

# Surviving a Prairie Ocean Adventure

How to get to, camp at, fish on, and return from a Fort Peck Reservoir angling expedition—and live to tell about it.

By Bill Schneider. Illustrations by Ed Jenne



“Why do I love this place?” I asked myself while standing chest deep in water, trying to keep my boat from slamming sideways onto the shore as I gasped for breath between 6-foot waves crashing over my head. “It’s certainly not loving me back today.”

This is what can happen on Fort Peck Reservoir when you make a bad decision, as I did that afternoon. It was our last day, and my friends and I decided to beach the boat while we cleaned fish, so we could dump the entrails in deep water before taking out. I saw the thunderstorm coming, but never

imagined it could nail us with 70-mph winds (gusting to 90 mph, I later learned.)

An hour later, my boat barely saved, I chided myself for a rookie mistake. I’ve fished Fort Peck for 12 years, six or seven weeks per year, and the catching rarely disappoints. Good fishing usually attracts

hordes of anglers, but even though I see a few more boats launching every year, the pressure can be minuscule, especially on weekdays, considering the size of the reservoir (245,000 acres, twice the size of Flathead Lake) or the heavy use that’s common on more-accessible warmwater fisheries. Hard to imagine, but Fort Peck Reservoir, or “Peck” to local anglers, is 134 miles long and has 1,520 miles of shoreline, more than the entire West Coast (California, Oregon, and Washington combined). Hence, the apropos moniker, the Prairie Ocean.

Most anglers target walleye, but Peck also has excellent fishing for northern pike, smallmouth bass, crappies, channel catfish, lake trout, and even chinook salmon. Peck is an incredibly productive and diverse fishery with 47 species of

game and nongame fish.

So why aren’t campgrounds and boat ramps crowded with anglers eager to take advantage of all this great fishing? To put it mildly, Peck has a well-deserved reputation as a tough place to fish, with difficult and remote access, limited campground amenities, almost no cell service, and dangerously foul weather. It takes an entire day to get there from most places, including a couple of hours on bumpy, unpaved roads, and there’s often no way to get help, services, or supplies.

Obviously, Peck is not for everybody. It’s mainly used by serious anglers with serious fishing boats. You don’t get up in the morning and decide to go to Peck on a whim. You spend days preparing like you’re going on an expedition, which you are. You must be self-reliant and bring everything you need

**In spring and throughout summer, expect a major thunderstorm or two.**

**While fishing, stay on red alert for incoming storms**



because you can’t run down to the store for something you forgot. You need a back-up for everything important, along with the tools and know-how to fix things that will inevitably break.

Despite the challenges, many anglers want to try Peck but aren’t sure what to expect or how to prepare. Here’s what you need to know for your first expedition:

#### MANAGEMENT

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers manages most access points and campgrounds. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks manages fishing access sites (FASes) at Duck Creek and Rock Creek. Management of the Hell Creek recreation area is transitioning to the Little Shell Tribe. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service manages the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge, which surrounds the reservoir.

#### GUMBO

If you don’t know about gumbo, read up on it before heading for Peck. This clay-rich soil is everywhere, and it’s as slick as oil on glass when wet. It sticks to everything and is difficult to remove. A soaking rain can turn access roads, even those with significant

## THE GUMBO



gravel, into endless quagmires. Roads often become impassable, even for rigs not towing anything, but especially for those pulling trailers or fifth-wheelers. Anglers sometimes have to leave their campers and boats and return days later to retrieve them.

**Tip:** Bring an extra pair of shoes or sandals to wear in the boat so you can keep gumbo out of it.

### BOAT ACCESS

Given its size, you'd think Fort Peck Reservoir would have lots of public access. But because the area is so remote and sites are so hard to maintain, the reservoir has only two main public access points: Fort Peck West, near the dam in the town of Fort Peck, and Hell Creek, on the south shore straight north of Jordan. There are even more-remote ramps at Nelson Creek, Rock Creek Marina, Rock Creek FAS, Duck Creek FAS, the Pines, Bone Trail, Devil's Creek, Fourchette Bay, and Crooked Creek. Devils Creek (no dock) and Bone Trail are rarely used because they're small, remote, and have long, rough, gumbo access roads.

**Tip:** Bring a day's worth of extra food and water in case you break down or get stuck during or shortly after a soaking rain.

**Anglers sometimes have to leave their campers and boats, and return days later to retrieve them. Even for rigs not towing anything, wet roads in the Fort Peck area can become impassable.**

### CAR CAMPING

Peck has a wide range of camping opportunities. The Downstream, West End, Fort Peck West, and Hell Creek campgrounds provide electrical hookups, showers, flush toilets, fish-cleaning stations, marina stores, and more. Rock Creek and Crooked Creek have small marina stores and potable water. The Pines has potable water and a fish-cleaning station.

The rest are primitive campgrounds equipped with vault toilets, picnic tables, and fire pits, but not much else. Bring all the drinking water, ice, firewood, and gas you'll need, along with sturdy garbage bags to pack out your trash.

If you need to leave a campground for

more than a day, never leave your camper or fifth-wheeler unattended in a campsite. Not only is that discourteous, it violates agency regulations. Instead, find an out-of-the-way place to store your camper so you don't tie up prime campsites others might want to use in your absence.

And for a bit of rare good news: With the exception of the four developed campgrounds, camping is free!

**Tip:** If tent camping, make sure your tent can survive gale-force winds. Make sure it is staked down securely. Don't leave anything in camp that can blow away at night or while you're out fishing on the reservoir.

### BOAT CAMPING

You can boat camp anywhere on the reservoir, choosing from hundreds of prime and rarely, if ever, used campsites. There are no facilities, of course, so bring everything you need and leave no sign that you camped there.

**Tip:** Watch the forecast. Don't boat camp in wet weather unless you want a thick layer of gumbo covering everything you own.

### WEATHER

Like in most of Montana, the weather at Peck is unpredictable. One thing you should count

on is the reservoir being so windy one or two days of your trip that you can't fish it, requiring you to spend the time hunkered down in camp. Also, in late spring and throughout summer, expect a major thunderstorm or two. While fishing, stay alert for incoming storms and try not to get caught out on the reservoir. If you get nailed by a big storm, seek shelter in a protected bay and wait out the bad weather rather than trying to cross the rough, lightning-exposed water to make it back to camp.

**Tip:** Prepare for the worst thunderstorm of your life and bring the best rain gear you can afford, something suited for working on a crab boat in Alaska. Also, start fishing early; morning storms are rare.

### BOATS

You can fish from any type of boat, including fishing kayaks, but most anglers use V-hulled craft suitable for long runs, 16-foot or longer with at least a 60-horsepower motor. If you have a small boat, don't venture too far from camp. Fortunately, the fishing is often just as good close to boat ramps as it is miles away.

Avoid beaching your boat overnight unless you're sure of the weather forecast.

A nighttime thunderstorm could blow in, and you might be shopping for a new boat. Experienced Fort Peck anglers bring their boat ashore every evening and launch again in the morning.

You can buy boat gas only at Fort Peck West, Rock Creek, Hell Creek, and Crooked Creek. For all other access sites, bring enough gas for the entire trip.

Other equipment to bring: small generator to charge trolling batteries, battery charger, compressor, jump starter, jumper cables, two spare tires for the truck and boat, self-sealing liquid for tires, extra batteries in all the sizes you might need, fuses, extra bolts and screws that may shake loose, and tools to fit every bolt and screw in your boat, trailer, and camper.

**Tips:** Make sure you have good boat trailer tires, which take a beating on the rough access roads. Put a kicker motor on your boat even if you don't use it for trolling.

If your big motor fails, it will get you safely back to camp.

### COMMUNICATIONS

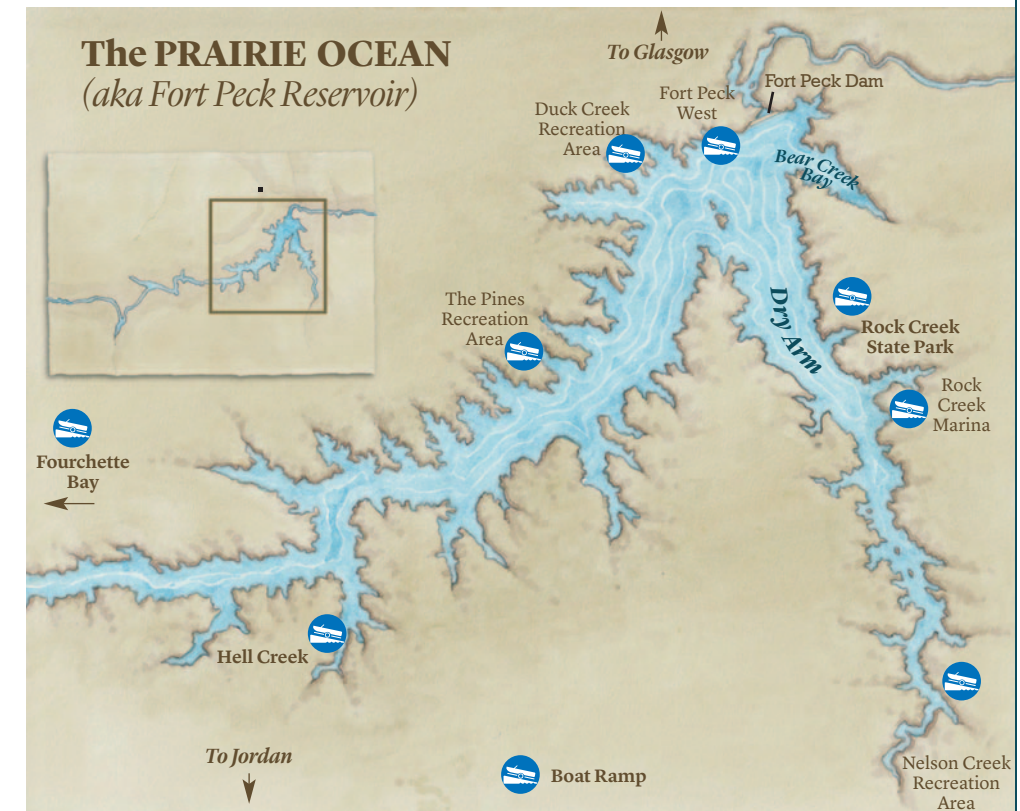
When phone companies say they have service "almost everywhere," that "almost" includes Fort Peck. Verizon has some service, but AT&T has no service near the reservoir.

Marine radios work well on the eastern portions of the reservoir around the dam, Dry Arm, and Hell Creek, but get increasingly unreliable as you go farther west.

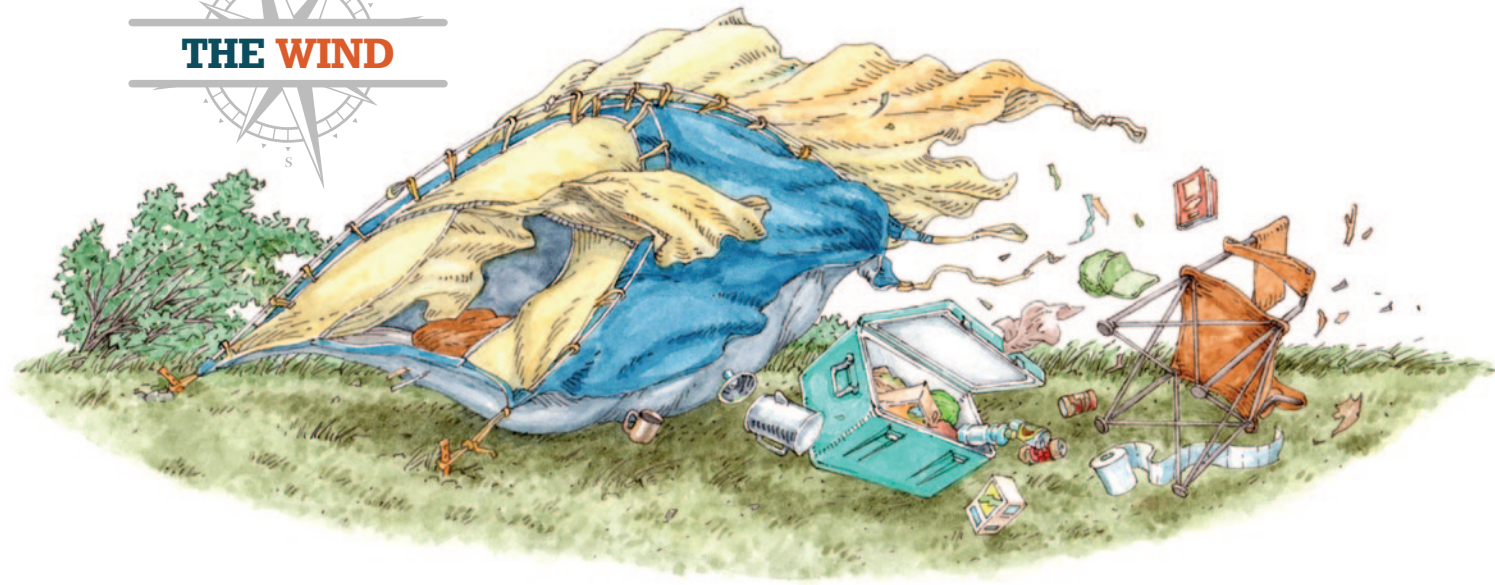
**Tip:** For the extra cautious, bring a satellite phone or other emergency communication device like a SPOT or InReach satellite transmitter.

### FISH CLEANING

Fort Peck West, Hell Creek, the Pines, and Rock Creek FASes have fish-cleaning stations. Otherwise, you have two options: gut your fish out on the lake in your boat or on



**NOTE:** Some boat ramps may be unusable due to low water levels on the reservoir. Always check the FWP, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, BLM, and other websites for reservoir levels and current boat ramp conditions before heading to Fort Peck.



shore and dispose of the entrails in deep water (which is legal, by the way), or clean the fish in camp and take the entrails out to deep water first thing the next morning. But remember: While on the water, you have to keep the head, skin, fins, and tail attached to all harvested fish so a game warden can identify and count the species. Also, never leave entrails in or around camp or on the shoreline around camp.

Bring a cooler full of block ice to keep fish cold. Pack in self-sealing bags and use a Sharpie to mark them with number of fish, species, and date. See page 80 of the 2022 FWP Fishing Regulations for fish and fillet transport regulations.

**Tip:** Water near shore is often muddy. Bring a pail in the boat. At the end of the fishing day, fill it with lake water to use back at camp for washing fillets. Bring a second bucket for entrails that you can dump in deep water after launching the next morning.

**BUGS**

Thankfully, mosquitoes are rarely a problem on or around Fort Peck. But in warm weather, annoying, nonbiting flies and gnats buzz around. The worst insect pests are those nasty little flies that attack your ankles on hot days out on the water.

**Tip:** If wearing sandals, wear socks or bring a pair in the boat in case the ankle-biters are out.

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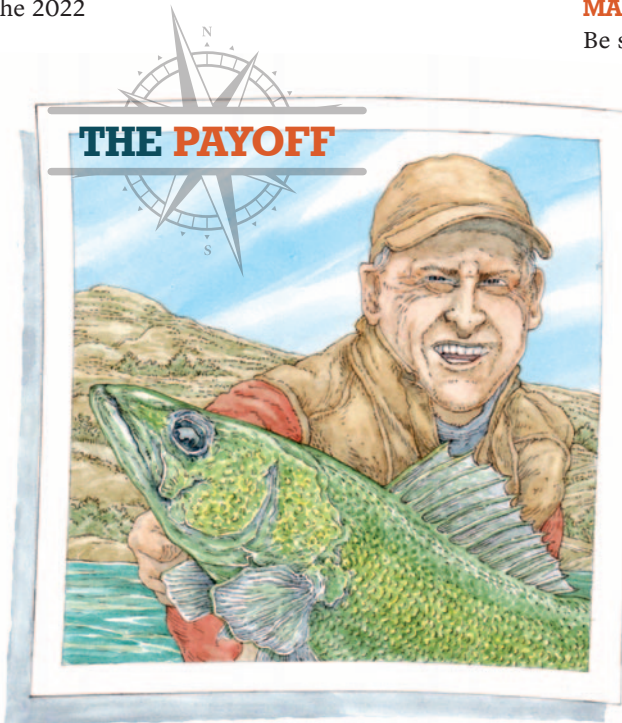
**FISHING PROTOCOL**

A few of my pet peeves:

- ◆ Never go between a boat that's fishing on a point and the point itself, even if it looks like there is enough room. That is their water. Go around them on the lake side.
- ◆ Never share a point with another boat unless invited. Fort Peck is a massive reservoir with many other points to fish.
- ◆ Leave good fishing points near camp for anglers with small boats who can't do long runs.

**MAPS AND MORE**

Be sure to contact the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for its "Fort Peck Lake and Dam" brochure. Contact the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service for its free map of the Charles M. Russell Wildlife Refuge. 🐾



*Due to persistant extreme drought throughout the upper Missouri River watershed, water levels at Fort Peck Reservoir were at record lows when this issue went to press in early February 2022. Crooked Creek access, especially, will likely be closed for a second year in 2022. However, conditions could change depending on late winter and early spring precipitation. Before heading to Peck, visit the FWP, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, BLM, and other websites for reservoir levels and boat ramp conditions.*