

The seductive dance of the fly-line over a clear-flowing stream has long held my imagination and spoken to my soul. So, a couple of years ago, I answered the call and took up the sport of fly-fishing. I paid my dues, flying chunks of hideous yellow yarn over the high school sports field, learning to command the graceful arcs, loops and rolls. In good time, I graduated to imposter flies, barbless hooks and open water. And, in no time at all, the seduction became an addiction.

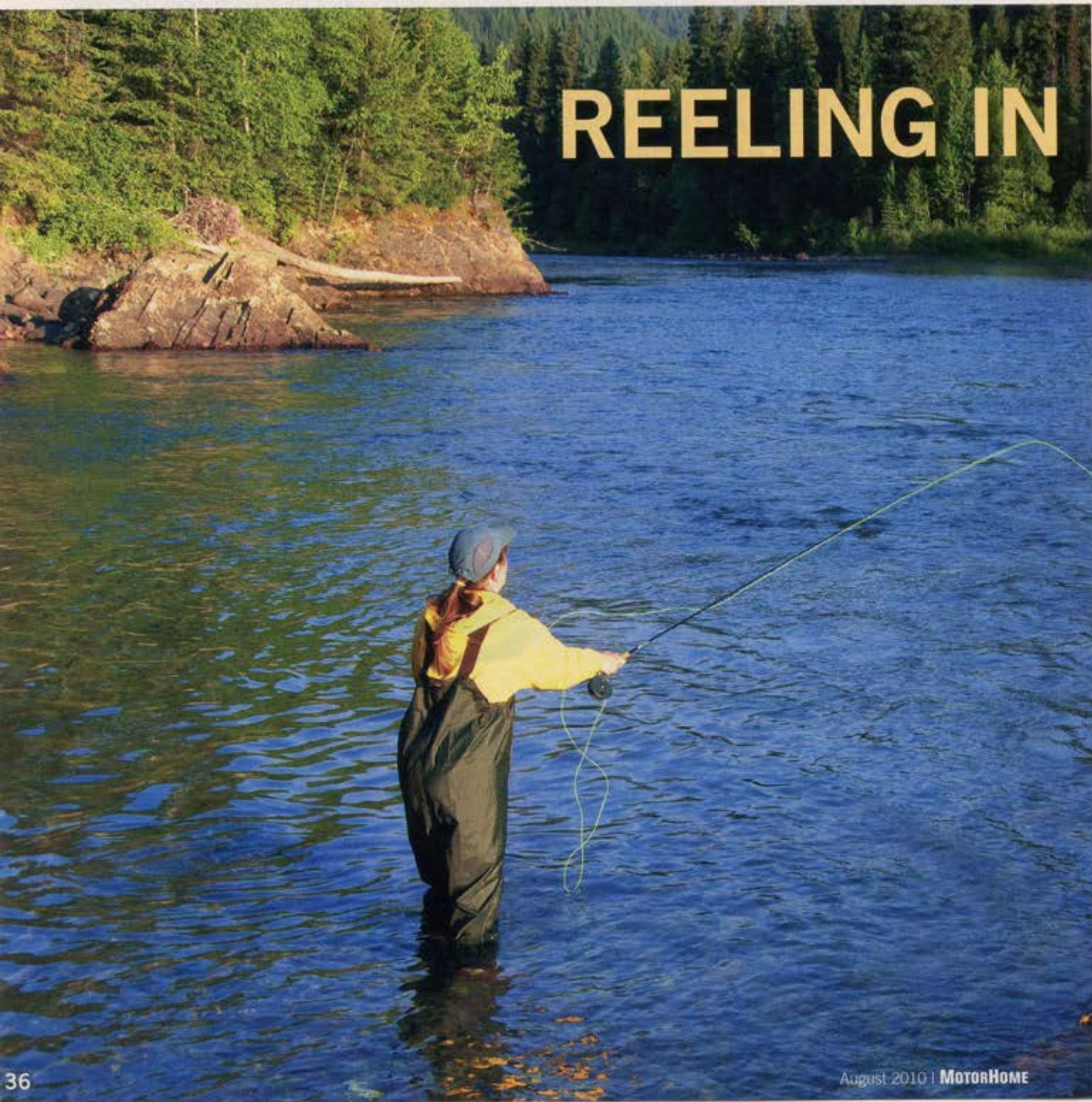
Ever since, I have been taking my act on the road. One obvious destination was my birth state, Montana, with its superb blue-ribbon trout fishery. I'd say I checked it off my wish list of

places to go in 2009, but fishing Montana is a wish that never fades. It's a fixture on my list.

The state's fishing and grand landscapes did not disappoint, but what truly won me over was the access. Montana boasts a superb fishing access site (FAS) system, serving residents and visitors alike. The set-asides provide river, lake and stream approaches for fishing and boat launching, with primitive camping available at nearly one-third of the sites. New accesses are added annually. Although not all of the camps or access roads are suitable for motorhomes, where you *can* camp the view from the picture window is top-notch.

The program's funding comes from the sale of the state fishing

REELING IN



license. One dollar from each license sold goes toward the acquisition and maintenance of these sites. Too often, great waters are locked up by private ownership. This program is a win-win for recreationists and landowners. It opens the waters and reduces trespass.

Having great waters is one thing; having great access to those waters is quite another. And, Montana has both.

The FAS program alone offers 332 places to get you started fishing. State park, Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service sites swell the offering and, in many cases, add to the complement of camping. Private RV parks can add more civility and comfort to your nights after a day on the water. Consult your

Trailer Life RV Parks and Campgrounds Directory.

According to Allan Kuser, FAS coordinator for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, the program officially went on the books in 1974, but lands had been acquired as early as the 1960s. Currently, due to the pure size of the system, 75 cents from each dollar goes to maintaining the existing sites, with the remainder used for new acquisitions.

"I guess you could look at it as the price of success," said Kuser.

Because of the current money skew and because getting on the water is the primary goal, Kuser explained that future

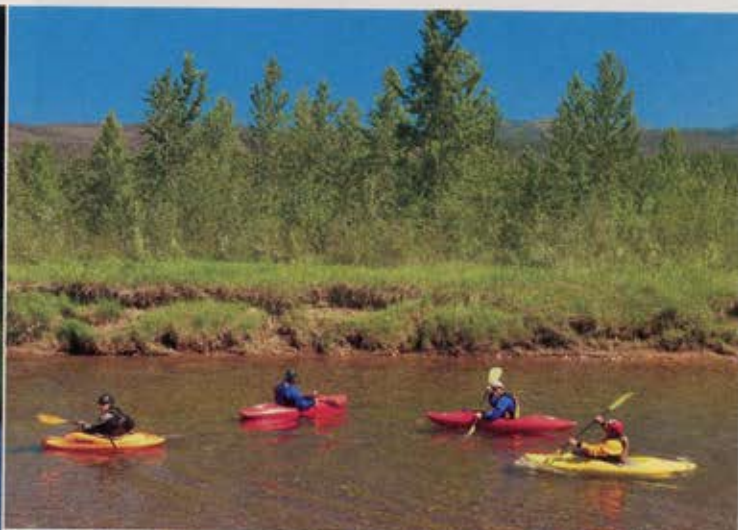
MONTANA

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by RHONDA OSTERTAG

The author does some fly-fishing at Middle Fork Flathead Wild and Scenic River. The area is part of the Cascadilla Fishing Access Site (FAS) in Montana's Flathead National Forest. Right, from top: Kayakers enjoy an outing on the Middle Fork River within the Moccasin Creek FAS. An RVer fishes at the Russell Gates FAS. Boaters navigate the Missouri River in Pelican Point FAS off Missouri River Recreation Road.

PHOTOS: GEORGE OSTERTAG





The author's Montana river stops included Blackfoot River at the Monture Creek FAS.

acquisitions will likely focus on providing day-use access and not camping. But, he adds, there is still plenty to crow about.

The access sites can range from 1- to 2-acre poke-your-nose-in sites to ample sites of several hundred acres. Kuser said, "There are gems in every district, and all sites have merit."

Montana is a big state, so my travels were mainly confined to the west, but as I said, I'll be back. I fished such legends as the Thompson, Big Hole, Bitterroot, Middle Fork Flathead, Swan, Clark Fork and Missouri rivers. But I checked out other waters along the way, sometimes birding, sometimes sightseeing. I hooked into mountain whitefish and rainbow, cutthroat and brown trout. The sport fishery, though, is quite diverse, varying by region and by water body.

On the Middle Fork Flathead, a popular rafting water, I sometimes had to hold up my cast while floaters passed. But I also hooked into and released my first of the celebrated Montana cutthroat, a beautiful wild fish with a green back, black

spots and signature orange chin stripe and a fight that would put a Rottweiler to shame.

On the Missouri, my husband, George, and I camped with my parents at the Prewett Creek FAS, and hopscotched between access sites up and down river. I fished with my Dad for the first time since I was a kid. This time, he didn't have to tie my knots or untangle my line. He actually could spend his time fishing.

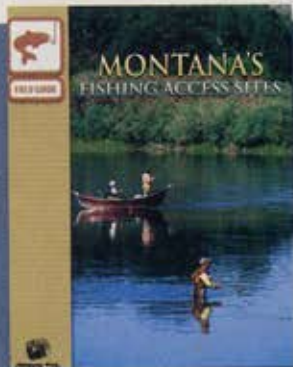
At the Dewey Access on the Big Hole River, I met up with a Pennsylvania fly-caster, thigh-deep in the river, juggling a fishing pole, a wading staff, a lively 17-inch brown trout and sporting a smile that could rival the fish in length, if only it were humanly possible. He and his wife were staying at an RV park in Butte, about a half-hour drive north on Interstate 15, and they were venturing out by passenger vehicle. After he landed and released the fish, though, his wife got behind the wheel to investigate some nearby primitive camping on the river.

George and I ended that day farther west on the Big Hole at Fishtrap Creek FAS (20 campsites, maximum RV length 28 feet). As the sun tipped its hat to the day, I stood in the river, tortured by a sci-fi blizzard of microscopic insects and the interlocking rings of percolating fish jumps and had not a clue as to how to match the hatch. Of the hundreds of fish nosing the surface, only two chose my flies. But it was a magnificent sight and George and I had it all to ourselves.

While on the rivers, I was treated to sightings of bald eagles, ospreys, white pelicans, Canada geese and mergansers. I also watched as deer sipped at the river's edge or swam to the opposite bank. An acceptance of fly-casters, not afforded other two-legged intruders, seems to exist. On road trips between the access sites, I spied prairie dogs, bison, bighorn sheep, antelope, elk and even badgers, on two separate occasions.

My river travels took me past Native American sites, Lewis and Clark sites, and ranching and mining history. Like the Pennsylvanians, our travels took us through Butte, with its ghosts and gallows and hot pasty (pass-TEE!) lunches. This Cornish pastry was the traditional miner's lunch — a hearty pocket pie with cubed meat, onions and potatoes.

When you fish Montana you can have it all — great sport, grand landscapes, wildlife, sightseeing and good eats. So, hang out the "gone fishing" shingle and head to Montana. You'll be hooked, too. ♦



FISH FINDER

Montana has made finding its fishing access sites (FAS) easy, with a well-designed field guidebook and a searchable Web version. The guide is broken down first by geographic district. It then identifies the waterways within each district and each water's fishery species. Under the waterway heading are the access sites that serve it. Associated maps help users visualize the general locations.

For each FAS, a succinct description alerts you to the use: day or overnight; facilities (latrines, concrete or gravel ramps, docks, designated or undesignated camping spots); any Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) access; and the all-important directions. Some entries even give clues to limited parking spaces or vehicle size.

The free booklet is generally available where licenses are sold, at visitor centers, or by calling Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (406-444-2535) or contacting any district office. On the Internet, go to www.fwp.mt.gov/fishing/guide. — R.O.