

# SMALL RIVER, BIG FISH

For years, the diminutive **Beaverhead River** produced phenomenal numbers of massive brown trout. Can those glory days ever return?

BY TOM DICKSON

#### SMALL BUT PRODUCTIVE

The Beaverhead seen from a hill near Dillon looking south (upstream) shows the serpentine river snaking through pasture and hay fields. One of the nation's top trophy brown trout waters, the tiny river flows at just one-third the rate of the nearby Big Hole and one-tenth that of the Missouri and upper Yellowstone rivers. PHOTO BY LINNETT LONG



**M**y first look at the Beaverhead River was such a letdown. For years I'd read about the storied blue-ribbon trout water in *Fly Fisherman* and other magazines, often mentioned with the equally renowned Big Hole, which flows nearby. I'd fished that big, brawling river, which in places surges past boulders the size of minivans. It's what I'd always imagined a Montana trout river to look like. I couldn't wait to fish what I assumed was the Big Hole's twin sister. Then I saw it.

"This is the legendary Beaverhead?" I said to myself, looking down at a dinky river only about 25 feet wide. Both banks were lined with walls of willows. The surrounding hills, flinty and dry, looked like prime rattlesnake habitat (a suspicion confirmed by other anglers I met there). Whereas the Big Hole offered vast open reaches to maneuver a drift boat, the narrow Beaverhead seemed fishable only with a raft, and even that looked difficult.

I watched rafts float by with people on the oars frantically navigating through the river's tight twists and turns while anglers casting up front struggled to keep from snagging bankside brush.

And woe to the poor wading anglers! While trying to find footing in the deep, narrow channel, they risked getting run over by rafts barreling down from upstream.

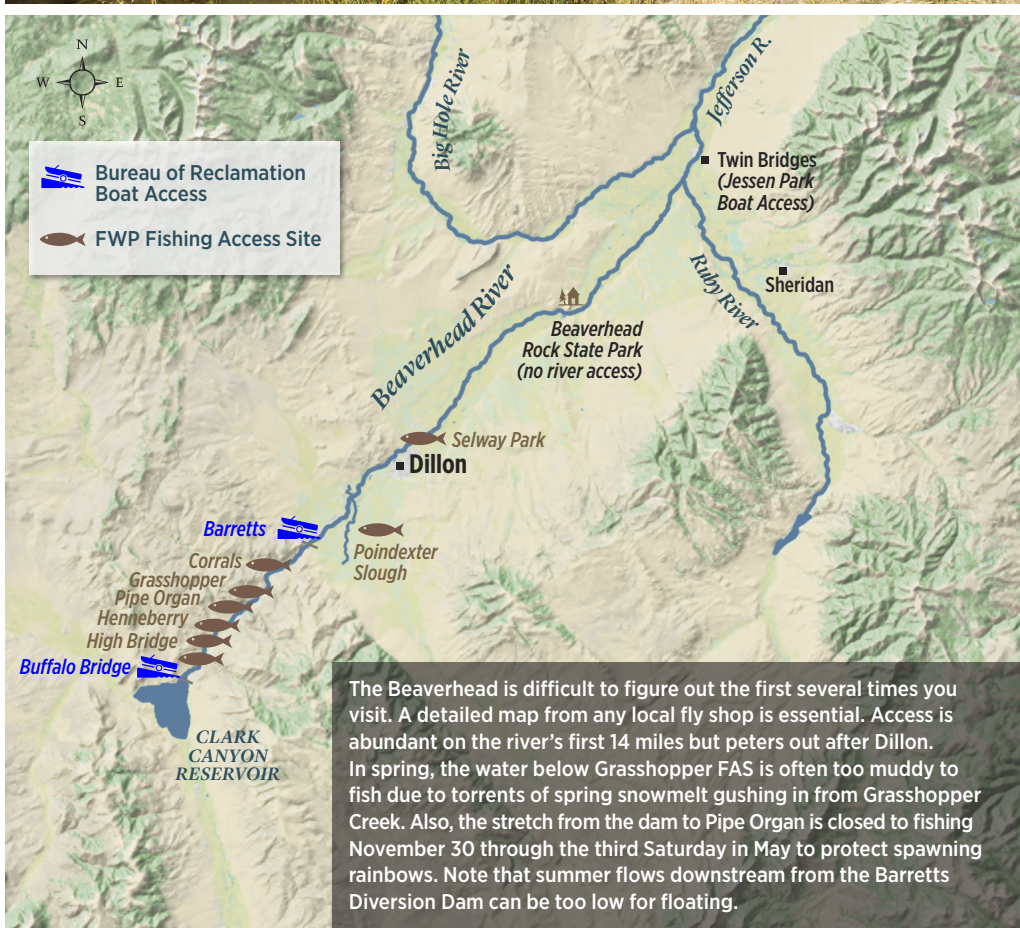
Disillusioned, I drove up to Clark Canyon Dam, which controls the river's flow. After wading into the river about 300 yards downstream, keeping a respectful distance above a few other anglers, I began drifting a Pinkhead Sowbug with a Pheasant Tail dropper. After a half hour I never had so much as a nibble, but two guys downstream seemed to be hooking fish every time I looked. And I mean big fish. I walked down to watch one of them lead a particularly massive trout to the shallows. He knelt down, unhooked the football-sized brown, and let it slide back into the Beaverhead.

As I headed back to my car, I thought, "So this is what all the fuss is about."

### A DAM (MOSTLY) HELPS TROUT

The Bannock, Shoshone, and other tribes who used the area for thousands of years as part of their seasonal movements likely

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weren't interested in fishing the Beaverhead, which then held native westslope cutthroats. If they wanted fish, they probably focused on the much bigger bull trout in the Clark Fork River to the north, or the ocean-running Pacific steelhead and salmon across the Continental Divide to the west.

The first mention of the river's trout was by Sergeant John Ordway of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, whose members waded up the serpentine stream from the Jefferson

River in July 1805. Wrote Ordway: "... the River crooked Shallow and rapid. Some deep holes where we caught a number of Trout." (See "Recognizing the 'beaver head,'" page 18.)

At the time, the Beaverhead looked much as it does today, with one huge exception. Clark Canyon Dam was built in 1964 to impound the Red Rock River and control irrigation flows for downstream cropland. What's now known as the Beaverhead begins below the dam, which controls the



**BROWN BEAUTY** Above: Though the Beaverhead produces some rainbows in its upper reaches, the river is mainly a brown trout factory. Top left: From the dam to Dillon, boaters can choose from eight concrete ramps for launching, plus a few unofficial dirt ramps like this one directly below the dam.

river's water levels, clarity, and temperature.

That water makes or breaks the existing trout population: rainbows and browns that were introduced in the early 1900s and out-competed the native cutthroats. "The fishery lives and dies by the dam releases," says Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks fisheries biologist Matt Jaeger.

Before damming, stretches of the river dried up in summer or became too warm for coldwater species to survive. Afterward, the dam moderated flows, sending a steady stream of cold water from the base of the reservoir even in midsummer. Phosphorous and calcium carbonate in the surrounding geology fuels rich growth of zooplankton and aquatic insects that fatten the trout in the reservoir and downstream.

During the first years after the dam was

built, water releases fluctuated widely during spring (rainbows) and fall (browns) spawning seasons, harming trout reproduction. Heavy flows flooded shallow areas, where trout then spawned. A few weeks later, the dam would hold back water, leaving eggs high and dry.

According to a 1985 *Montana Outdoors* article, FWP officials in the 1970s convinced the Bureau of Reclamation, the dam's owner and operator, to stabilize flows during the spawn. The resulting trout population boomed, increasing five-fold from 600 trout per mile—"probably fewer than existed before dam construction," wrote author Jerry Wells, then FWP regional fisheries manager in Bozeman—to 3,000 per mile. "The Beaverhead River [now] supports one of the most productive wild trout fisheries in the nation," Wells wrote.

As has been true for decades, browns outnumber rainbows roughly 5:1 in the Beaverhead's upper few miles; downstream from Pipe Organ Fishing Access Site the river is almost all browns.

Though it hardly seems possible, the trout population further improved in the late

1990s. Five consecutive years of heavy snows and steady rains filled the reservoir and allowed for abundant spring and fall releases that inundated additional downstream habitat with trout-producing water. "There were so many big fish in there during that time it was unbelievable," says Jaeger, who has been enamored with the river since first fishing it at age 20 in 1996. "The biggest trout I ever caught was a 27-inch rainbow that must have weighed 10 pounds. When it jumped out of the water, another angler yelled over at me, 'That's a *steelhead!*'"

### **BOOM THEN BUST**

News of fish like that travels fast, even in the days before YouTube and Instagram. Anglers from across the country descended on the Beaverhead. Crowding got so bad in the 1990s the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission closed, on a rotating schedule, certain sections of the Beaverhead and the nearby Big Hole, experiencing its own angling boom, to float fishing by nonresidents and outfitters. The stretches were only open to resident and nonresident wading anglers and

resident noncommercial floaters. In addition, the commission placed a moratorium on new outfitters for both rivers and capped the number of client days during the peak season for all existing outfitters to their “historical use.”

Over the past two decades, outfitters have learned to live with the new rules, though some still say the restrictions weren’t necessary and initially hurt their businesses. Local anglers and nonresident waders continue to support the restrictions. The now-called Fish and Wildlife Commission has considered similar rules for other Montana rivers experiencing increased angling pressure.

Since the Beaverhead’s heydays, the number of trout per mile has stayed about the same, but the percentage of fish over 18 inches has declined dramatically. From 1997 to 2000, the river averaged 2,044 brown trout per mile, with an astonishing 35 percent over 18 inches. The average number of fish held steady through the drought years of 2001-09 (1,968) and 2013-18 (2,039), but the share of



**BROWN ON!** Fishing near Pipe Organ, an angler plays a big trout hooked while nymphing. Insect hatches are relatively uncommon; most fish are caught by nymphing tiny midge and *Baetis* patterns.

big trout plummeted to just 6 percent.

What accounts for the trophy trout decline? “Mainly it’s winter discharge,” Jaeger explains. Though the Bureau of Reclamation maintains stable flows during spawning seasons, the lack of snow over the past two decades often forced the agency to hold back water in the reservoir to provide enough for irrigators the next growing season. “Winter

flows make a huge difference in the number of fish, especially trout over 18 inches, that the river can support,” Jaeger says.

During the late 1990s, average winter discharge was 325 cfs. The average during the past eight years has been just 68 cfs. “With plenty of winter water you can have lots of trout and lots of big ones,” Jaeger says. “But with little water, it’s one or the other, and

## Anglers: Get ready to grumble

**The Beaverhead might be the most frustrating** trout river you’ve ever fished. There’s all those massive fish, many of them visible. But like a giant spring creek, the river is so productive that trout have more than enough aquatic insects floating past their nose; they don’t need to move even a few inches to look at—much less eat—your offering. All that underwater food also keeps the biggest, smartest fish from coming anywhere near the surface except at night. Why risk getting grabbed by an osprey when you can feed hidden in deep water?

Then add the challenge of trying to catch those big fish in deep, fast-moving current where an errant cast can leave your just-tied double-nymph rig wrapped around a willow branch. *Aargh!*

So how does an angler fish this river successfully? Here’s what I’ve learned from local fly shop owners, my own experience, and Montana fishing guidebooks:

The Beaverhead flows about 80 miles north from Clark Canyon Reservoir to Twin Bridges, where it joins the Ruby River then the Big Hole to form the Jefferson. It has three main stretches: Clark Canyon Dam to Barretts Diversion Dam (which draws off about half the river for irrigation), Barretts to

Dillon, and Dillon to Twin Bridges. The best—though most crowded—fishing is the upper stretch. Fish numbers decline as you move downstream, but so do angler numbers.

Beaverhead fishing is mainly with nymphs. Mainstays include the Zebra Midge, Pheasant Tail, and Copper John, all in small sizes (20s and 22s). Some guides say the Beaverhead’s trout have seen so many bead-head nymphs the fish are more likely to take unbeaded old-school versions. Many trout also seem to recognize what a bright strike indicator floating overhead represents and will refuse flies fished underneath. Try using the white Palsa pinch-on floats, which resemble water foam.

For the rare dry-fly fishing, there’s some midge action in early March, Blue-winged Olives from about St. Patrick’s Day through April, and sporadic caddis hatches from mid-May to the end of September. Dry-fly flingers occasionally pick up fish on Yellow Sallies from late July through Labor Day weekend. As on trout streams statewide, terrestrials (ants, beetles, and grasshoppers) can work all summer. The dry-fly season, such as it is, ends in the fall, when a few *Baetis* duns might pop on the rare cloudy or rainy days. ■



sometimes neither.” That was the case following several dry years in the late 2010s, when the average winter discharge trickled to only 41 cfs. By 2019, brown trout numbers had dropped to just 844 per mile; only 5 percent topped the magic 18-inch mark. Last year numbers climbed a bit to 1,052, with 17 percent of those trophy size. “Fingers crossed it will keep increasing,” Jaeger says.

#### “FRYING PAN” TROUT MANAGEMENT

Another challenge facing the Beaverhead’s trout is periodic springtime sediment washing in from Clark Canyon Creek, which joins the river about a mile and a half below the dam. The severe sediment loading, from geologic formations of volcanic ash in

**OPTIMIST CLUB** FWP fisheries biologist and Beaverhead fan Matt Jaeger with a typical brown. “This river has incredible potential to grow a lot of big trout. We’ve seen it happen before and I’m trying to make it happen again,” he says.



**WHAT BROWNS WANT** Miles of bankside willows produce endless overhead cover that brown trout love. That habitat plus steady, cold flows from Clark Canyon Dam and abundant aquatic insects combined to make the Beaverhead one of the nation’s top brown trout fisheries in the late 1990s. From 1997 to 2000, the river averaged more than 2,000 browns per mile, a remarkable one-third of which were over 18 inches. Paltry winter flows in recent years have caused trophy trout numbers to dwindle.

surrounding hills that are prone to landslides, often comes after large storms or rapid snowmelt.

“It’s like having tons of liquid concrete pour into the river,” Jaeger says. “The slurry fills in every nook and cranny in the streambed and suffocates aquatic insects.” Sediment loading in 2006 and 2010 caused the population to decrease by 50 percent. “Historically, heavy storms or snowmelt resulted in dam releases creating high flows in the Beaverhead River and Clark Canyon Creek at the same time. So all that sediment would be washed downstream,” Jaeger says. But during years when little water is released from the dam, the creek’s sediment settles in the Beaverhead’s riffles and pools.

Jaeger says he has been working with the Bureau of Reclamation and downstream irrigators to reserve more water in the reservoir, so it has been able to periodically release a “flushing flow” to wash out sediment

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when necessary. “The flushes seem to be working,” he says. “We’re now seeing cleaner gravels, and anglers are reporting better insect hatches.”

In addition to low winter discharges and sedimentation, another issue hampering the trout fishery is fish harvest—surprisingly, not too *much* harvest, but too *little*. “If you have a whole bunch of smaller fish, as is the case now, you can’t have as many big fish. There’s simply not enough space,” Jaeger says. His goal is to increase the proportion of trout over 18 inches to 20 or even 25 percent.

“Unless we get some great water years, the only way to do that is to free up more space for the 17- and 18-inchers to grow a bit larger. And that requires harvesting more of the smaller 10- to 16-inch fish,” he says.

That’s not an easy sell to anglers raised on the sanctity of catch-and-release. “They understand the science,” Jaeger says, “but many tell me, ‘Matt, I just can’t kill a trout.’”

They may have to find a way. Jaeger believes “frying pan” management is an essential management tool for the Beaverhead. With the long-term forecast calling for even less precipitation, culling small fish may be the only way to return the trout population to some semblance of its former glory.

“I’ve fished New Zealand, Argentina, the Henry’s Fork in Idaho, all over, and the biggest trout I’ve ever caught came from the Beaverhead,” the biologist says. “The potential is still there. My job is to find ways for the river to reach its potential.” 🐾

## Recognizing the “beaver head”

**Native Americans had lived** near what is now called the Beaverhead River for thousands of years by the time Lewis and Clark waded up the winding stream from the Jefferson River in July 1805. The Corps of Discovery was heading southwest, hoping to find Shoshone Indians. They wanted to acquire horses and ditch their canoes, which were increasingly useless as they traveled upstream in ever-narrowing rivers.

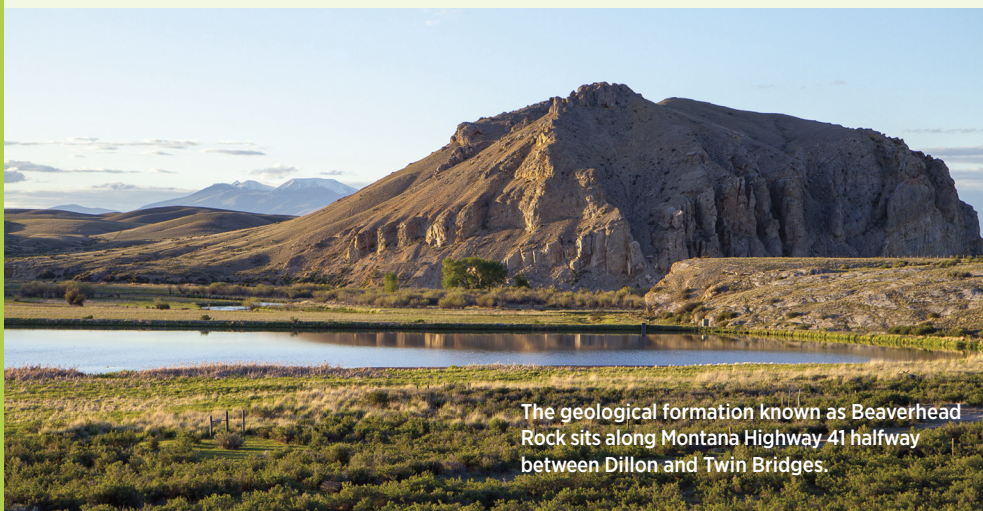
Accompanying the men was Sacajawea, an 18-year-old woman who had grown up among the Shoshones. Near what is now Twin Bridges, she recognized in the distance a large rock landmark known as the “beaver head” for its faint resemblance to the toothy rodent.

Captain Meriwether Lewis was excited by the news. “She assures us that we shall find her people either on this river or on the river

immediately west of its source; which from its present size cannot be very distant,” he wrote in his journal. Sure enough, a few days later the Corps was visited by Shoshone chief Cameahwait, who turned out to be Sacajawea’s brother. Cameahwait helped the expedition obtain guides and horses, in part to repay them for reuniting him with his long-lost sister, who had been kidnapped by the Hidatsa Indians six years earlier.

In honor of the fortuitous meeting, Lewis named the spot, now submerged beneath Clark Canyon Reservoir, Camp Fortunate. A sign on the shoreline marks the site.

The Beaverhead River was later named for that rock, now a state park. Nearby is 8-acre Clark’s Lookout State Park, on a hill above the river that Captain William Clark climbed to scout the surrounding landscape. ■



The geological formation known as Beaverhead Rock sits along Montana Highway 41 halfway between Dillon and Twin Bridges.



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