

Catching Lake Trout in Flathead Lake

Dock Angling: Tips and Recommendations

A Handbook and Companion to the Tribes' Dock Angling Movie

THE TECHNIQUE

Learn the best dock angling techniques, everything from where to fish, to casting, to learning how frequently to change your bait.

THE ROD AND REEL

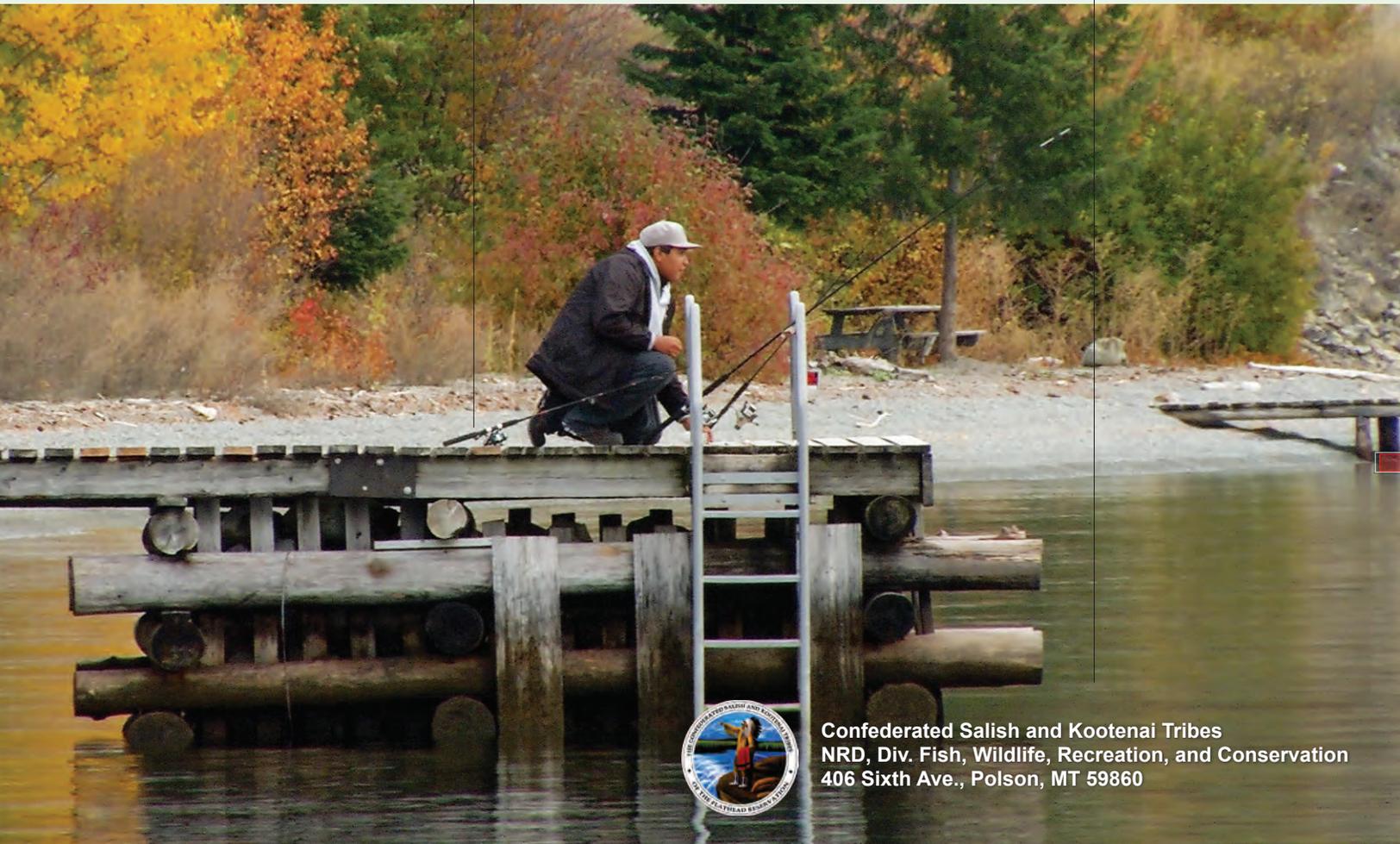
Learn what to look for in a rod and reel, what kind of line to use and how to rig your rods.

THE BAIT AND ATTRACTORS

Learn about using sausages and other baits and how you can enhance the scent and sight of your bait.

THE FISH

Learn about lake trout—their habits, where they are at different times of the year, and how you can consistently catch them.



Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes
NRD, Div. Fish, Wildlife, Recreation, and Conservation
406 Sixth Ave., Polson, MT 59860

Rods, Reels, Lines, & Leaders

Rods and Reels

The anglers we interviewed favored medium-to-fast-action rods. Most prefer a sensitive tip so they can feel the bites better. A good choice is a rod like the Lamiglas 86MH (moderate/fast action rod) 8 feet 6 inches in length, although any good 6-foot to eight-and-a-half foot medium rod will do.

Line

For dock or shore angling, most use a braided, monofilament or fluorocarbon. Braided line seems to be favored for several reasons. At any given test, it has a thinner diameter than monofilament or fluorocarbon. Braided line also lasts longer, and because it does not stretch, it is much more sensitive when you get a strike or have a fish on. Our anglers were for the most part using a 30-to-40-pound test braid (a braided line at that strength is actually thinner than 10-pound test monofilament), though one was comfortable with a 17-pound test fluorocarbon line.



Leader

Most of the anglers we talked with use a 25-to-30-pound test monofilament or fluorocarbon leader or a dark-colored steel leader. Monofilament and fluorocarbon are good because they are less visible and because they stretch (fluorocarbon less than mono), and stretch in your leader can prevent you from tearing a hook out of the fish's mouth. Steel leaders are good because lake trout are "toothy" fish. Their teeth are sharp and strong enough to cut a leader.



Weights (Use Tungsten not Lead)

Fishing from the shore or off a dock requires you to be able to make long casts. To cast far you need weight, and lots of it. The dock anglers we talked to used 1.5 ounces or more. It used to be the only choice was to buy lead weights. But lead is highly toxic to humans and wildlife. Tungsten has proven to be a popular alternative, especially among leading anglers who both care about the waters they fish and who want to catch more fish. Tungsten is a naturally occurring metal and is denser and heavier than lead, which makes it a natural fit for fishing weights and sinkers because the weights can be smaller and sleeker—less likely to spook fish. But more importantly, tungsten is a non-toxic metal. While fishing, it is inevitable that some weights are lost to snags, rocks, big fish, and other unforeseen circumstances.

The cool thing is, if you lose a tungsten weight, it will cause considerably less damage to fish and wildlife, both of which humans occasionally eat. There are several brands of tungsten fishing weights and sinkers available on the market today from retailers and online stores like Cabelas, and they can be found in a variety of styles and sizes. Simply put, there is no reason to use lead anymore, but there are lots of good reasons to use tungsten.



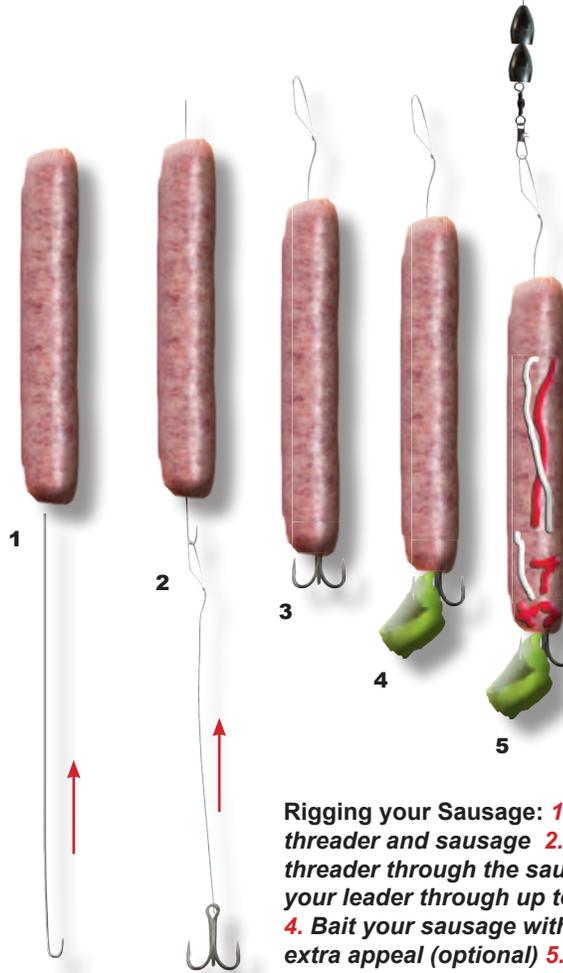
Tungsten Fishing Weights

Sausage

Pork Sausages



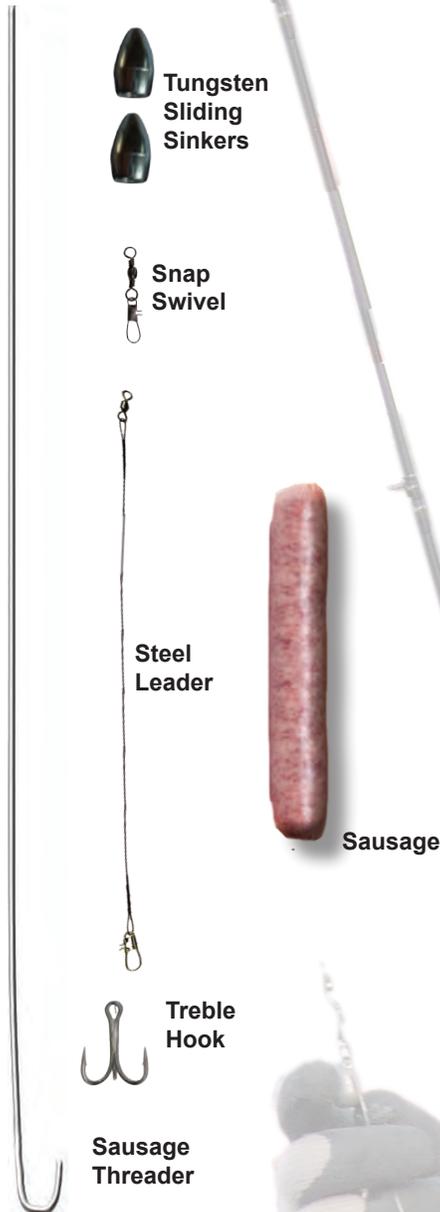
Fish Attracting Lotions



Rigging your Sausage: 1. Wire threader and sausage 2. Push the threader through the sausage 3. Pull your leader through up to the hook 4. Bait your sausage with cut bait for extra appeal (optional) 5. Add attractants like shrimp lotion and/or glow oil or lotion (optional)



Cut Bait



"For some reason, lake trout just love pork fat"

— Dick Zimmer



Tips

Setting your Drag and Using Pole Holders

Set your drag to a light setting because if the fish feel any tension when they go to take the sausage, they will spit it right back out.

Pole Holders

Use the pole holders or hold your rod. Don't lay it on the dock or shore. A big lake trout can and will take your rod and reel into the lake, and you may never see it again.

Casting

Cast as far out as possible. To do that you will need some weight on your line. Use tungsten weights rather than lead. Lead is toxic to people and fish. The last thing we want in Flathead Lake's clean waters is lead.

A Big Net

You can catch some pretty big fish fishing from a dock or from shore—fish well over 30 inches are not uncommon—so make sure you have a big net to land them.

Be There at the Right Time

The best times to fish for lake trout in Flathead Lake are mornings and evenings (dawn and dusk are the very best). The action drops off markedly the closer you get to midday. Also, during Mack Days, some of the best areas will be fished out by mid morning.

Use Dark Colors

Anglers we talked to said it was important to use dark leaders and swivels to reduce the visibility of your line.

Keep your Sausage and Bait Fresh

All the anglers we interviewed emphasized how important it is to change your sausage and cut bait (or at least re-scent it) periodically. Scent leaches out of sausage and bait when its in the water.

Catch the Hits

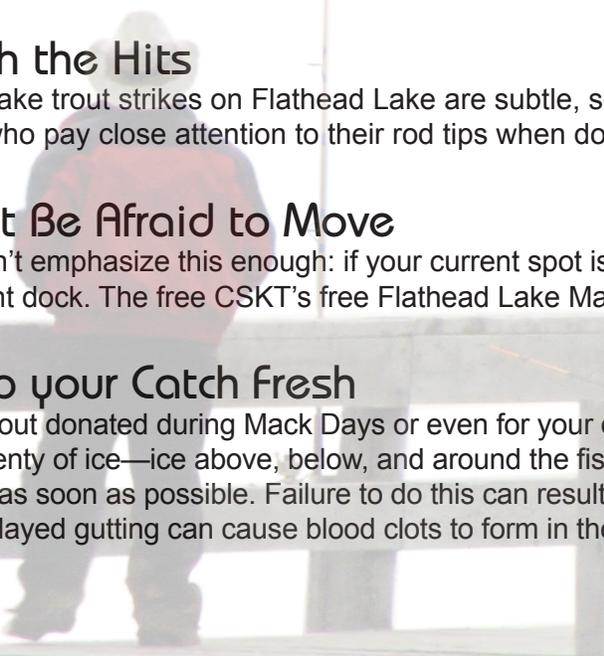
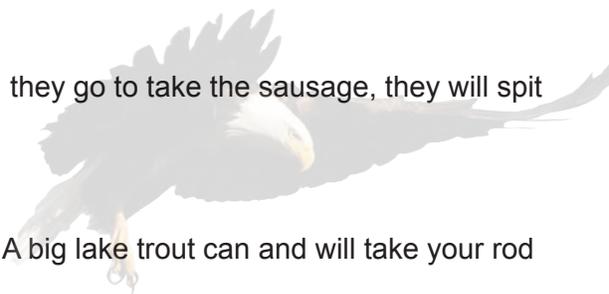
Often lake trout strikes on Flathead Lake are subtle, so you need to watch your rod tip for slight movements. Anglers who pay close attention to their rod tips when dock fishing will catch more fish.

Don't Be Afraid to Move

We can't emphasize this enough: if your current spot is not working, go to another spot on the shore, or move to a different dock. The free CSKT's free Flathead Lake Map lists public docks on the lake.

Keep your Catch Fresh

Lake trout donated during Mack Days or even for your own use need to be kept on ice. Pack your catch in a cooler with plenty of ice—ice above, below, and around the fish. Once you get back, the fish should be processed and frozen as soon as possible. Failure to do this can result in the flesh having a soft, open texture. Inadequate bleeding and delayed gutting can cause blood clots to form in the flesh, and those fish are not suitable for freezing.



Lake Trout

Habitat and Diet

Lake trout inhabit deep, clear, rocky lakes with temperatures of about 50° Fahrenheit and oxygen levels of six to twelve milligrams per liter. Water temperatures above about 74°F can be lethal. Lake trout also inhabit shallow lakes and rivers, but this is usually in the northern parts of their range. They are a bottom-oriented species regardless of depth, and juveniles are usually found in deeper water than adults. The species is “negatively phototropic”, meaning it avoids light. In large lakes with many fish species, lake trout are typically piscivorous, meaning they eat other fish. In Flathead Lake, *Mysis* shrimp make up an important part of the diet as well.

Reproduction

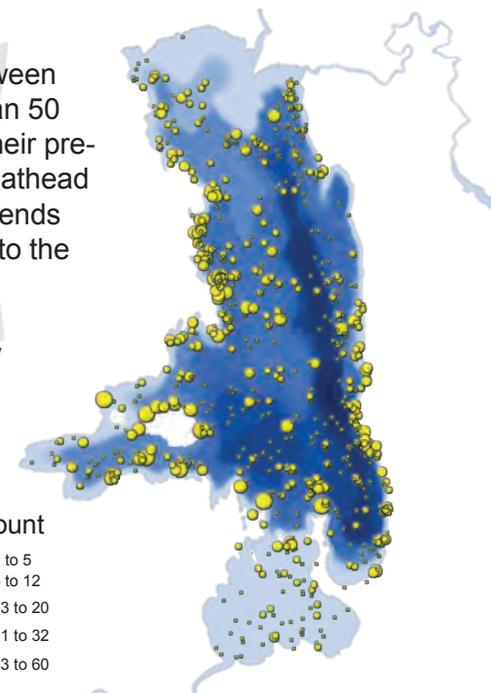
Lake trout have a relatively low reproductive potential because of their late age at maturity, large egg size in relation to body size, broadcast spawning behavior (no parental care to increase egg survival), and a six-month incubation period. They are fall spawners and normally reproduce every second year from September to November in most parts of their range. Temperature, light, and wind are factors that contribute to the onset and duration of spawning activities. They spawn at night on offshore shoals, near shorelines, and points near islands exposed to the prevailing winds. The substrate is a combination of broken rubble and edged rocks 1-to-6 inches in diameter. Unlike most salmonids, they do not construct redds, and they do not form single mating pairs. Spawning may involve several females laying their eggs into crevices in the rocks or spaces between the rocks. Typically, several males fertilize the eggs. Egg incubation lasts up to six months, depending on temperature and oxygen levels. The eggs hatch between February and April, but the fry do not emerge from the rubble until their yolk sacs are absorbed a month later. The fry ascend to the surface to fill their swim bladders and then descend into cooler, deeper water where they remain for two to three years.

In Flathead Lake

Habitat within Flathead Lake is optimal for lake trout. They prefer temperatures between 44 and 58°F, which generally limits their distribution in the lake to depths greater than 50 feet during summer. Thermal habitat volume—the quantity of water column within their preferred temperature range during summer—is limiting in many lakes but is large in Flathead Lake. Based on observations during autumn-gillnet sampling, it appears spawning tends to occur in nearshore areas in depths of less than 50 feet. Juveniles typically move to the deepest portions of the lake to avoid predation by adults.

A group of lake trout in Flathead Lake referred to as dwarf lake trout (because they do not exceed 24 inches in length) have restricted movements, remaining consistently in deep-water habitats where they feed on *Mysis* shrimp throughout their lives. In contrast, the original stock introduced into Flathead Lake, called the “lean” form, utilizes *Mysis* primarily during juvenile years then switches to fish as adults. They grow large and use shallower water than the dwarfs.

Lake trout have become abundant in Flathead Lake since *Mysis* became established, and their population has now stabilized at near carrying capacity. Estimates derived from mark-and-recapture studies, length distributions derived from gillnet and angler catches, and advanced modeling put the abundance of lake trout in Flathead Lake from age 1 to age 30 at about 1.5 million fish.



Lake trout capture locations in gillnets set predominantly during autumn, 1998 - 2010. Each circle represents a gillnet location; the circle size indicates the number of lake trout caught in each net.

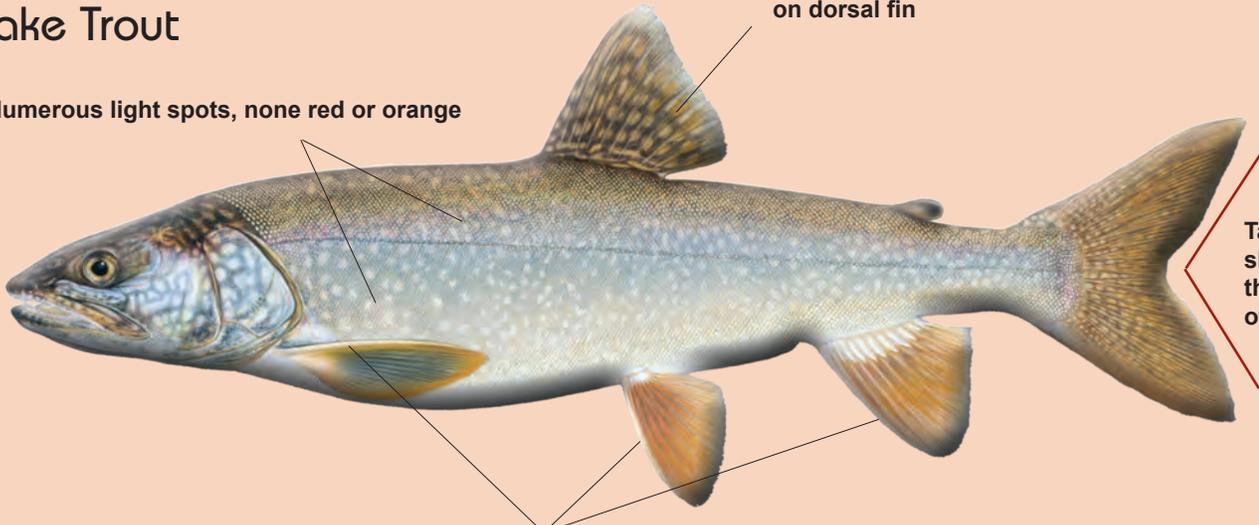
Fish ID

Good Anglers Can ID the Fish they Catch

Lake Trout

Numerous light spots, none red or orange

Black or dark markings on dorsal fin



Tail deeply forked, shortest ray less than one-half length of the longest

White leading edges often present on fins

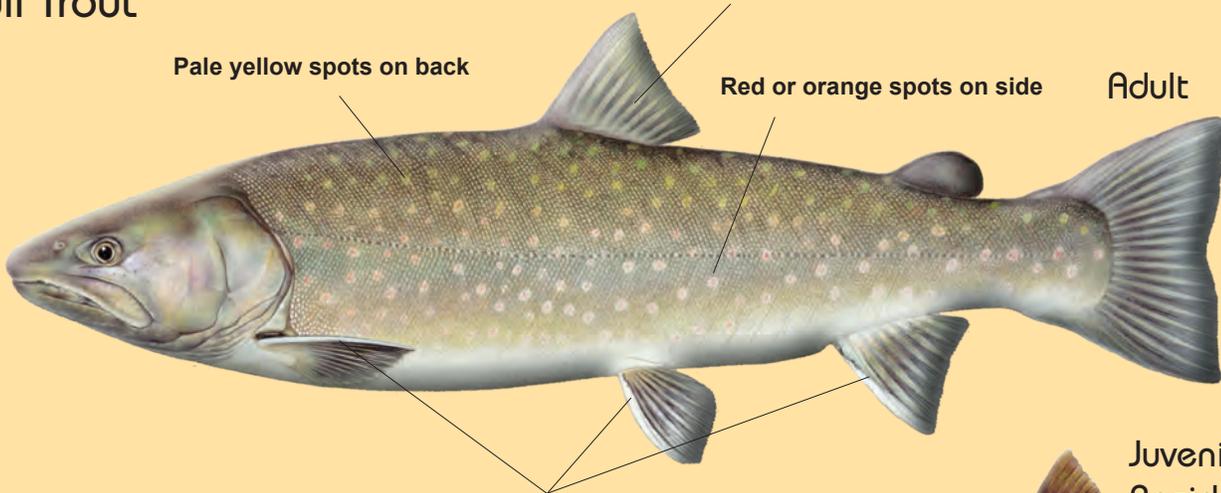
Bull Trout

Pale yellow spots on back

No black spots on dorsal fin
(No Black, Put it Back)

Red or orange spots on side

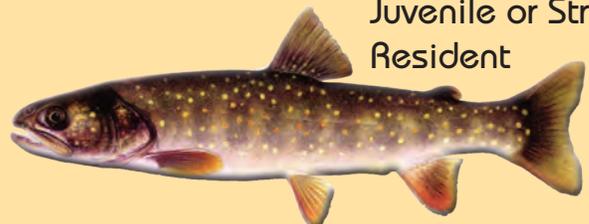
Adult



Tail slightly forked, shortest ray more than one-half the length of the longest

White leading edges on fins

Juvenile or Stream Resident



Bull Trout are a Threatened Species listed under the Endangered Species Act, and Montana and Tribal law requires all bull trout caught in Flathead Lake be released immediately.

The distinguishing characters shown for the adult also apply to the juvenile or resident form.

Protect Flathead Lake

Invasives

Aquatic invasive species are a major threat to Flathead Lake. Zebra and quagga mussels, Eurasian watermilfoil, New Zealand mud snails, and whirling disease are just a few of the destructive and aggressive invasive species that could destroy fishing opportunities on the lake. Boats, trailers, equipment, and waders and boots that come in contact with aquatic systems easily transport these invasives, introducing them to new areas. Many of these species have the ability to withstand extended periods out of water or in small amounts of water, making their transport to new locations possible. To protect the lake, clean your boat and equipment, drain water from everything, let it dry, and then inspect everything from top to bottom to make sure there are no invasives hiding somewhere. 1-877-786-7267 is the National Hotline for aquatic nuisance species. If you suspect a new infestation of an invasive plant or animal, call to report it.



Zebra Mussel



Quagga Mussel



**New Zealand
Mud Snail**



Eurasian Milfoil



Keep it Clean

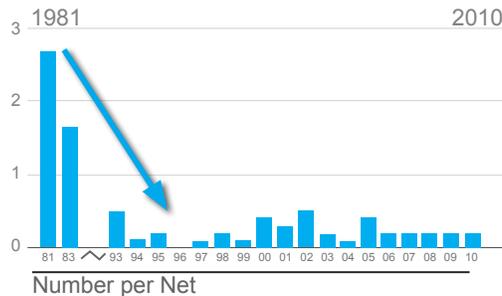
An individual's contribution to pollution may seem insignificant, but taken collectively, the pollution from the thousands of people who visit the lake annually add up. Follow these simple guidelines to help restore and maintain the lake's outstanding water quality and fishing opportunities:

- Use tungsten fishing weights and sinkers instead of lead. Lead is highly toxic, and besides tungsten works better.
- Know your fish and release all bull trout and cutthroat trout.
- Use litter bags on the dock and in your camp.
- Bring back all cans, bottles, and litter after an outing.
- Bag and recycle fish parts for compost or fertilizer.
- Do not release dead or live bait into the water.
- Know where toilet facilities are and use them.
- Read labels and buy products that are environmentally safe. Never use WD-40 as a fish attractor. For disposal purposes, WD-40 is classified as an ignitable hazardous waste that is harmful or fatal if swallowed. Besides, scientific tests have shown that commercial fish oils and lotions are much better for attracting fish. The company that makes WD-40 asks anglers to not use the lubricant as a fish attractant because of the damage it can do to the environment.
- Avoid cleaners with bleach, ammonia, lye, or petroleum distillates. Use alternatives like baking soda, lemon juice, vinegar, and elbow grease.

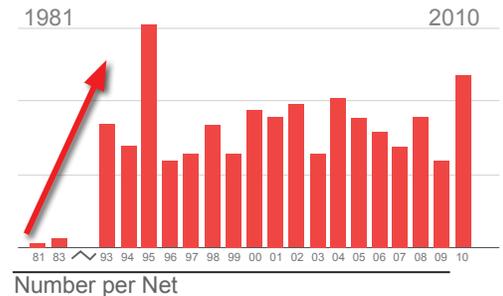
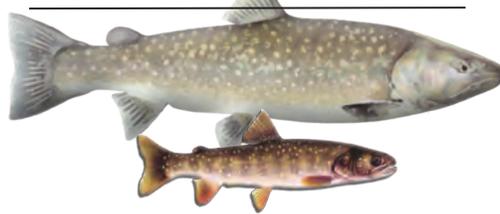
Management

Restoring Native Fish

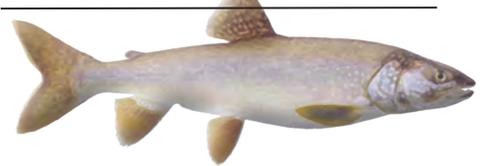
Bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout are Native Species of Special Concern (a Tribal and State designation). Bull trout are also listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. Both species use Flathead Lake, the Flathead River, and its forks and tributaries for various portions of their life histories. For example, most bull trout grow to adulthood in Flathead Lake, migrate upstream through the main stem and two of the forks, enter a tributary to spawn, then return to the lake. Offspring rear in tributary habitats for several years then migrate downstream to the lake where they grow to adulthood before returning upstream to complete the cycle. Thus, all parts of the aquatic system are crucial to life stages of these native fish. Because of their migratory nature, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, the fisheries management agencies for the system, manage the lake and river as a single entity.



Bull Trout Abundance

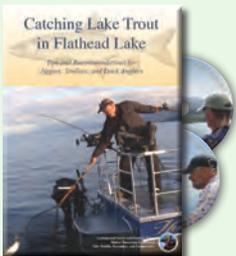


Lake Trout Abundance



Bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout populations have declined dramatically due to a variety of human activities, chief among them the introduction of non-native fish species. In Flathead Lake, the most significant of those introduced species is lake trout. Research indicates that the increase in the lake trout population is the main reason the numbers of bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout have declined so precipitously. Because the large number of lake trout have put our native trout at risk, there is a need to reduce that risk through management actions or strategies set forth in the Flathead Lake and River Fisheries Co-Management Plan. The actions are designed to: (1) increase populations of native fish, (2) decrease numbers of lake trout, (3) maintain clean water, (4) improve angler-access, and (5) sustain 40,000 angler days in the river and 50,000 angler days in the lake. By restoring a greater balance to the Flathead Lake fishery, the long-term viability of native, migratory fish will be improved.

You can help us achieve that goal by participating in Mack Days and other opportunities to catch lake trout in Flathead Lake; by following clean-boating practices; by ensuring that your boat, trailer, and equipment are free of aquatic invasives; and by doing all you can to protect the lake's water quality and natural beauty.



This handbook is a companion to the Tribes' trolling and dock angling movies available at mackdays.com or on a DVD from the Tribes' Division of Fish, Wildlife, Recreation, and Conservation. Contact Cindy Benson at (406) 675-2700 ext.7294 or cindyb@cskt.org.



Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes
NRD, Div. Fish, Wildlife, Recreation, and Conservation
406 Sixth Ave., Polson, MT 59860