

Trout Town

Missoula, Montana *By Michael Hamilton*



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Missoula, Montana, may offer visiting anglers too darn many choices. Do you just want to fish? No problem. Five legendary trout streams are located within an hour's drive of town. How about day hiking? Easy. Seven designated wilderness areas are close by. Need a beer? Sweet! Six local breweries pour some of the best microbrews in the West (and you can often find anglers and guides sharing a beer and telling tall tales about their day on the water). Maybe you have something more urbane in mind? No worries. A vibrant, active downtown scene on the banks of the Clark Fork buzzes with coffeehouses, pubs, cafés, boutiques, music venues, nightlife, and more.

"Think of Missoula as an adventurous good friend that won't let you down," says Mayor John Engen. "Old-fashioned Mayberry meets outdoor cool is the way I like to describe Missoula today."

Prior to 1992, Missoula was largely off the angling radar. But Hollywood changed that. With the release of the film version of Norman Maclean's novell, *A River Runs Through It*, Montana and Missoula boomed. First, the local fly-fishing industry saw an immediate eye-popping jump of 60 percent in retail sales.

Second, droves of veteran and rookie fly fishers descended on Montana and Missoula proper, where the story was set.

"As far as driving tourism, there's never been another movie that can touch it," says Tia Troy, public relations and communication manager for Glacier Country Regional Tourism Commission.



PHOTO BY STEVE MAEDER

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Personally, I've always wondered if the film's director, veteran actor Robert Redford, ever imagined the impact his film would have on the fly-fishing industry. Fortunately, Brian Wimmer, a fishing comrade, actor, longtime friend of the Redford family, and fly-fishing ambassador to Utah's Sundance Mountain Resort (founded by Redford in 1969), posed my question to Redford.

"No, I did not," replied Redford, "but it was a pleasant surprise."

Indeed, sometimes unexpected results spring from creative genius.

Today, Missoula's population has grown to more than 69,000, almost a 20 percent increase since the release of *A River Runs Through It*. "The city has never lost its vibe," quips Engen. Winter ski areas, golf courses, mountain biking, river surfing (it looks real scary), festivals, fairs, and, yes, at least nine months of superb fly fishing, says Engen, continue to make Missoula a hip destination and true trout mecca.

If you need more ammo to angle, consider this: within a 60-mile radius of Missoula, there are more than 300 miles of floatable water, with an almost endless selection of stretches to explore. Four celebrated rivers—the Blackfoot, Clark Fork, Rock Creek, and the main stem of the Bitterroot, along with its East and West Forks—surround Missoula to form a unique concentration of history, geography, geology, and legendary fly fishing.

And trout-fishing opportunities abound in those seven wilderness areas: Bob Marshall, Mission Mountains, Anaconda–Pintler, Rattlesnake, Scapegoat, Selway–Bitterroot, and Welcome Creek are each within 100 miles of Missoula. On top of all that, numerous creeks, such as Blodgett, Fish, Tin Cup, No Name, North Fork of the Bitterroot, Gold, Montaur, Lolo, and Skalkaho, rush from the high country or meander through verdant valleys. Only a handful of guides and locals fish these tiny streams rich with native westslope cutthroat trout and wild German brown trout.

If lake fishing is more your speed, options abound. Flathead, Georgetown, Seeley, Como, Holland, and Browns Lake, as well as Frenchtown Pond, are all within easy striking distance from Missoula.

Plenty of strong fish, heavy hatches, and optimum flows (in nondrought years) combine to provide the waters around Missoula and the surrounding towns of Ovando, Florence, Hamilton, and Darby with some of the most diverse fly fishing in the Lower 48. Served by five major airlines, Missoula is easy to reach from anywhere in the country.

"You could spend a lifetime and not touch all of the trout water around Missoula," chuckles Dan Sheppard,



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former managing partner of Missoula's Grizzly Hackle Fly Shop. "Fly fishing is absolutely central to this community. It's a way of life, plain and simple."

Blackfoot River

With headwaters along the Continental Divide above Lincoln, Montana, the Blackfoot River tumbles, glides, and meanders for 130 miles before it joins the Clark Fork about 5 miles east of Missoula. In the past decade, the Blackfoot has emerged from a 100-year legacy of hard-rock mining to become "a bullish, badass fishery," in the words of longtime Grizzly Hackle Fly Shop guide Matt Bryn. After runoff, usually by the third week of June, it's game on. Marauding trout crush huge Salmonflies that must look like Big Macs. Use 9-foot leaders, stout 2X or 3X tippets, and hold on. River Junction to Russell Gates, a distance of 12.4 miles, is the perfect float. In midsummer, the Blackfoot often hosts a spruce moth hatch.

"Big trout will move 6 to 7 feet off the bottom to explode all over your imitation Spruce," notes Sheppard. He likes Denny's Spruce Moth, a size 12 or 14 pattern designed by local angler Denny Waln.

In addition to all the summertime fun, many anglers love to fish the Blackfoot in October. Chucking streamers tight to the banks often results in vicious strikes; in late afternoon, switch to an October Caddis pattern for an exciting finish to a great day of fly fishing. Access river-wide is excellent. Montana State Route 200 from Bonner follows much of the river, and along the 26-mile Blackfoot River Corridor alone, from Johnsrud Park easterly to Russell Gates Memorial, there are 16 public access sites.



PHOTO BY STEVE MAEDER

Clark Fork

The Clark Fork begins near the Continental Divide and meanders 310 miles through vast mountain valleys before emptying into Lake Pend Oreille in northern Idaho. This lengthy river is best considered as two different sections: above Rock Creek and below Rock Creek. The upper stretch from Drummond (50 miles southeast of Missoula on Interstate 90) to Rock Creek is a sleeper. Mostly overlooked by anglers because of its sparser trout populations, this 30-plus-mile section nonetheless holds big browns that will inhale streamers or crunch hoppers in late summer. Notably, both westslope cutthroat and rainbows have repopulated this upper reach after the Milltown Dam came down in 2010.

“Taking the dam out was a common cause that connected with the community,” says Karen Knudsen,

executive director of the Clark Fork Coalition. “Today, the river sustains and inspires us.”

Below the Rock Creek confluence, pods of 16- to 20-inch cutthroat, rainbows, and cuttbows are common. The fish circle foam lines and feed on abundant mayfly and caddisfly hatches that start in June and run well into October. I’ve seen 40 heads sipping PMDs. It’s enough to make your knees shake. The Clark Fork also hosts a prolific spring *Skwala* stonefly hatch, which some anglers say is even stronger than the better-known *Skwala* hatch on the Bitterroot. Mid-April fishing can be lights out on a cloudy day. Be forewarned: Clark Fork trout are acrobats and bulldogs. Use a 5-weight rod for dries and nymphs, and at least a 6-weight for fishing streamers.

A popular float runs 5 miles from the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Sha-Ron Fishing Access Site (FAS), through downtown Missoula to the Silver Park boat landing near Osprey Stadium. In the case of Missoula, a river does run through it—a very good river.

Downstream from Missoula, the fishing just keeps getting better. The waters below Alberton as well as through the towns of Superior and Saint Regis and westward to the river’s confluence with the Flathead River could easily justify a feature story all its own. The bottom line is that the Clark Fork offers some of the best match-the-hatch dry-fly fishing in the West.



PHOTO BY JON LUKE

Bitterroot River

Locals like to say, "If God created a trout stream, it's the Bitterroot."

From March to November, fish rise to a smorgasbord of hatching insects, making the Bitterroot a true dry-fly paradise. *Skwala* stoneflies hatch in March and April. Cast size 8 or 10 *Skwala* dry-fly patterns on 7.5-foot leaders with 3X tippet to hard-charging, 16- to 20-inch-plus cutthroat, rainbow, and brown trout that seem as hungry as a hostage after a winter diet of tiny midges.

Be prepared to share. The hatch uncorks a frenzy of eager fly anglers. Little Brown Stoneflies and Western March Browns hatch on the heels of the *Skwala* stoneflies. Some years, a Mother's Day Caddis hatch occurs just before the spring runoff that usually begins in mid-May.

"I like to start fishing the main stem the end of the first week of July when flows are typically under 2,000 cubic feet per second," states Sean O'Brien, owner of Osprey Outfitters in Hamilton, a 40-minute drive from Missoula. O'Brien calls July on the Bitterroot "stonefly madness" because several species hatch river-wide.

Westslope cutthroat dominate the upper river south of Hamilton. The heavily braided middle stretch, from Tucker Crossing FAS 6 miles north to Bell Crossing FAS, boasts rainbows, browns, and cutthroat to 20 inches. From Stevensville to Missoula, the Bitterroot widens. Abundant hatches

of stoneflies, mayflies, caddisflies, and terrestrials make the Bitterroot a great option for spring, summer, and fall—and, says O'Brien, "Streamers in October can be dynamite."

The Bitterroot River's two main tributaries—the East and West Forks—also offer fine angling prospects. The East Fork is mainly a walk-and-wade fishery, but it is floatable in



PHOTO BY STEVE MAEDER

early spring from the town of Sula (pop. 37 in the 2010 census) north. If you seek solitude, rugged scenery, and lots of 12- to 16-inch cutthroat and brown trout eating dry flies, the East Fork is definitely worth exploring.

The West Fork is born high up in the Bitterroot Mountains, close to the Montana-Idaho border. Fed by

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Missoula INSIDER

Local intel: Glacier Country Regional Tourism Commission, (800) 338-5072, www.glaciermt.com; Destination Missoula, (406) 541-9465, www.destinationmissoula.org; Missoula Chamber of Commerce, (800) 847-4868, www.visitmt.com; Missoula Downtown Association, (406) 543-4238, www.missouladowntown.com.

Delicious breakfasts: Hob Nob, (406) 541-4622; The Shack Restaurant, (406) 549-9903.

Favorite lunch stops: Walking Moustache, (406) 549-3800; Five on Black, (406) 926-1860; Tagliare Delicatessen, (406) 830-3049; Lisa's Pastry Pantry, (406) 543-0839.

Dinner out: Pearl Café, (406) 541-0231; The Silk Road, (406) 541-0752; Caffé Dolce, (406) 830-3055; Plonk, (406) 926-1791; The Notorious Pig BBQ, (406) 926-1344; Scotty's Table, (406) 549-2790; Montana Club, (406) 543-3200; Burns St. Bistro, (406) 543-0719; Sa Wad Dee, (406) 543-9966; Vietnam Noodle House, (406) 542-8299; Mission Bistro (Stevensville), (406) 777-6945; Romeo's Italian Kitchen (Stevensville), (406) 777-4499; Spice of Life (Hamilton), (406) 363-4433; The Signal Grill (Hamilton), (406) 375-9099.

Breweries/brewpubs: Bayern Brewing, (406) 721-1482; Big Sky Brewing Company, (406) 549-2777; Draught Works, (406) 541-1592; Flathead Lake Brewing Company, (406) 542-3847; Iron Horse Brew Pub, (406) 728-8866; Great Burn Brewing, (406) 317-1557; KettleHouse Brewing Company, (406) 830-3162; Tamarack Brewing, (406) 830-3113; Montgomery Distillery, (406) 926-1725.

Fly shops/guides: Grizzly Hackle Fly Shop, (406) 721-8996, www.grizzlyhackle.com; Osprey Outfitters (Hamilton), (406) 363-1000, www.ospreyoutfittersflyshop.com; John Perry's Montana Fly Fishing, (406) 370-9183, www.johnperryflyfishing.com; The Kingfisher, (406) 721-6141, www.kingfisherflyshop.com; The Missoulian Angler Fly Shop, (406) 728-7766, www.missoulianangler.com; Blackfoot River Outfitters, (406) 542-7411, www.blackfootriver.com; Clear Creek Outfitters, (406) 370-7039, www.clearcreekoutfitters.com; Montana Trout Outfitters, (406) 544-3516, www.mttroutguides.com; Missoula on the Fly, (406) 360-7373, www.missoulamontanaflyfishing.com; Missoula River Lodge, (877) 327-7878, www.montanaflyfishingguide.com; Clark Fork Trout, (406) 382-0161, www.clarkforktrout.com; Trout Bums, (406) 825-6146, www.rockcreektroutbums.com.

three tributaries, the river flows into Painted Rocks Reservoir. The best fishing is the 23-mile stretch from below the reservoir to the confluence with the main stem of the Bitterroot. Access is good. Four miles south of Darby on US Highway 93, turn right onto West Fork Road, which follows the river to the dam. During the Salmonfly and Golden Stonefly madness of June and July, it's a run-and-gun show fishing from rafts or drift boats, and 30-plus-fish dry-fly days are not uncommon. As flows diminish in mid- to late summer, the West Fork becomes a consistent walk-and-wade fishery for the balance of the season.

Rock Creek

Rock Creek is in a league of its own. This famous creek is everything a classic free-stone stream should be, offering excellent fly fishing for rainbow, cutthroat, and brown trout in a wild and scenic setting. Two forks merge to form the main stem near Philipsburg. Flowing 52 miles, mainly through the Lolo National Forest about 30 minutes from Missoula, Rock Creek is simply a perfect trout stream.

"The creek boasts trout populations of 2,200 fish per mile. It offers anglers of all skill levels miles of deep pools, big boulders, fast currents, riffles, and more pocket water than an angler could fish in a lifetime," beams John Perry, guide, outfitter, lodge owner, and avid outdoorsman.

Perry started guiding on Montana's rivers in the early 1980s. His fly patterns, such as the Bugmeister,

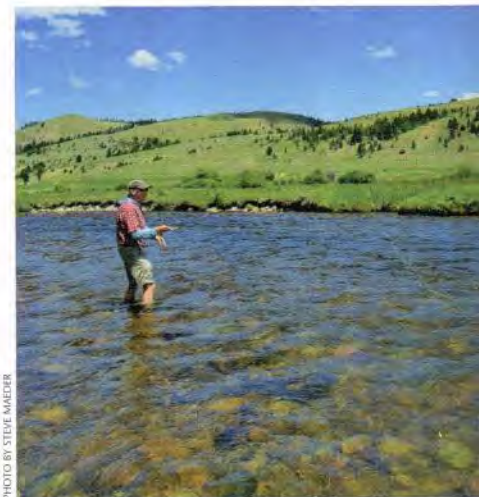


PHOTO BY STEVE MAEGER

Transformer, Nightmare, Hymen Hopper, and Congo Caddis, have made him something of a local legend. Perry begins fishing the creek in early spring, before runoff, casting stonefly nymph patterns, such as Pat's Rubber Legs or Bitch Creek, tight to the banks.

"We can get away with short leaders and 2X tippet," he notes.

In June, the creek's most famous hatch takes flight. Perry says the sky can be literally clouded with thousands of giant Salmonflies. "If we get an early runoff, the dry fishing can be epic, unbelievable really, with fish to the fly almost every cast."

As the summer flows begin to drop, Rock Creek becomes a premier walk-and-wade fishery. Worth noting is the creek's spruce moth hatch in August. Use light-colored down-wing patterns, such as a size 10 or 12 Elk Hair Caddis. Skittering the fly across the surface and letting it swing will draw explosive strikes.

Fall fishing is a mixed bag of top-water and subsurface tactics. On a cloudy day, Blue-Winged Olives are abundant. If you see rising fish, park your rig and walk the creek below the rises.

"You can pick 'em off casting your way back upstream," Perry notes.

During their fall spawning season, big browns will slam streamers cast tight to the banks on the 10 miles above the creek's mouth. Public access along Rock Creek is excellent, although a partially paved road that runs the length of the creek can be gritty and bumpy. A word of caution: watch out for mama moose. The temperamental animals are common along the creek.

Trout Town Beckons

I believe that fly fishing connects us with our true selves. It exposes our feelings, many of them raw, and leaves us exhilarated, peaceful, and happier than we have been at most other times in our lives. The opportunity to plug in to the natural beauty and tranquility of a trout stream and tune out the cacophony of everyday life is only a cast away in Missoula, truly one of the continent's great trout towns. 🐟

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