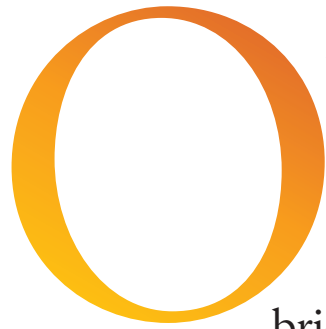




# Giving a Hoot

Angler and guide self-restrictions and FWP “hoot owl” closures provide stressed trout a break during Montana’s increasingly hot summers. *By E. Donnell Thomas, Jr.*





One day last August, my wife Lori and I decided to drive south from our Lewistown home to visit friends in Paradise Valley. Crossing the bridge over the Yellowstone River in Big Timber always serves as my demarcation between eastern and western Montana. As we briefly watched the low, clear current pass beneath us, we left the world of walleyes and catfish and entered the land of trout.

With the weather balmy and clear, fly anglers were out in force enjoying the day. As we drove west on the interstate parallel to the river, every glimpse of the water revealed drift boats and rafts following the current as fly lines shot back and forth. The Yellowstone is big enough so that it seldom looks crowded, but the water did seem busy in a pleasant way.

We stopped for gas in Livingston before turning south toward Yellowstone National Park. When we next made visual contact with the river, my impression registered something oddly amiss. Then I realized that all the drift boats and anglers had vanished, leaving the scene eerily depopulated, like a post-apocalyptic landscape in a disaster movie. When Lori made the same observation and asked me where all the boats had gone, I experienced a sudden insight and glanced at my watch. “It’s after two. Hoot owl rules are now in place.” On this stretch of river, no fishing would be allowed again until midnight.

It appears that Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks will likely need to impose similar restrictions on many trout rivers again this summer. Snowpack in much of western Montana was low this past spring, and much of the state remains in extreme drought conditions. To help beleaguered trout even further, FWP is asking anglers to

*Don Thomas, a writer in Lewistown, is a longtime contributor to Montana Outdoors.*

consider “giving a hoot” by voluntarily restricting their fishing even before official restrictions are set.

#### WHY “HOOT OWL”?

Though no one knows for certain, it seems that the term “hoot owl” to describe a time of morning activity dates to the early logging days in the Pacific Northwest. During late summer, the danger of wildfire caused by logging activity—hot truck mufflers igniting grasses and sparks flying from axes hitting metal, horseshoes on rocks, and rattling



**WADE WARNING** When summer coldwater streams become warm enough to comfortably wade, that may indicate that temperatures are or soon will become dangerously high for trout.

chains—increased in late afternoon due to hotter temperatures, stronger winds, and evaporation of morning dew. Consequently, logging crews rose early, worked during the safest time of day, and left the forest in the early afternoon. Several owl species, including the great horned and the barred, call frequently at sunrise, and their characteristic hooting at some point was used to describe the loggers’ early work schedule.

In the early 2000s, FWP began applying the term to new restrictions on summer trout angling activity that allowed anglers to fish only from midnight to 2 p.m.—the coolest hours.

Fisheries managers have long known that trout can’t survive in water that is too warm, thus the term coldwater fish. But they didn’t consider temporary closures until the early 2000s, when growing angling pressure on Montana’s trout fisheries combined with several consecutive years of drought to put extraordinary stress on fish. Though most anglers release their trout, a certain percentage of the fish die from the stress of being caught and handled. A 2008 Montana State University study showed that trout caught and released from water with a temperature above 68 degrees F were far more likely to perish than those taken from cooler water.

To reduce catch-and-release mortality when fish were most stressed, FWP restricted afternoon and evening fishing on streams



and river stretches when certain environmental criteria exceed tolerable levels.

Senior fisheries officials note that restricting angling hours on streams and rivers is not a decision they take lightly. “It’s a last resort, and only when it looks like trout on a river are really in trouble,” says Bozeman-based FWP regional fisheries supervisor Mike Duncan, whose region covers the Big Hole, Beaverhead, Madison, and several other popular trout rivers.

#### HOW FWP DECIDES

The two most important criteria for applying hoot owl restrictions on a stretch of river are water temperatures of 73 degrees F or higher for three consecutive days, or stream flows running below the fifth percentile of the mean historic flow for that body of water. The criteria apply only to streams managed for salmonids (trout and char), which have far less tolerance for warm water than other Montana game fish such as bass and sauger.

Area fisheries biologists begin thinking about the possibility of stream closures in late winter as they monitor mountain snowpack. Scanty snow could reduce headwater streams to a trickle by midsummer. Biologists then track flows and water temperature from United States Geological Survey (USGS) monitoring stations throughout spring and summer, all the while watching short- and long-term temperature forecasts.

If a river section nears dangerously low levels or high water temperatures, an area biologist notifies senior managers in the regional office and Helena headquarters, who then alert the Fish and Wildlife commis-



**WILDFIRE CONCERNS** The name for angling “hoot owl” restrictions may trace its origins to the early days of logging in the Pacific Northwest. To prevent wildfires ignited by sparks that came from saws hitting rocks, chains on trucks, and horseshoes on boulders, loggers limited their activities to the cool, damp mornings. That’s also when barred and great horned owls are most likely to call, inspiring the “hoot owl” term, which was later applied to restrictions on afternoon angling in mid-summer on some rivers. Above: Loggers use a crosscut saw to cut logs from a tree in the Bitterroot Valley, date unknown. Left: A barred owl from *The Bird Book*, 1915.

sioner whose region covers that water. In discussion with department staff, the commissioner makes the final recommendation to impose hoot owl restrictions. The FWP director signs the order.

Duncan says additional factors come into play when imposing or removing a closure. “For instance, after we set a hoot owl restriction, we don’t want to lift it if weather forecasts suggest that cooler water temperatures will be short-lived and will then exceed our temperature criteria a few days later,” he says. “We want to be consistent and not make things confusing for anglers and guides.”

Duncan notes that a few rivers, like the Big Hole, have drought management plans that stipulate flows that trigger closures. FWP’s new Statewide Fisheries Management Plan also highlights specific reaches of rivers that are likely to see high water tem-

peratures and low flows in the coming years, which could serve as a useful guide for visiting anglers (see Editor’s Note on page 23).

#### WIDESPREAD ACCEPTANCE

Summer hour restrictions are widely supported by anglers. “Our organization and members have advocated science-based, consistent hoot owl triggers for many years,” says David Brooks, executive director of Montana Trout Unlimited. “During a summer of low water levels and high water temperatures, we need to sacrifice some fishing opportunities for the long-term health of our fisheries.”

It’s also easier for anglers and guides to swallow since late afternoon is often the worst time to catch trout in midsummer as well as when most kayakers and inner-tubers are out floating (and inadvertently spooking rising trout). Many guides start their clients off earlier in the day, fishing the



**MONITORING CONDITIONS** FWP crews regularly check trout stream water temperatures, flows, and dissolved oxygen levels to see if they are approaching or at levels that are dangerous for trout. The specific criteria for the department to impose angling restrictions are water temperatures reaching 73 degrees F or higher for three consecutive days, or stream flows running below the fifth percentile of the mean historic flow for that stretch of river. Says one senior agency official: “We don’t take hoot owl restrictions lightly. We recommend them only when we feel we have no other choice.”



**SELF-IMPOSED RESTRICTIONS** Anglers who “give a hoot” about trout can voluntarily choose to take themselves out of the angling picture in mid- to late summer when water temperatures warm, imposing their own hoot owl restrictions before FWP needs to.

cool mornings when the fishing is often more productive.

While individual anglers may have to give up some time on the water, guides and outfitters can actually lose income from the closures. Yet the majority support hoot owl restrictions, says Brant Oswald, senior advisor to Fishing Outfitters of Montana (FOAM). “Most guides and outfitters voluntarily initiate their own restrictions, fishing early and ending early whenever water temperature and flow become an issue,” he says. “We try to be proactive and change our behavior before regulations require it, for the good of the fishery.”

Oswald adds that some clients complain of getting short-changed on the length of their angling day. “That’s when having the official FWP restrictions in place helps us resolve those conflicts,” he says.

While most hoot owl restrictions apply mainly to fisheries containing non-native brown and rainbow trout, the state’s native bull trout fisheries have even lower restriction thresholds due to the species’ even lower tolerance for warm water. Fisheries managers have begun discussing adapting more conservative hoot owl closure criteria for fisheries containing Montana’s state fish—native westslope cutthroat and Yellowstone cutthroat trout, which also have especially low tolerance for warm water.

Duncan notes that one way FWP and trout conservation groups help keep native salmonid fisheries and blue-ribbon rivers as cool as possible is by working with landown-

ers to lease water in spawning tributaries. “That not only helps maintain water in those streams for trout survival, but it also keeps more cool mountain water flowing into mainstem rivers in late summer,” he says. (See “A Little Goes a Long Way,” *Montana Outdoors*, July-August 2019.)

Other ways FWP helps trout are by protecting and restoring streamside vegetation that shades water, and removing obstructions so fish can swim up- and downstream to find spring-fed pools and other coldwater refuges.

Duncan adds that people wanting to help trout don’t need to wait until FWP imposes restrictions. “Anglers can follow the lead of many guides and outfitters by voluntarily not fishing during the afternoon and giving trout a rest from being caught,” he says. “If the long-term forecasts hold, conditions for trout will continue to be tough every summer, so it’s important that trout anglers ‘give a hoot’ and do all they can to protect this invaluable resource by fishing responsibly and ethically.” 🐾

*Editor’s Note: Before heading out to fish, visit the FWP website to check for current restrictions. For drought information, visit: <https://fwp.mt.gov/conservation/fisheries-management/water-management/drought>. To read about drought affecting specific rivers as outlined in the FWP Statewide Fisheries Management Plan, visit <https://fwp.mt.gov/conservation/fisheriesmanagement/statewide-fisheries-management> and scroll down to the drainages you’re interested in.*

## How to help heat-stressed trout

Anglers don’t need to wait until FWP imposes hoot owl restrictions. Ethical angling actions that reduce stress on coldwater species include:

Fishing only during the morning when water temperatures are lowest.



Bringing hooked trout to the net as quickly as possible to reduce lactic acid buildup.



Keeping trout in the water when removing the hook.



If you must take a photo of a trout out of water, doing it as quickly as possible.



Considering mountain lake or stream fishing during late summer.



Wetting your hands before handling trout to protect their mucous skin coating.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: THOM BRIDGE; SHUTTERSTOCK; JEREMIE HOLLIMAN; ERIC ENGBRETSON