

Moser has been fishing the Madison since he was a teenager. “The appeal for me has always been that the river is wadeable in most places, with the potential to catch a large fish in an absolutely spectacular setting,” he says.

Continuing downstream to McAtee Bridge, the Madison offers many access points for wading and floating. The high peaks of the Madison Range, including monolithic Sphinx Mountain, loom on the eastern horizon. During spring and summer, caddis flies swarm above bankside junipers in the late light of day, and the evening rise keeps an-

glers on the water until well after dark.

The river’s combination of abundant fish, prolific hatches, and jaw-dropping scenery attracted fly-fishing authors Joe Brooks, Lee Wulff, and others to the Madison in the 1940s and ’50s. Their stories in *Field & Stream* and *Outdoor Life* brought the river international acclaim. The publicity also drew an influx of anglers and created the first hints of user conflict. In 1959, float fishing was closed on the Madison, with the exception of a 13-mile stretch from Varney Bridge to Ennis Lake. Though that restriction was later lifted, over the next 30 years others have been tried to maintain a high-quality experience for anglers while accommodating growing commercial and recreational use. For instance, currently two stretches are wade-fishing only.

By the late 1990s, parking lots on the Madison’s fishing access sites overflowed with vehicles. Angling pressure, outfitted trips, and nonresident use nearly doubled from 1997 to 2003, primarily on the upper Madison between Hebgen Dam and Ennis Lake. In 2003, FWP documented more than

190,000 angler days, making the Madison the most heavily fished river in the state. Fans of the beloved river worried it was reaching capacity. In 2006, a group of citizens met with FWP and the Bureau of Land Management to discuss concerns that crowding was degrading the experience of river users, harming the river ecosystem, and bothering adjacent landowners.

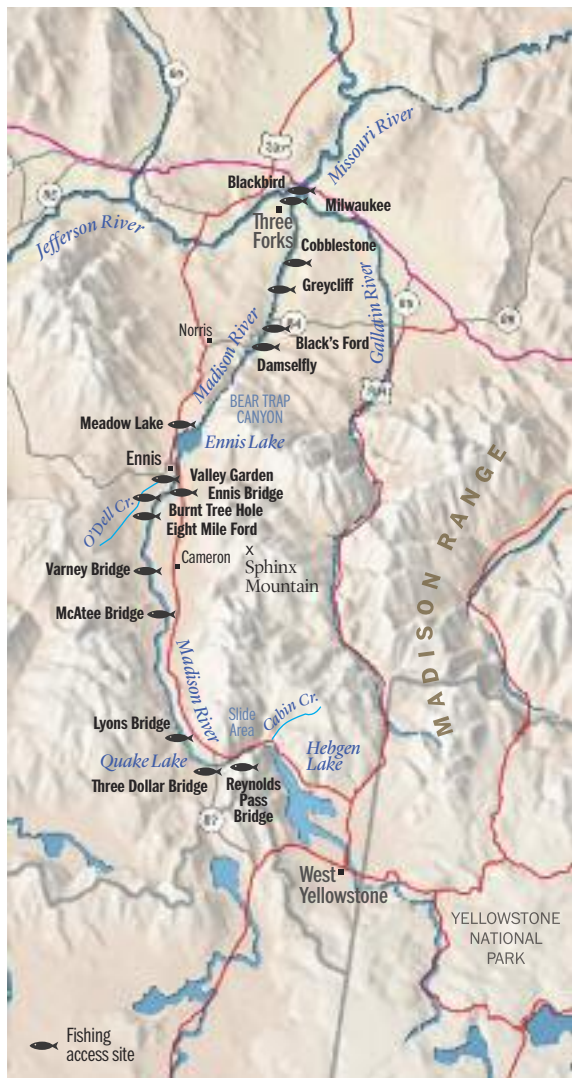
Surveys conducted by FWP in 2008-09 found that 68 percent of avid longtime resident anglers had either stopped fishing the Madison or fished it less due to crowding and conflicts. At the same time, the survey found a high level of satisfaction among anglers and boaters who had fished the river for only a few years. “A lot of anglers on the Madison don’t perceive the crowding issue because they are coming from crowded rivers in other states,” says Blaine.

Based on past creel surveys and conversations with longtime anglers, Moser says catch rates have decreased. “Trout populations are at or higher than historical levels,” he says. “But the fish are just harder to catch, likely because of the increased boat traffic and the number of flies cast over them each day.”

To disperse use on the Madison, the Fish and Wildlife Commission approved opening the river to year-round fishing beginning in March 2016. The change opens three sections on the upper river previously closed from the end of February to the third Saturday in May (see sidebar on page 22).

McAtee Bridge to Ennis

Below McAtee Bridge, the Madison winds through cottonwood-lined banks in a broad valley. The open landscape is home to two wolf packs and thousands of wintering elk, which return to the forested mountains in summer. Because the river braids more in this



stretch, the side channels offer anglers opportunities to get off the main river and explore.

The river reach below Varney Bridge is hallowed water. This is where wild trout management in the United States began. In 1966, FWP fisheries biologist Dick Vincent began electrofishing the Madison to survey its trout populations. He discovered heavy losses of rainbow and brown trout because of low flows during February, March, and April. His data helped convince Montana Power to release more water from Hebgen Dam in the spring, and to establish minimum annual flows downstream from the impoundment. The primarily wild trout populations downstream from Ennis Lake increased nearly 50 percent in the years following the flow adjustment. Oddly, trout on the upper river, which contained mostly

stocked fish, did not fare as well.

Puzzling over the discrepancy, Vincent theorized that fish stocking on the Madison River was limiting the ability of wild trout to flourish. In 1970, FWP tested the theory with a controversial experiment. The department discontinued stocking the Varney Bridge section, from the bridge downstream four miles to Ennis. Meanwhile, FWP stocked, for the first time, a 1.4-mile stretch of nearby O'Dell Creek, which had a healthy fishery. "When we quit stocking the Madison, populations of wild trout, both rainbow and brown, just started to explode," Vincent recalls. "Numbers of larger brown trout and rainbow trout increased 200 to 400 percent within three years after stock-



HALLOWED WATER Dick Vincent, of Bozeman, at Varney Bridge. Now retired, the FWP fisheries biologist led a study from 1970 to 1974, on the stretch downstream of the bridge, showing that stocking hatchery fish suppressed wild trout populations. "When we saw large trout numbers in the Varney section triple [after stocking was discontinued], well, that just blew us away," Vincent says.

“When we quit stocking the Madison, populations of wild trout, both rainbow and brown, just started to explode.”

ing ceased.” At the same time, trout numbers in newly stocked O'Dell Creek dropped from 515 per mile to 280.

Later research in Montana and other states showed that hatchery trout push wild fish out of holding lies, making them more vulnerable to fishing. Backed by Vincent's work, the state ended stocking in the Madison in 1974 and ushered in the era of wild trout management

More water to fish

This past spring FWP opened to year-round fishing three sections previously closed from late February to late May. The section of the Madison between Ennis Bridge and Ennis Lake was closed starting in the 1980s to protect nesting Canada geese, but the waterfowl are now so abundant such protection is unnecessary. FWP closed the stretches from Quake Lake to Lyons Bridge and Lyons Bridge to Varney Bridge after whirling disease struck the river in the 1990s. The disease killed 90 percent of the Madison's young rainbow trout between 1991 and 1997, and the closure was aimed at protecting remaining rainbows, which used the upper river to spawn. The Madison has since experienced a remarkable rebound. "We don't know this for certain, but one explanation could be that the fish more susceptible to dying from whirling disease were eliminated from the population, and the ones that remain are more resistant," says FWP fisheries biologist Dave Moser. Rainbow numbers have bounced back to pre-1990s numbers. "Opening the river to year-round fishing will not affect the rainbow or brown trout populations," Moser says. "Our goals with that regulation are to provide a time of year for residents to fish and to spread out the use." ■



on rivers throughout the state.

Not stocking rivers was a hard sell when the answer to poor fishing had always been to add more hatchery trout. Business owners in Ennis and West Yellowstone feared the public would no longer come to fish the Madison. But anglers flocked to the river, lured by reports of abundant wild trout. "Dick Vincent did a great job proving that we have a better fishery on the Madison by letting it go wild," Jacklin, the West Yellowstone fly shop owner, says. "Because they're wild fish, they're not as easy to catch, but there are plenty of them out there."

Bear Trap Canyon

Downstream from Ennis, the Madison River passes through the towering granite walls of Bear Trap Canyon. Surrounded by the Lee Metcalf Wilderness, the canyon has no road access and can be visited only on foot or by intrepid boaters. The Class IV Kitchen Sink rapid keeps most float fishermen out of the canyon, and frequent sightings of bears and rattlesnakes convince many hikers to go elsewhere. That makes the canyon a good spot for brave and wary anglers seeking solitude on the increasingly busy Madison.

From Norris Bridge the river continues downstream to Three Forks, where it meets



BIG GULP A rainbow trout rises to emerging caddis flies. The Madison's famous "Mother's Day" caddis hatch occurs on the lower river downstream of Ennis Lake typically during the first week of May when water temperatures hit 50 to 52 degrees.

the Jefferson and Gallatin to form the Missouri River. The river slows and warms in this reach but can still provide good fishing. During the "Mother's Day" caddis hatch (late April to early May), blizzards of bugs send trout into a frenzy. The lower river is used mostly by anglers until June. That's when the "bikini hatch" heats up and the

river gets taken over by inner-tubers, who enjoy the lazy float from Warm Springs to Black's Ford.

Because it's hard to sneak up on trout amid flotillas of splashing inner-tubers and increasing numbers of fishing boats, many anglers now avoid both the lower and upper river in summer—the prime time for dry-fly fishing. "It's a wide river, so it can support high numbers of people," says Moser, "but you see conflicts at crowded boat ramps and where wade anglers have a hard time finding places to fish."

Hoping to find solutions to the crowding issue, FWP is compiling data on angler use and satisfaction and will present its report to outfitters and other user groups this summer. Then the department will draft an environmental assessment (EA) outlining various options proposed by the public—such as resident-only days or stretches reserved solely for wading anglers—and submit the EA for public review and comment before drafting a final plan. The plan will mark a new course for a river that's at no loss for love.

"When you consider how popular this spectacular river has become, everyone who fishes and loves the Madison should have a voice in its future," says Moser. 🐻



WHOSE RIVER IS THIS? The sparkling "50-Mile Riffle" that characterizes the Madison is an easy float with outstanding fly-fishing amid some of the West's most spectacular scenery. Maintaining angling quality like this is the goal of a new FWP plan aimed at managing the river's growing number of anglers and other recreationists.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LEFT, THOMAS LEE; JOHN WARNER; BEN PERCE; VICTOR SCHENDEL