

Carping about fishing

By Tom Dickson

Not long ago while shopping for lures in a Missoula sporting goods store, I overheard two anglers griping about the lack of walleye fishing opportunities in western Montana.

“We have to drive halfway across the state,” groused one guy.

“Where I’m from, we’ve got walleye pretty much everywhere,” said the other.

Though tempted to respond, I bit my tongue, moved off, and considered their complaint.

Griping is second nature to every angler

Anglers like to complain, and often we have unrealistic expectations. That’s mainly because most of the time while on the water we aren’t catching fish. Those long hours of frustration tend to build up.

So, I understand those two guys. But only to a point.

The fact is, you can’t have every type of game fish everywhere you live. I’m sorry, Glasgow anglers. You’ve got Fort Peck Reservoir, one of the best warmwater fisheries in North America, right out your back door. You can’t also have a great trout river like the Madison or the Big Hole there, too. The landscape is just too different.

Same with you, western Montana anglers. Despite your complaints, FWP is not about to stock walleye on your side of the Continental Divide. That wise decades-old policy protects existing trout, perch, and other fisheries vulnerable to yet another finned predator. Not only would the addition of walleye be biologically irresponsible, it would be unfair to anglers currently enjoying existing fisheries.

Besides, driving from Missoula to Canyon Ferry Reservoir, the nearest walleye fishery, is not like making a cross-country expedition. It takes two hours. I grew up in Minnesota, the self-proclaimed walleye capital of the universe. Most North Star State anglers live in the Twin Cities and regularly drive two, three, four, or more hours each Saturday morning to reach decent walleye waters—few of which, by the way, can hold a candle to Canyon Ferry.

In Minnesota, a 22-inch walleye is any

angler’s catch of the year. A 28-inch shows up every few seasons on the evening news under the banner “Veteran Guide Lands Fish of a Lifetime.” The first spring I lived in Helena, the *Independent Record* reported walleye of 30 and 31 inches caught at Canyon Ferry—one by a 12-year-old boy. A few years ago, a fellow I work with caught a 30-inch there *from shore*.

As for catch rates, those in Montana walleye reservoirs regularly top those in most Midwestern waters, including legendary Lake Erie. I didn’t hear those guys in Missoula talking much about that.

The fact is, we Montana anglers have it good. The trout fishing is off the charts. In addition to our dozen world-renowned blue-ribbon rivers, the Treasure State is home to a half-dozen reservoirs like Holter and Hauser where stocked rainbows regularly reach 22 to 24 inches. An angler can explore 28,000 miles of other streams and rivers if the Gallatin, Bitterroot, or other popular waters get too crowded. And 1,000-plus high mountain lakes hold trout so eager to bite they even make me appear skilled.

Then there’s our incredible warmwater fisheries. Montana is home to a dozen walleye reservoirs, as well as topnotch bass fishing on Noxon Reservoir, the lower Yellowstone River, and 10 or more reservoirs on either side of the Continental Divide. We can fish for channel catfish on hundreds of miles of river, northern pike and tiger muskies on a half-dozen lakes, and crappies and sunfish on hundreds of urban and prairie ponds that FWP stocks each spring.

You can learn more about these and other angling options on the FWP website or the department’s free FishMT app.

As for my fellow anglers so hugely dissatisfied with the fishing here? I suggest you head back to Minnesota, California, Texas, or wherever and fish there for a few years. If the angling is better, please drop me a line.

I’ve got a hunch no one will take me up on my suggestion. We anglers like to gripe, but deep down we know a good thing when we see it. 🐟



I know. The fish should be bigger, more abundant, and more willing to bite. FWP should post hourly updates on every reservoir and river telling anglers exactly where the fish are hiding and what they are eating.

I made up that last one, but it’s not far off.

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