

# Eastern Montana's Great Fishing

**M**y only “problem”—if you can call it that—with liking so much about the outdoors is finding the time to enjoy all the activities. It’s something I wrestle with every year. One activity that calls to me each spring—especially when mountain runoff makes my favorite trout streams unfishable—is eastern Montana angling.

Yes, I’m partial to fly-fishing small streams for cutthroats, browns, and rainbows. But put me in a boat on a sunny May afternoon, hand me a spinning rod, set a cooler of iced beverages within arm’s reach, and I’m one happy angler. Throw in the trolling motor’s soothing drone, the gentle rocking of the boat, and some friendly conversation, and I’m in heaven.

Opportunities for such enjoyable days on the water abound in eastern Montana. In this issue of *Montana Outdoors*, *Outdoor Life* editor and Glasgow resident Andrew McKean details the fantastic fishing that Fort Peck Reservoir is producing these days. Thanks to the high water of 2011 that flooded vegetated shorelines and washed loads of nutrients into the reservoir, an already superb fishery has become even better.

As McKean says: Go now.

In your haste to fish Fort Peck, don’t forget all the other great waters in the state’s eastern half. There’s also Nelson Reservoir near Malta, where more state record fish have been caught than anywhere else in Montana. It’s a superproductive fishery filled with large northern pike, perch, walleye, and an assortment of lesser known species (including massive bigmouth buffalo).

The lower Yellowstone River from Billings to the North Dakota border is another premier warmwater fishery you don’t read about too often. In addition to sauger, walleye, and northern pike, the longest undammed river in the lower 48 states also offers freshwater drum, shovel-nose sturgeon, and channel catfish.

If you don’t have a boat, head to the mouth of the Milk River just east of Glasgow. Many fish congregate where this tributary spills into the Missouri a few miles below Fort Peck Dam. It’s best known for channel catfish, but anytime between now and mid-June an angler could hook shovel-nose sturgeon, sauger, northern pike, or even blue suckers.

Another great confluence is where the Marias, Teton, and Missouri Rivers come together, about 50 miles northeast of Great Falls. Though technically not in eastern Montana, it’s a great place for shore anglers to catch sauger in May, and, later in summer, pike, smallmouth bass, and even a few resident browns and rainbows. It’s also one of the closest places for western Montana anglers to get their annual warmwater fix.

On the FWP Fishing Guide page ([fwp.mt.gov/fishing/guide/](http://fwp.mt.gov/fishing/guide/)), learn about other eastern Montana fishing opportunities such as at Fresno Reservoir, Tiber Reservoir,

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Medicine Lake, and the Musselshell River.

Anyone who enjoys warmwater fishing should visit Tongue River Reservoir State Park, home of the state’s top crappie fishery. The best fishing is generally in mid-May, when anglers in boats and on shore regularly catch these tasty panfish. It’s hard to imagine anything tasting better than a plateful of fried batter-dipped crappie fillets.

Maybe the thing I like best about angling for warmwater fish is that it’s relaxing. Fly-fishing for trout requires so darn much concentration. But with warmwater fishing you have more chances to visit with friends, share stories, and take in the surroundings.

That’s not to say it’s always paradise. One time our outboard caught fire and we had to spend an entire night on the lake before getting a tow back to shore. It wasn’t so bad, though. Often the best time to catch walleye is after dark. After lowering the anchor, we passed the long hours fishing and swapping tales of past adventures.

That’s the thing about fishing. When it’s good, you’ve got a great day to remember. And even when things go wrong, such as your motor going up in flames, well, that just gives you another good story to tell on the next fishing trip.

—**Joe Maurier**, Montana FWP Director



NELSON KENTER

Fishing at sunset on Fort Peck, one of many great fishing spots in eastern Montana.