

What We're After

Finding fish and solace at FWP's family ponds

By Ben Long



HOOKED The author holds one of his son Aidan's first trout at Buffalo Head Pond.

Henry David Thoreau once wrote, “Many men go fishing all of their lives without knowing that it is not fish they are after.” That well-worn quote was the furthest thing from my mind as my son and I drove down the country road that leads to Pine Grove Family Fishing Pond outside Kalispell. Stuff it, Henry. We were after fish.

In the oncoming lane going the other way we passed a white tanker truck with a nylon net rising like a ship's pennant above the cab. The truck was in the rearview mirror before my mind clicked: That was a Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks hatchery truck! It had just been to the pond! I turned to Aidan in the passenger seat.

“Buddy,” I said, “we are in for some action.”

Real-world fishing

Read the glossy magazines or watch the outdoor videos and you might think Montana is all drift boats and pack trains, royal bull elk and rod-bending rainbows. In this fairy-tale Montana, kids skip to the local spring creek, where the rancher's dog welcomes them with a wagging tail. They dig a can full of worms and bring home a stringer of trout to fry up for dinner.

But real-life Montana is not a magazine cover or YouTube video. Montanans often

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hold down multiple jobs that gobble up weekends and evenings. Filling the tank is a considerable investment. We keep watch over our unruly kids, and maybe their cousins and a few neighbor kids to round out the mob.

Parents are often too weary to load up the SUV for a week-long fishing vacation. And, as in the rest of the country, most Montana kids live in cities or towns, with more access to asphalt than trout streams.

But throw in a family fishing pond and you'll discover that, as Jim Vashro, a retired Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks regional fisheries manager, says, “Everything is just better with a little water and some fish slime.”

Small budget, big payoff

During his long career with FWP, Vashro helped build the fishing ponds in and around Kalispell, my hometown. He was an early advocate for FWP's statewide Community Fishing Pond Program, which funds and supports community efforts to create or improve easy-access ponds that have high catch rates.

There is no hard-and-fast definition of what makes a family-friendly fishing pond. The FWP website lists 64, most of them ponds but also a few lakes and small reservoirs, within and outside town limits.

Regulations vary. Some ponds are only for kids age 14 and under. Older visitors can't fish there, though they can help the youngsters. Other ponds, like those near

Kalispell, are open to adults and kids alike. Adults can fish with or without kids, but only young anglers may keep fish.

Kids usually don't hook big fish here—though there are exceptions I'll explain soon. But they do catch fish, at least more often than they would fishing Montana's larger and more challenging rivers and reservoirs. And if you want a kid to learn to love fishing, outdoor educators say there needs to be steady action, especially on the first few outings.

The program's annual budget is \$50,000, recently boosted by the Montana Legislature. But in my experience the return on investment cannot be measured merely in dollars.

Hitting it out of the park

Glasgow's Home Run Pond is a prime example of a high-value community fishing pond. Its humble half-acre supports five species: rainbow trout, yellow perch, sunfish, catfish, and crappies. The pond is open year round for both open water and ice fishing.

“Glasgow is surrounded by water—Fort Peck Reservoir and the Milk and Missouri Rivers—but those are difficult and inaccessible places for a beginning angler,” says Andrew McKean, a longtime Glasgow resident, field editor for *Outdoor Life*, and a father who regularly took his three kids to Home Run Pond when they were younger. “People here recognized that if we could build an accessible fishing pond close to town so that

kids could ride their bikes to it, make it family friendly in a parklike setting, and use FWP resources to keep it stocked, it could be a real benefit to the community,” he says.

And it has been. That's true not just in Glasgow but also in communities small and large across the state.

Even so, I gave family fishing ponds nary a thought until I was a father myself.

“I got one!”

When Aidan was about four years old, he caught his first trout—a six-inch hatchery cutthroat—at Buffalo Head Pond. It's a two-acre basin in north Kalispell that appears to be filled mostly with street runoff. Buffalo Head is stocked periodically, but the trout don't survive long in its warm, murky water. Aidan and I fished there a few times before we hit the hot bite. He reeled his first fish right up to the shore, but at the last second the fish leapt and threw the hook. Fatherly instinct kicked in. I jumped into the waist-deep water to scoop the trout into the landing net. Aidan posed for the hero shot with a death grip around the fish's gills. I would teach him the finer points of catch-and-release later.

In subsequent years, Aidan developed severe epilepsy and devastating intellectual disabilities. For a long while, we spent far more time in hospitals than we did fishing. We camped and canoed as much as we could, but the family's finances and free time were constrained. Once he grew heavier than 50 pounds, I knew I could no longer carry him out of the backcountry in case of a medical emergency. The frontcountry became our new frontier.

My son will never join me in the mountains chasing elk or bighorn sheep, but these local ponds provide us with a slice of Montana's great outdoors and endless hours of quiet moments under the state's big skies.

Aidan often must be dragged off the

water, sometimes insisting we stay until we catch the “biggest fish in the lake.” We actually did that once, hooking a feisty brood stock rainbow that probably topped eight pounds. FWP periodically plants these hatchery monsters when they reach old age. I hooked it, watched the rod bend, then handed the rig to Aidan. The lunker trout almost pulled him into the water before we wrestled it ashore.

Then there was that day at Pine Grove Pond when we arrived right after the hatchery truck left. It was not the fishing frenzy one might imagine, but we steadily caught trout all afternoon.

On fishless days there are plenty of other creatures to entertain us. My son and I see wildlife that, like us, are drawn by the fish: otters, mink, bald eagles, great blue herons, and belted kingfishers. On several ponds, we've seen how ospreys learn to drop from the sky to seize dazed trout fresh from release. There are also painted turtles and no end to the waterfowl. Lively goldeneyes dance and whistle in the spring, omnipresent mallards rear their broods in summer, and colorful bands of wood ducks stage at the ponds for their early fall migrations.

Lessons and solace

We watch people, too, many as colorful and entertaining as the wildlife. Like the little girl in the pink tutu we sometimes see speeding laps around Pine Grove Pond on her BMX bicycle. Or the teenagers in small clusters or romantic pairs looking for a bit of privacy.

Another pond constituency is people like me: self-taught fly-casters who seem perpetually stuck in the novice stage. Yes, we could practice at the city park, but why not hone our casting (and hook-sets) with live targets?

Then there's another type: the Anony-

mous Hero. One breezy fall day at Pine Grove Pond, Aidan watched as I fruitlessly flailed away with my fly rod. An older fellow came by and offered to let us share his rig—a nice spinning outfit with a quarter-ounce copper Cyclone spoon on 4-pound-test line.

“You can cover a lot of water with this, even with a headwind,” Mr. Anonymous Hero said.

He and Aidan began reeling in and releasing one slab rainbow after another, while I spent my time repeatedly unhooking my fly from the willows.

After an hour, the stranger tipped his hat, gave the rod and reel to Aidan as a gift, and walked off. Aidan watched him go, looking like the kid at the end of *Shane*. We've been hauling in trout with that outfit ever since.

So generosity can be taught at these diminutive waters. There are other lessons, too, such as responsibility. Like taking one fish home but leaving the rest for other kids. Or the importance of picking up your trash, dramatically demonstrated one afternoon by a hen mallard frantically trying to escape from a tangle of discarded monofilament. We waded in and snipped the bird free and have been diligent about collecting litter ever since.

Recently, there came the sad day when I had to tell Aidan that his grandfather—with whom we had fished these ponds—had died. I took Aidan out of school early and decided to break the bitter news at our local pond.

Thinking later about why I was drawn to that spot, it occurs to me that those places I've hunted and fished have always been places of solace. They are places that continue to make sense when the rest of the world makes none. If a father can pass that on to a son, it seems one of the more worthy lessons of fatherhood.

Maybe Thoreau was right. Maybe it's not just fish we're after, after all. 🐟

Find a nearby family fishing pond

On the FWP website, search for “family fishing sites.” For each of the 64 waters, you'll find the species, sizes, and numbers of fish FWP has stocked there, and when stocking occurred. Each water includes a site map, fishing pressure information, regulations, any fish consumption advisories, contact information, and more.

State agencies, cities, counties, civic groups, or other community-based organizations wanting to create or enhance local fishing ponds can apply for an FWP grant. Typical enhancements include fishing piers, educational signs, pond construction or deepening, fish habitat, and aerators that prevent winterkill. To learn more, call or e-mail your nearest FWP regional office or the grant program administrator, Michelle McGree, at (406) 444-2432; MMcGree@mt.gov.