

Everything You Ever Wanted to  
Know about  
Fly-Fishing the Beartooth Country,  
But Were Afraid to Ask



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***Everything you ever wanted to know about fly-fishing  
the Beartooth Country but were afraid to ask!***

**Overview:** The Beartooth area has been blessed with some of the best trout fishing in Montana, a state known for its blue ribbon trout streams. Whirling disease, New Zealand mussels, or other recently introduced exotic species are not found and therefore have not affected trout or their habitats here in the Beartooth area.

The Beartooth Mountain Range and the lands surrounding it represent the highest average elevation of anywhere in the State of Montana. When other areas of the State receive little to no moisture, the Beartooth Mountains wring out every drop of precipitation as storms pass over this immense chunk of up thrust granite. In other words, we seem to always have adequate water conditions for fishing and floating. The last five years of drought has not caused adverse effects to our streams and rivers or their wild trout populations.

The streams running from the mountains are typically infertile, cold, and of a very steep gradient. Once they exit the mountain front, they generally flatten out, warm with the seasonal temperature changes, increase in fertility, and provide the perfect place to live if you are a trout.

**Streams:** We have many. The major streams include the Main, West and Lake Forks of Rock Creek. Traveling west you would encounter the East and West Rosebud Rivers, then the Main Fork of the Stillwater River, followed by the West Fork of the Stillwater.

East of Red Lodge, the Clark's Fork of the Yellowstone offers fly fishing opportunities during fall, winter and early spring. Still further east of Red Lodge (100 miles) the Bighorn River offers even more fishing choices.

The information that appears below represents my personal (Rocky Fork Outfitters and Guide Service, ph# 445-2598) preference of streams to fish. Generally, I'd rather fish the Stillwater River than any other body of water found along the Beartooth Mountain Front. However, the Yellowstone, the Rock Creeks (Main, Lake, and West), the Rosebuds (East and West) and the Clark's Fork each have their unique charm and characteristics. Heck, I love 'em all, and so will you. The information and opinions expressed represent only my perspective, which is always subject to change. That's one of the great things about fly-fishing; you are always exposed to new situations, techniques, and materials. You will never know it all, and you shouldn't. Including me!

## *Stillwater River*

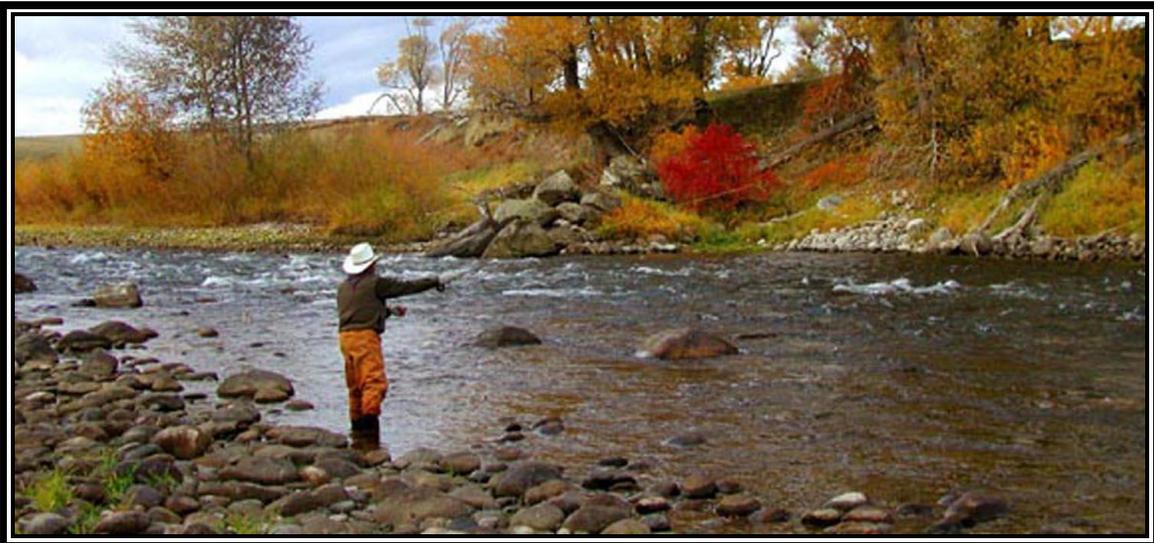
In my opinion, *the Stillwater is the finest fishery in the State of Montana* and it is relatively unknown. With a little forethought, you can have the place to yourself. While the fish are typically not huge, they are plentiful with approximately 3,000 fish per river mile. Browns predominate in the upper reaches, while rainbows comprise about 70 percent of the lower rivers' trout population. During the spring, the fish average 14 to 16 inches due to an influx of large spring spawners from the Yellowstone River. During the summer, the typical fish is approximately 12 to 13 inches long. The months of March, April and early May are incredible fishing if you know the river and its moods.

The upper river runs from the Forest Service boundary to the confluence of the Rosebuds. The lower river extends from this point to the confluence of the Yellowstone. River characteristics differ between these two segments. The upper river is faster, half the size of the lower river, and is more difficult to wade. There is also a portion of the Stillwater within the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness that I refer to as the headwaters. I do not fish this area since it contains a bazillion little brook trout and not much more.

*Hatches are prolific and predictable* as described below under the topic "*Seasons of the Fisher*" found later in this document. Mayflies begin the dry fly season followed by caddis, giant golden stoneflies, more mayflies, and then hoppers. Streamers, (minnow imitations) are available to the fish year-round and I recommend trying them if nothing else works.

*Wading* on the Stillwater can *challenge* even the most experienced angler. The river bottom consists of bowling ball sized cobbles and larger boulders. During the summer and fall, they become coated with algae growth and are very slick until the algae die in late September. During the run-off and immediately after, wade fishing is very difficult due to high water and the challenging wading conditions, although the fishing is excellent if you are floating.

Fly selection is not complicated. Please refer to the section of this document entitled "Bug Activity" for an accurate chronology of flies to use during various times of the fishing year. Generally speaking, unless you are faced with specific hatch, big bushy, white-winged dry flies will usually catch the most fish during the summer. If you are fishing during the spring, summer, or fall and no surface activity is evident, try a #14 bead head impressionistic nymph near the bottom and you'll catch fish.



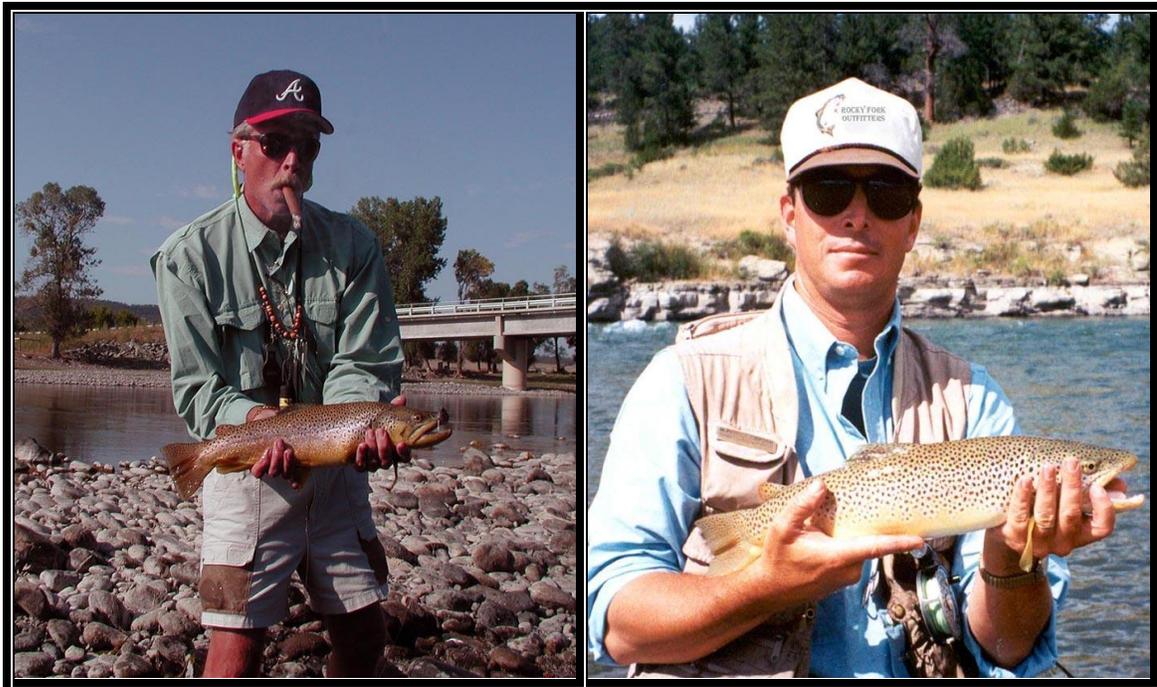
*Just another fall day on the Stillwater River*

## ***Yellowstone River***

The Yellowstone is by all standards, a very large trout river. Many people take one look at the Yellowstone and then drive somewhere else. This is a serious mistake! The “*Stone*” contains some of the largest and meanest trout in the State of Montana. The number of fish over 20 inches in this river is very impressive. Not only are the trout long, but they are wide and deep as well. The large fish in the *Stone* reflect the high productivity of this river. If you are looking for a truly large trout, this is the place to try your luck.

*Hatches* on the lower Yellowstone are not a major fish enticer. Fish in this river don’t reach these large sizes eating itty-bitty bugs or other appetizers; they’re looking for a double cheeseburger with extra curly fries. In other words, these guys got big by eating big stuff. The river from Big Timber to Columbus contains lots of baitfish, crayfish, frogs, etc. Insects play a minor role in the care and feeding of the fish that live in the lower Yellowstone except during the spring of the year or during hopper season. These fish are keyed into large streamers and nymphs for the most part.

Fish in the Yellowstone are not distributed evenly throughout the river. Focusing your fishing at the junction of the riffles and pools will pay dividends. Forget the long flat stretches of water between the riffle and pool junctions.



*23-inch fall brown on the “Stone”*

*This 21-inch guppy ate a hopper*

*Wading* the Yellowstone is relatively easy. The bottom usually consists of sand and gravel, not the large cobbles and boulders found on other area rivers. However, don’t become complacent while wading the *Stone*, the current is very strong and deep in many places.

The best fishing in this river is usually found in the time period between late July and mid November. However, spring (pre-runoff) fishing can be very productive on warm overcast windless days. Baetis mayflies (size #16 to 14) hatch on the *Stone* from late March to mid-April. March Browns can literally blanket the water during the month of April. The most productive method to find feeding fish is to float and then cast to rising fish.

The Yellowstone has a tendency to blow out (turn muddy, high and unfishable) from late April to the first week in July due to snowmelt in the surrounding mountains. The river begins above Yellowstone National Park and runs through some highly erosive soils. As April temperatures reach 70 degrees, this usually spells the end of the spring fishing and signals the beginning of runoff. As snowmelt decreases in early July, the river clears and the fish begin really looking for a meal, after all, their diet has been restricted for quite a long time. Large, light colored streamers such as bunny fur, zonkers, or wooly buggers can provide great action. Also, don't forget black, brown, or olive wooly buggers. The trick is to get the bug down in the water column and then vary the stripping speed.

By the middle to the end of July and continuing into mid-September, the fly of choice is definitely a grasshopper imitation. I always fish hoppers with a trailing nymph tied about 14 to 16 inches underneath the dry. This provides the fish with a choice of an appetizer with the main entrée. The dry fly action can, on the right day, simply blow your hair back. Fish up to 25 to 26 inches are not unheard of. If you don't catch at least one fish over 20 inches, you've had a mediocre day!

The valley of the Yellowstone is known not only for its large fish, but also for its serious winds. If you are not confident firing large flies into a 20-mile per hour wind, you may wish to consider a more sheltered stream such as the Rock Creeks or the East or West Rosebuds.



*Lovely family float with a huge rainbow hooked up on a white bunny fur, the fish measure 24 inches, but the camera batteries gave out right before landing*

## ***Main Rock Creek***

The characteristics of the Main Fork of Rock Creek as well as the fish populations substantially change depending on which direction you head from Red Lodge. From Town to its headwaters, the Creek is primarily a fast pocket water stream with lots of large boulders and medium to small trout. Rainbows from 10 to 13 inches predominate from Town to the Forest Service boundary. On Forest Service property 8 to 10 inch Brook Trout make up the majority of the fish in the stream. This is a wonderfully relaxing place to spend an hour or two during the summer throwing bushy attractor dry flies to aggressive trout. However, due to the high elevation of Rock Creek upstream of Red Lodge, it does not fish well during spring or late fall. The stream simply is too cold and the fish are inactive. During the summer months, days of 20 to 40 fish are not at all uncommon.

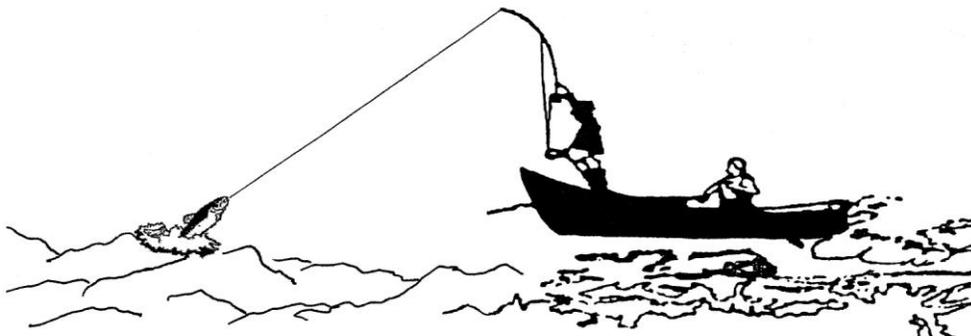
Fish above Red Lodge have a limited number of lies where they can comfortably hold due to the speed of the water. Immediately above and below large rocks or well defined current seams usually contain at least one fish, and they are not picky about how or if the fly floats.

Rock Creek downstream of Red Lodge is a completely different stream than above Town. At Red Lodge, an increasingly large cottonwood riparian creek bottom develops. These cottonwood trees find their way into the creek due to windstorms, beavers, and old age. This results in a stream comprised of pools created by logjams. If you could stick your head under these logjams, you'd be shocked by the numbers of very respectable brown trout. Rainbow and the occasional Brook trout can also be found north of Town.

*Fly hatches* are much more important downstream of Red Lodge than above Town. The chronology of hatches described for the Stillwater River fits the Main Fork of Rock Creek. Flies of a particular species usually hatch approximately two weeks later on Rock Creek as compared to the Stillwater though. The reason is simple. Rock Creek runs at a higher average elevation than the Stillwater does, thus Rock Creek usually remains colder for a longer period of time. This serves to delay the hatches. Also, the hatches are typically of much shorter duration, both on a daily and seasonal basis. The optimum time to fish Rock Creek or any of its tributaries is late-July, August, and September. Unlike the upper portion of the stream, fishing downstream of Red Lodge is good in spring (April) when the baetis, March browns, and Mother's Day Caddis are on the water.

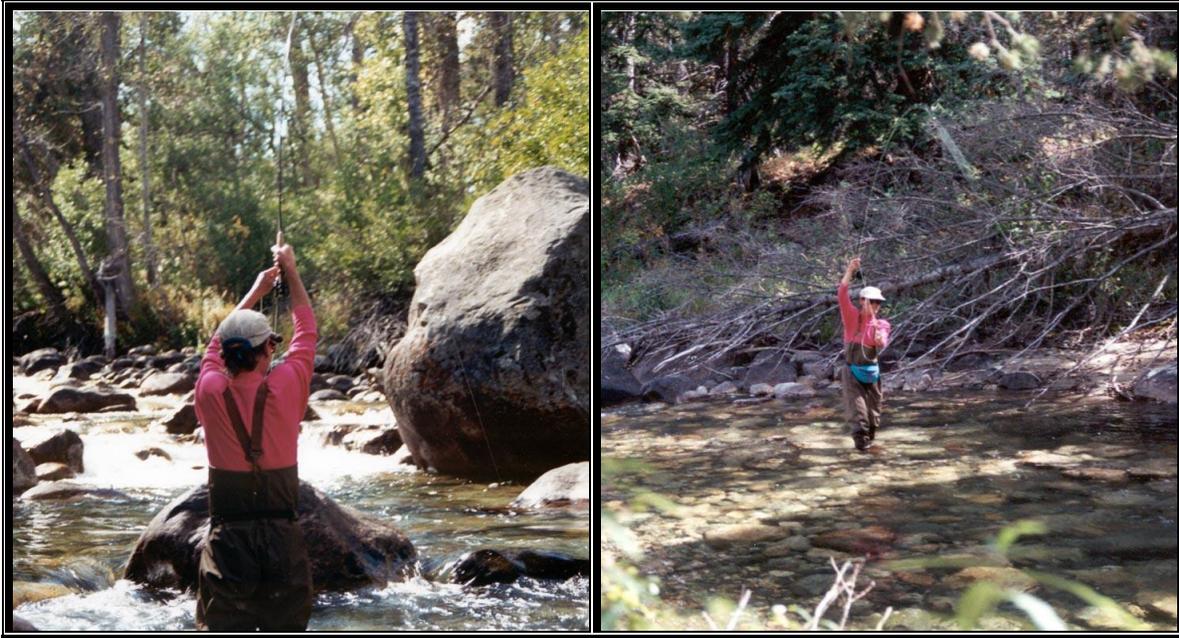
One word of caution regarding *wading* conditions on Rock Creek; be very, very careful out there. Rock Creek is a very difficult stream to wade for those not use to walking on round, slick, rolling rocks. Couple this with the current velocity and you are faced with a real challenge. Due to the elevation of the entire Rock Creek system, (Main, Lake and West Forks) the water remains very high well into July in most years. So if you choose to wade fish, take your time and plan your footing route.

Casting distances are typically short on this stream due to the adjacent brush and small-ish nature of the stream. Many folks find that casting can be difficult on Rock Creek due to the amount and proximity of the overhanging vegetation. Short cast and stealth stalking tactics are more important than casting long lines.



### ***West Fork and Lake Fork of Rock Creek***

The West Fork of Rock Creek is one of my very favorite places to fish. I have great memories of my wife and kids walking the banks while firing Trudes, Wulffs, and bi-visibles into the pocket water. Fall colors, lack of people, green moss, golden aspen, orange fireweed, and the brilliant pink sides of fat feisty rainbows make for an enchanted forest feel. The Brookies dress in their finest courtship spawning colors during fall. These waters simply do not receive much fishing pressure and therefore, they are great places to get away from everyone and enjoy the things that fly fishing is really all about. Remember, it's not about size or numbers, it's about the quality of the experience.



***Typical boulder formed pocket water found on both the Lake Fork and the West Fork of Rock Creek. Nearly a fish on every cast during late summer and early fall.***

*Wading* conditions described for the Main Fork of Rock Creek adequately describe wading on the West and Lake Forks. If you fish these small streams, do not attempt to set any land speed records, these are not easy streams to get around in. An additional word of caution when wading the West Fork of Rock Creek is in order. The stream is cold, I mean really cold. In other words, the perfect place to chill your beer! However, this is not the place to take a swim, intentionally or otherwise. I've tried it and the temperature will take your breath away anytime of the season. Consequently, this is an excellent choice for a place to fish if the air temperatures have been hovering in the 90's during the dog days of summer. As the cool mountain air flows out of the high country, you will be glad you are where you are.

Due to the diminutive size of these waters they are not floatable during any part of the year. Therefore wading these waters is your only option. The good news is that all of the Lake Fork and most of the West Fork are located on Forest Service lands, so legal access is not a problem.

*Fly hatches* on both the Lake and West Forks of Rock Creek are not of major importance to the angler. This is due to the fact that both of these streams are very fast pocket waters. As in most locations along the Beartooth Mountains, a suggestive, buggy looking fly, either a nymph or a dry will catch the majority of the fish.

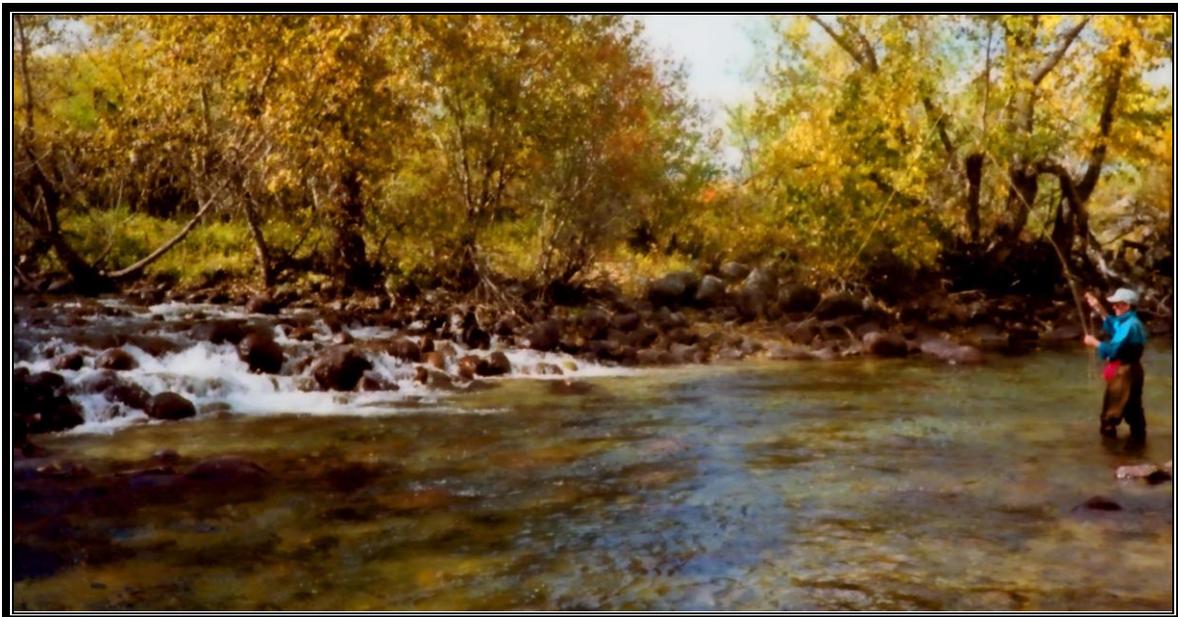
### *East and West Rosebuds*

The “*Buds*” are two beautiful streams that are pretty much carbon copies of one another. The best access is located on Forest Service lands near the mountains. The fish are definitely smaller in these upper portions of the Creeks than they are in the lower private lands. Access on the lower rivers is very limited and more than a little touchy. Private land owners take private property rights very seriously so don't trespass.

Of the two streams, the West Rosebud is the overall better fishery. Pools and rifle segments dominate the stream with isolated pocket water in a few locations. One of the great things about fishing the West Bud, is that you never know what you are going to catch. This stream is one of the few locations along the mountain face that I have caught pure Yellowstone Cutthroat trout. The stream also contains browns, rainbows and brook trout along with the ever-present mountain whitefish. West Rosebud Creek flows through two small lakes on its journey toward to the Stillwater River. These lakes are known as West Rosebud Lake and Emerald Lake. During the high water of June and the pre-spawn excitement of fall the inlet and outlets of these lakes can supply some surprisingly good fishing. On the rare calm day, if you stand on one of the large boulders that rim the lakes, you can spot 14 to 18” browns cruising the shallows and picking off nymphs.

The East Rosebud cuts its way through a beautiful, flat bottom, glacially carved canyon. The area was recently burnt in the Shepard Mountain Fire (1996). Some folks consider the canyon to be ugly after the fire. However, that's not the way I see it. The Shepard Mountain Fire removed most of the lodgepole pine trees immediately along the stream. This resulted in increased sunlight hitting the water. Warmer water coupled with increased nutrient content due to inflows of ash has resulted in an increased bug biomass in the creek. Ultimately, the result has been larger fish. Prior to the fire, the average fish was 10 inches. However, currently the average fish length has increased to the 13-inch range. While these fish may not be considered lunkers, the fish are only a portion of the reason to be in the East Rosebud Canyon. The fire also resulted in the rebirth of the once decadent aspen forest. Falls in the East Rosebud are one of those treats that have to be seen to be understood.

Due to their small-ish sizes, both the East and West Rosebuds are relatively easy to *wade*, but they are composed of boulder and cobble sized rocks that become slick as the summer wears on. The wading conditions described for the Stillwater is an accurate portrayal of wading conditions found on these two streams.



*Fall dry fly fishing on the lower East Rosebud River*

### ***Clarks Fork of the Yellowstone***

The Clarks Fork of the Yellowstone, known locally as the Clarks Fork begins immediately adjacent to Yellowstone National Park in Montana, flows into Wyoming, and then back into Montana. The section of the river most accessible to Red Lodge based anglers is approximately fifteen miles east of Town.

I have to admit that I really love the Clarks Fork although it is not an easy river to love. Trout populations are low, averaging between 400 to 100 fish per mile depending how far north of the Wyoming border you are fishing. What the river lacks in trout numbers, it more then makes up in character, opportunity, and fish size.

The Clarks Fork provides a unique opportunity for winter, early spring, and fall fishing in a truly desert environment. The landscapes, which the Clarks Fork and its irrigation systems flow across, are composed of highly erodible soils. This river does not fish well during the summer months; say from mid-May through August, due to reduced river volume resulting from irrigation demands. Additionally, since the river is situated in a truly desert environment, elevated water temperatures are the norm during the summer months. Additionally, the irrigation return waters consist of muddy “waste water” that serves to reduce or eliminate necessary water clarity. These contributing factors all but make the Clarks Fork unfishable during much of the traditional fishing season.



*These two large and healthy trout were caught in the Clark's Fork of the Yellowstone. These fish were caught in early to mid-March. Large streamer flies did the trick.*

The make up of the lands surrounding the Clarks Fork are un-like anything you will encounter along the Beartooth Mountain face. This is a place where fishing opportunities can be found through out the winter, and it is not unusual to find fish rising to midges during the winter months. If you're tired of skiing and want to try something different, this river may be for you. The river contains some truly large trout and one of the best things about the Clarks Fork is that you never know what species you are going to catch. In a single day, browns, rainbows, cutthroat, and grayling can be caught at the right time of the year. Additionally, the river is packed with mountain whitefish, and during the winter months, you can share the fish, and a shot of schnapps' with the local Fin-landers sitting on a five gallon plastic bucket drowning maggots. Just a little of that unique character found only on this river.

*Wading* the Clarks Fork is relatively easy as the river contains few locations with slick rocks or gravel. The most important wading consideration is the large amounts of sediment that build up on the rivers bottom. This stuff has a tendency to "suck you in", and at times you may think that you can't free yourself from the muck. Do yourself a favor and look at the bottom before you wade forth.

*Fly selection* on the Clarks Fork is pretty straightforward. You should focus on wet flies of either the nymph (sizes #12-18) or go for the big boys and chuck large nasty streamers with lots of action. By far, my preference is throwing the large streams such as bunny fur, wooly buggers, or yuck bugs. I also prefer lots of lead and believe that the more you get the flies down to where the big trout live, the better luck you will have. The only time that dry flies become important on the Montana section of the Clarks Fork is during the winter months. These fish aren't overly smart and any reasonable midge imitation will work provided the fish are actively engaged in feeding on these little flies. Midge dries or wets should predominately be of sizes #14 to 18. Winter dry fly fishing, whether to whitefish or trout is a wonderful way to spend a couple hours on days between 40 to 50 degrees, thus breaking the ensuing cabin fever.

## ***Bighorn***

The Bighorn River is unquestionably one of America's best-known trout streams. The blue ribbon section of this river begins as a tailwater outlet of Yellowtail dam, which was constructed in the early 1960's. Due to the fact that the river begins in this manor, its waters are rarely off color and never freeze immediately below the dam due to the constant release of relatively warm water. This provides fishing opportunities even during the coldest Montana winter days.

Prior to the recent drought years, the "Horn" supported trout populations ranging from 8,500 to 10,000 trout per mile. Floating this river can seem like a journey through a fish aquarium. As you look over the side of the boat, it is not unusual to see hundreds of fish in the crystal clear waters swimming below. However, things have changed significantly on the Bighorn. The most recent fish population statistics released by the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks indicates that populations have been severely been reduced to approximately 1,500 fish per mile. This is both good and bad news. The obvious bad news is that there are less fish to catch, however, the size of the remaining fish have increased with a large proportion of the fish in the 20 inch or above range.

Fishing on the "Horn" is a very technical experience as well as a very "social" experience. The vast majority of food sources in the Bighorn are in the itsy-bitsy size class. Flies are typically size 18 to 22, especially the dry flies. This calls for 5x to 6x tippetts and long fine leaders. Strikes are usually subtle and constitute more of a "feeling" that you have had a strike. Unfortunately, the public notoriety of the river attracts crowds of fishermen from local and national destinations. It is not unusual to see 40 to 50 or more floaters on the river in a single day. At times, tempers and ethics become frayed, and I have experienced more then one tantrum from either a guide or the locals defending what they believe to be their hole. The more popular locations often have a waiting line of fishermen. It is not my idea of a quality fishing experience even though the river has some truly impressive lunkers. The river is dominated by brown trout with a lesser amount of rainbows.

The best times of the year to fish the Bighorn, for my money, is late fall, winter and early spring. During the June runoff, when all the other local rivers are blown out, I'll force myself to go to the "Horn" since it is not affected by spring runoff due to the constant release of water from Yellowtail Reservoir. However, be forewarned, this is the time of the year when the crowds really descend on the Bighorn, so be on your best behavior. Some folks may be itching for a fish (fist) fight.

*Wading* on the Bighorn is a pretty easy proposition. However, the current can be deceptively strong and the depths of runs and holes can be enough to hide the Titanic. The bottom is typically composed of silt and sand, and there are few slick boulder or cobble sections within the 26 miles below the Afterbay dam. There is limited access on the Bighorn, so wading typically occurs near the Afterbay access, Three-mile access and Bighorn access. Be prepared to meet many new and exciting people, and you'll have a good time.

Flies used on the Bighorn fall in to the category which I refer to as "fly du jour", meaning that the fish soon grow accustomed to seeing a particular pattern and get smart or adapt to not eating that particular pattern knowing that it is a fraud. Thus, you have to keep up with the Joneses and switch to the new "hot" pattern before the fish grow tired of it. As previously discussed, flies are usually small since the bug life in the river is small. Nymphs are the day in and day out staple of the river with sow bugs, shrimp, Ray Charles, and pheasant tails being the standards. But rest assured, that when you fish the "Horn", there will be a new hot pattern that you will have to purchase from one of the many fly shops. The most famous fishing, and the reasons for the human hordes, is undoubtedly the dry fly action beginning with the Baetis in early April, followed by pale morning duns, little black caddis, and tricos, and finally baetis again as late fall rolls around. I usually try to buck the trend and throw big and ugly streamers, especially in the fall when the brown develop their spawning attitudes.

### **Lakes:**

What can I say? The Beartooth Mountains contain approximately 300 lakes. Over half of them contain trout, but some periodically freeze out and therefore are barren. There is simply not enough time, ink or paper to describe them all. Generally, the high country lakes are frozen into the first week of July or mid-July. Lakes such as East Rosebud, West Rosebud, or Emerald, all lower elevation lakes, lose their ice about mid-May. Ice out can be one of the more productive times of the year to fish lakes since it has been a long winter and the fish are starved. Stripping small black, olive, or brown wooly buggers have really pay-off during ice out conditions. High Country lakes can be pretty finicky. The situation is usually hit or miss. One day you knock 'em dead, and the next day you can't catch your breath. Mornings and evenings, with emphasis on evenings, are usually the best periods to fish. At times, it will appear as though raindrops are hitting the water surface, there are so many fish taking insects. At other times, you'd swear the lake is dead, and devoid of all aquatic life.

Fly Selection for lake environments are pretty universal, so you don't have to stock and carry loads of fly patterns. High country lake fish cannot afford to be selective, they have a very short time span to eat and store fat before winter begins.

Pat's Picks include;

#### **Dry Flies**

#14-16 Adams  
#14-16 Mosquito  
#12-16 Elk Hair Caddis  
#12-14 Black Beetle  
#12-14 Black Ant

#### **Nymphs**

#14-16 Beadhead pheasant tail  
#12-16 Beadhead hare's ear  
#12-16 Light colored Soft hackles  
#12-16 Dark colored Soft hackles  
#12-16 Zug Bug

#### **Streamers**

#12-8 Wooly Buggers (Black, Olive, Brown)  
#10 Mickey Finn

I won't try to describe all the lakes in the Beartooths, just the ones that are more readily accessible. I will cover a few of my favorites that provide a diversity of species or that are easily accessible and lower in elevation.

### ***Wild Bill and Greenough Lakes***

Wild Bill Lake is located in the West Fork of Rock Creek drainage about seven miles up the road once you enter Forest Service lands. It is strictly a put and take lake (stocked pond). Wild Bill is a great place for wheel chair based fisherman, or kids and grandparents. No serious fly fisherman would be caught dead around the place. The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks periodically stock the lake with rainbow. Additionally, there are a few brook trout that find their way into the confines of the lake, how is hard to say.

Corn, marshmallows, salmon eggs, worms, and cheese balls seem be the "fly" of choice. If I was going to fish it, I guess I'd try a hare's ear or some sort of fuzzy nymph.

Greenough Lake is much the carbon copy of Wild Bill Lake, a great place for kids and grandparents. It is located in the Main Rock Creek Canyon, look for signs, or better yet go buy a map of the entire area from the US Forest Service. A well-groomed trail leads for approximately a quarter mile through flat terrain and lodgepole pine woods and then you are at the lake. Greenough Lake is stocked with ten-inch rainbows at least twice a summer. These rainbow seem to prefer the same fare as mentioned above, no wonder, they come from the same hatchery.

### ***Glacier Lake***

Glacier Lake is worth the hike but the trail is steep for about a mile and a half until you hit the eastern edge of the shoreline. The lake contains mostly brook trout and cutthroat trout. I have caught some very large brookies in the lake, in excess of five pounds, but I think it was a fluke. The best place to fish is in the pool below the main Glacier Lake (after Rock Creek leaves the lake). There can be some very fat and feisty brook trout in this pool. Other places to fish are any obvious tributary stream inlet, or the shoreline where the wind is pushing floating bugs. This is a popular hike and place to fish; you most likely will not have the place to yourself.

Glacier Lake is unique in that the southern shore of the lake is within the State of Wyoming, while the rest of the Lake is in the State of Montana. Be aware of your location and have the proper credentials.

### ***East Rosebud Lake***

East Rosebud Lake is a strange place. I must admit, I have never caught many fish in this lake, but I know those who do. I have a buddy who ice fishes (drinks beer) the lake extensively, and I've seen some of the huge browns that he has caught during the winter and spring months. They are truly impressive fish. The lake also contains rainbow, cutthroat, suckers and mountain whitefish. Unfortunately, the lake is pretty much surrounded by private lands even though you have to drive a nasty Forest Service road to get to the lake. There is a boat launch that the private landowners allow the general public to use at the north end of the lake. This is by far the best method to get around in the lake. However, be cautioned, the wind can really howl down the East Rosebud Canyon, and you don't want to be on the lake, even in the Queen Mary, if the wind really starts to rip.

### ***West Rosebud and Emerald Lakes***

These can be two productive lakes during either run-off conditions or late summer and early fall conditions. Both bodies of water are relatively shallow. During the bulk of the summer, these two lakes are over run by campers and fishermen, I wouldn't consider fishing them from Memorial Day to Labor Day, at least if I wanted to have the place to myself. They are located in the West Rosebud drainage and are easily accessible. You can drive right to them. The lakes primarily contain brown trout and a few brookies. The best fishing of the year takes place during September and October as the brown trout begin to leave the upper lake headed for the spawning gravel. Be forewarned though, the Canyon of the West Rosebud is no stranger to wind.

### ***Hellroaring Lakes***

The Hellroaring chain of lakes are a great place to combine a healthy hike and good fishing in beautiful terrain. The road and drive to the lip of the Hellroaring Plateau is enough to get your heart and head a thump'n. The hike into the lakes consist of a relatively flat walk across the plateau and then a steep, I mean very steep, drop over the edge into the upper Hellroaring Lakes basin. The lakes, about a dozen in all are strung up and down the valley bottom. Some have brookies, some have nice cutts, and some have very nice cutts. Be ever watchful for a big black thunderhead sneaking over the high rock ridge to the west. You wouldn't be the first person killed in the mountains during a lightning storm.

### ***Line Lake***

This lake has a reputation for large cutthroats. Fish in the five and six-pound categories have been reported, although I think most of those people drink. One thing that is for sure, this is one windy spot, if you can't throw a line and bugger into a stiff thirty mile an hour breeze, stay home. The lake is found after a medium length hike across the Line Creek Plateau from the Forest Service trailhead. The lake is named Line Lake since it is very close to the Montana and Wyoming State line.

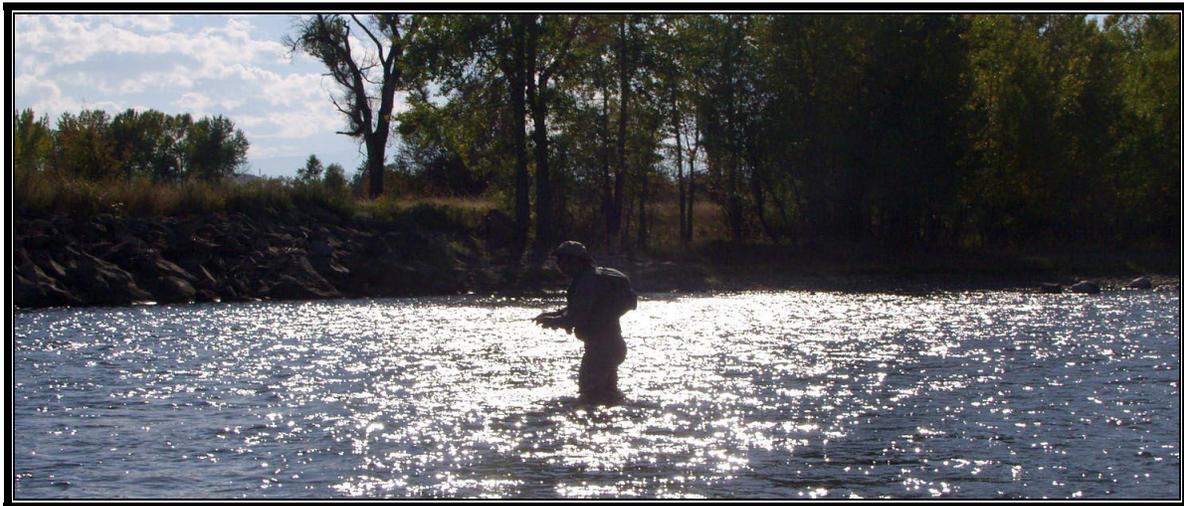
### ***Upper and Lower Basin Lakes and Timberline and Gertrude Lakes***

These lakes are all grouped together since they are very similar lakes. All are located in the West Fork of Rock Creek drainage. They can be reached by parking at the trailheads, south of the West Fork Road. These lakes are not real difficult, but not easy to access through steep trails starting at the valley bottom of the West Fork, Rock Creek drainage. Distances to the lakes vary between 4 to 6 miles.

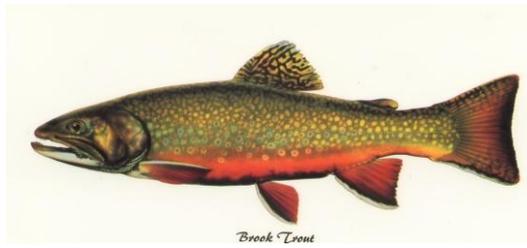
All four of these lakes are loaded with brook trout. Some years, the trout are ten inches or better and fat, some years they look like snakes and you couldn't make a meal out of a dozen of them. Such is the nature of high country lakes, one year this way, the next year something else. Timberline and Gertrude are located in very beautiful country and the scenery is worth the trip.

### ***Sioux Charlie Lake***

It is not really a lake, but rather a wide shallow spot on the main Stillwater River in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness. This place is full of sardine-sized Greenough Lake brookies that will eat darn near anything.



*The end of another relaxing day*



**Seasons of the Fisher:** As the seasons change, so do the rivers, bug hatches, and trout. Here is a brief month-by-month overview of river characteristics, insect hatches, and things to consider. This information will be presented in the chronological occurrence according to a fisherman’s perspective on the year.

**March and April:**

**Bug Activity**

Usually, by the middle of March, the fishing starts to really pick up. Water temperatures warm to the mid-40’s and the insect activity begins in earnest. By the beginning of April, water temperatures move into the high 40’s to low 50’s and the bugs really begin to pop! If I had only one month of the year I could fish, it would definitely be April. Primarily hatches in order include the baetis mayflies, followed by the March Brown mayflies, and then the mother’s day caddis hatch.

**Best Fishing Time**

No need to get out there at the crack of dawn during pre-runoff fishing season. Fish this time of the year will concentrate their feeding activities during the warmest part of the day (10 am to 3 pm). This makes for a very gentlemanly day on the water.

Nymphs play a major role early in the month and early each day prior to peak hatch activity. Dry flies typically appear on the surface around noon (give or take an hour). Windless, overcast days are definitely the best for baetis dry flies. Many times during these conditions the hatch will last for 4 hours instead of the customary 2-hour hatch.

**River Conditions**

Usually all the major drainages coming from the Beartooth Face are low, clear, and very fishable these months. The Yellowstone and the Clark’s Fork of the Yellowstone can blow out and become muddy if we have a heavy rain event or if the air temperatures bump the 70 degree range for 3 or 4 days.

The rivers of choice should be the Stillwater followed by the Yellowstone and Rock Creek.

Pat’s Picks include;

**Baetis Dry Flies**

- #16-14 Blue Winged Olives
- #16-14 Adams
- #16-14 Parachute Adams

**Baetis Nymphs**

- #16-14 Beadhead pheasant tail
- #16-12 Beadhead hare’s ear

**March Brown Dry Flies**

- #14-12 Adams
- #14-12 Parachute Adams
- #14-12 March Brown Dry

**March Brown Nymphs**

- #14-12 Beadhead hare’s ear
- #14-12 Beadhead pheasant tails
- #14-12 Dark bodied Soft hackles

**Mother’s Day Caddis Dry Flies**

- #16-14 Elk Hair Caddis

**Mother’s Day Caddis Nymphs**

- #16-14 Beadhead hare’s ear
- #16-14 Beadhead green Caddis pupa
- #16-14 Light colored Soft hackles

## May:

### **Bug Activity:**

The premier hatch during the first ten to fifteen days of the month is the Mother's Day Caddis. This profusion of bug life can literally carpet the surface of some of our local rivers like the Buds, Rock Creek, or especially the Stillwater or Yellowstone. You really have to see it to believe it. The best hatches take place on the Stillwater and the Yellowstone above Big Timber. Rock Creek sports the Mother's Day hatch starting about the tenth of May and continuing for about two weeks. Remember, that the Rock Creek drainage has a higher average elevation, and thus runoff is delayed.

### **Best Fishing Time:**

The best time to fish during the month of May is generally early in the month, before run-off conditions begin. If we get a couple days of 70 degrees or more, the river will pulse and rise as much as a foot overnight. If we then get a night or two of cold weather, in the low 30's, the river will then drop, clear and become fishable again. The best way to evaluate days that are fishable, you simply have to stay aware of the weather conditions and check out the river periodically. However, if you can hit the rivers during the Mother's Day hatch before the run-off starts, during a sunny afternoon, you will be in for a real treat.

On any particular May day, fishing is generally better during the afternoons vs. the mornings. However, during the beginning of run-off, mornings are more productive since the water is generally clearer in the morning.

The rivers of choice should be the Stillwater followed by the Yellowstone and Rock Creek.

Pat's Picks include;

**Mother's Day Caddis Dry Flies**  
#16-14 Elk Hair Caddis

**Mother's Day Caddis Nymphs**  
#16-14 Beadhead hare's ear  
#16-14 Beadhead green Caddis pupa  
#16-14 Light colored Soft hackles

### **River Conditions:**

May is a month of change here in the Northern Rockies. The temperatures and the rivers really begin to rise. The fishing can be great in our freestone waters until the middle of the month, then the water becomes high, off color, and its time to tie flies until July unless you plan to fish one of the lower elevation lakes or reservoirs.

## *June:*

### **Bug Activity:**

Bug activity is limited during the month of June along the Beartooth Country. If you happen to be in the right spot at the right time, you could encounter a hatch of Green Drakes on the West Rosebud or Stillwater. But these are infrequent occurrences. Toward the end of the month, you may begin seeing stoneflies in various sizes ranging from #12 (Yellow Sallies) to #6 Giant Golden Stone Flies.

### **Best Fishing Time:**

Any time you find clear water.

### **River Conditions:**

Fly-fishing on our local rivers is typically not available due to the extreme water levels and current speeds resulting from spring runoff. The exception is the Bighorn River, which can provide good but crowded dry fly action. On low snow pack years, the Stillwater may be fishable by the fourth week in June, but peak run-off typically takes place during the third week of June. Finding the right day can be a crap shoot. Be extremely careful if you are wading the rivers' edges. The volume and speed of our run-off swollen rivers can kill you in a heartbeat.

The rivers of choice are the Bighorn and maybe the Stillwater toward the end of June.

Pat's Picks include;

**Dry Flies**

#14-12 Elk Hair Caddis  
#12-8 Golden Stone Fly  
#12-14 Adams

**Nymphs**

#16-14 Beadhead hare's ear  
# 8-12 Golden Stone Nymphs  
#12-14 Lightning Bug

**Streamers**

#10-6 Woolly Buggers  
# 6-8 White Double Bunnies

*July:*

**Bug Activity:**

Well, this is the time of the year that everyone waits for; the giant golden stones are out in force and will be the stable food items for all self-respecting trout. These are large bugs, and the fish selectively seek them out during hot and sunny summer days of July. Toward the end of July, the grasshoppers begin to show themselves. Fish will switch from looking for the giant golden stones to "hoppers". These large meaty morsels will replace the stoneflies as the main food staple for the next two months, and will take the same golden stone fly pattern that you could have fished for the previous month.

**Best Fishing Time:**

The giant golden stones begin their daily activities between ten and eleven in the morning. Given the right conditions, the big bugs will be available to fish until about four in the afternoon. Fish large stone fly nymphs with a hare's ear or lightning bug nymph as a trailer. When the fish quit slamming your large dries in the late afternoon, go home, you've had a good day.

**River Conditions:**

The rivers begin the month very high and steadily drop throughout the month. Wading can be dangerous during the first two weeks and less so during the last two weeks. The best avenue of access is through floating. You will be able to present the flies in locations not accessible from the bank. Additionally, you will be able to cover more water in a day floating than in a week of wading. Floating in this manner often results in days exceeding 40 fish per angler.

Preferred rivers include the Stillwater, the Buds, and Rock Creek.

Pat's Picks include;

**Dry Flies**

#12-8 Golden Stone Fly  
#10-8 Jack Cabe  
#12-14 Adams  
#12-16 Elk Hair Caddis  
#10-14 Royal Wulff  
#10-14 H&L Variant

**Nymphs**

# 8-12 Golden Stone Nymphs  
#12-14 Lightning Bug  
#16-14 Beadhead hare's ear

**Streamers**

# 6-8 White Double Bunnies  
#10-6 Woolly Buggers

*August:*

**Bug Activity:**

Grasshoppers are the bugs of choice during most of this month. The summer of 2002 was the first year in the last ten that hoppers became important once again to our local trout. Over the last decade, we have not seen the numbers of grasshoppers necessary to excite our finned friends; things appear to have turned around however. When these land born insects become prolific, the trend usually lasts seven to ten years, so the next few years should be kick butt! Caddis flies are also important during August either in the early morning or most likely, an hour before dusk. The edges of the Stillwater can literally swarm with #14 light tan caddis. Also, the fish seem more opportunistic during hot August days. Attractor patterns, with bushy white wings become increasingly important. My favorites are still the Royal Wulff and the H&L Variant.

Also a new player comes to the stage during the last two weeks of August, that being the small trico mayflies. Around the middle of August, if you are on the river in the early morning, you may witness the dancing silver hordes mating over rivers like the Yellowstone, Stillwater, and Clarks Fork. This is fun but challenging fishing. It is not everyone's "cup of tea", and not all anglers are up to the technical challenges involved. There is more detailed information regarding this hatch in the following September discussion.

**Best Fishing Time:**

The days become increasingly hot during August. During the last four drought years, due to lower water levels in the area rivers, fishing has been pretty much an early morning to mid-afternoon endeavor. If the water is at its normal volumes, fishing will be productive throughout the day. If you are fortunate enough to be fishing on a clouded stormy day, you may see lots of mayflies. These are also good times to chuck and duck, that is cast larger streamer flies to the deepest portions of cut banks and the heads of pools. A little air and water temperature difference can at times really turn the big fish on and they will chase large meaty streams for a quick and easy meal.

**River Conditions:**

The rivers will be dropping throughout the month of August. This is one time of the year that you can usually count on consistent water conditions. I say usually, because on occasions when an intense thunderstorm rages the mountains surrounding Yellowstone National Park, the Yellowstone River will turn chocolate over night and stay that way for a couple of days. The Stillwater and other streams along the mountain face will remain clear and fishable though.

Preferred rivers include the Yellowstone, Stillwater, the East and West Rosebuds, and the Lake and West Forks of Rock Creek.

Pat's Picks include;

**Dry Flies**

- #8-10 Bullet Head Hoppers
- #8-10 Dave's Hoppers
- #8-10 Parachute Hoppers
- #12-16 Elk Hair Caddis
- #10-14 Royal Wulff
- #14-16 Royal Trudes
- #10-14 H&L Variant

**Nymphs**

- #12-14 Lightning Bug
- #14-16 Beadhead hare's ear
- #16-12 Flash back Pheasant Tails

**Streamers**

- # 6-8 White Double Bunnies
- #10-6 Wooly Buggers
- #10-6 Yuck Bugs

*September:*

**Bug Activity:**

Grasshoppers will continue to be the prime entrée during the first two or three weeks of the month, then things will change. Mornings are getting started later each day and the weather begins to cool, the trico hatch really gets going during the first two weeks of the month. However you have to be somewhat of a hard-core fisherman to get out there and enjoy the trico hatch, since it begins right after the break of dawn. Make no mistake about it; the trico's are itty-bitty mayflies, typically ranging from #16 to #22's. The spinners are by far the most important phase of the critter if you are a trout or a trout fisherman. You must be a good caster, and use small diameter tippets if you are going to succeed at trico fishing. But the rewards are worth it; stalking feeding trout with big nasty noses sticking through the water surface is a rush. It almost does not matter if you catch the fish or not.....almost!

Another change will be noticed in the attitude of larger brown trout. This species will become increasingly aggressive and ill natured, displaying this sour demeanor by killing any large streamer flies within their self-proclaimed territories. Rainbows and browns both take on a new glow of color as fall approaches. For those in the know, this is a special time to be on the rivers. Mornings are grand beyond description, and hard-core fly fishermen adopt a bull in the rut mentality. It is no longer about how many fish; it's about how big! In other words, size counts.

**Best Fishing Time:**

Any time you have a chance. However, I love being out there first thing in the morning with the trico's and then again in the late afternoon chucking streamers. The angle of the sun this time of year will produce some incredible sights. If you are a photographer, you already know this.

**River Conditions:**

The water conditions will be very stable by this time of year, no big changes from day to day. Wading or floating is possible depending on the stream or river you choose to fish.

The preferred rivers include the Yellowstone, Stillwater, and Clarks Fork

Pat's Picks include;

**Dry Flies**

#8-10 Bullet Head Hoppers  
#8-10 Parachute Hoppers  
#10-14 H&L Variant  
#12-16 Royal Wulff  
#16-18 Trico Spinners  
#16-18 Trico Duns

**Nymphs**

#12-14 Lightning Bug  
#14-16 Beadhead hare's ear  
#16-12 Flash back Pheasant Tails

**Streamers**

# 6-8 White Double Bunnies  
# 6-10 Woolly Buggers  
# 4-8 Yuck Bugs  
# 4-8 Muddler Minnows

*October:*

**Bug Activity:**

Insect activity during the month of October tapers off to little, if any, critters flying about. Early in the month, you may see a few hoppers. There is always a chance at baetis mayflies on cloudy windless days, but not much else. The fish become more focused on spawning and killing large fishy looking flies swung in front of their faces.

**Best Fishing Time:**

As the waters get chillier, the prime fishing time moves toward the late morning and afternoon. Relatively warm mornings, say in the low 50's to high 40's, can be very productive fishing large streamer flies.

**River Conditions:**

The rivers continue to drop, but overall, their volumes remain relatively constant. There should be no chance of off color water condition this time of year.

Pat's Picks include;

**Dry Flies**

#10-14 H&L Variant  
#12-16 Royal Wulff  
#14-16 Adams  
#10-12 Bullet Head Hoppers

**Nymphs**

#16-12 Flash back Pheasant Tails  
#12-14 Lightning Bug  
# 8-12 Stone Fly  
#14-16 Beadhead hare's ear

**Streamers**

# 6-10 Bunny Fur  
# 4-8 Woolly Buggers  
# 4-8 Yuck Bugs  
# 4-8 Muddler Minnows

*November thru February:*

**Bug Activity:**

There isn't much. Midges, tiny little two winged insects make up the bulk of insects available to the fish. These can be loads of fun if you are in the right place, at the right time, with the right fly. It can also test your wits.

**Best Fishing Time:**

During this time, we are moving into the coldest days of the year. Fishing becomes a noon to four o'clock proposition. You definitely want to be on the water and in position during the warmest part of the day. In order to experience truly productive conditions, the daytime temperatures should be over forty degrees. Forty-five is better.

**River Conditions:**

The river will be at its annual low during this time of the year. Trout will be cold, lethargic, and spooky since they will be able to see. Take your time and plan your approach to known fish or good holding water. Fishing with dry flies (midges) require long cast with fine leaders due to the clarity of the water. Streamer fishermen will do better with seven to eight foot stout (2x to 0x) leaders. You have to make a decision on which way you want to go. Either a big ugly streamer and heavy equipment or fine and far fishing with little dry flies, you can't do both unless you take two rods.

Pat's Picks include;

**Dry Flies**

#12-16 Black Bivisibles  
#16-18 Griffith Gnat

**Nymphs**

#14-16 Dark Soft Hackles  
#12-14 Lightning Bug  
#16-12 Flash back Pheasant Tails  
#14-16 Beadhead hare's ear

**Streamers**

# 6-8 White Double Bunnies  
# 4-8 Woolly Buggers

## **Equipment:**

The vast majority of fishing conditions that you will experience along the Beartooth Front can be comfortably handled with a nine-foot, five weight fly fishing outfit. I prefer longer rods, rather than shorter rods. The shorter rods (8') just will not allow you to fish with the ease of a nine-foot rod. A nine-foot rod will cast easier and further, mend line with less effort, and will increase your mechanical advantage over the water and the fish.

You do not need a wide variety of fly lines to fish the Beartooth Country. One hundred percent of my fishing is done with floating fly lines. However, if you intend to fish the lake country, a sink tip would be nice. I believe that leaders, at the end of the fly line, are just as important. Most leaders are constructed with limp, wimpy materials and simply will not turn over large western flies in a stiff breeze. Stout thirty pound butt sections, tapered to smaller diameters will do the trick nicely. Unfortunately, you cannot buy them in the retail outlets.

Footwear is one of the most important considerations to anyone fishing the streams and rivers along the Beartooth Face. The footing is slick, the rocks are round, the water is fast, and you can be easily knocked off your feet. Felt bottomed fishing boots are a must. Waders are nice to have as well, although I don't wear them during the hot months of summer (July to September). There are a number of "breathable" lightweight waders on the market. They are reasonably priced and worth the added comfort. I wear my breathables even during the winter months and simple wear polar-tech or a similar fabric underneath the waders

## **Ethics and Conduct:**

This should pretty much be in the forethought of any good sportsmen. However, I'm sometimes amazed at what I see. So here is a quick review and I'm sure you already knew this.....right?

Respect the resources, including the land, the river, the fish, other fishermen, and the private interest.

Don't hold the fish out of the water and expect them to hold their breath until you're ready with the camera. They can't hold their breaths that long. You try it and see how it works.

Don't litter and don't walk across a ranchers land to get to the water.

Don't be afraid to walk up or downstream, below the high water mark, and get away from other fishermen, the roads, or whatever. Spread out! I generally believe that if I can see another person, they are to close. However, at times you will have to share the water, give the next guy a couple of holes, or about 300 yards.

Don't wade through the spawning gravels (redds). We all depend on successful recruitment of the next trout generation.

Don't pee in the water.

Be aware of where you have been fishing and that river's status regarding *whirling disease*. *We don't have it and we don't want it*. There are a number of Clorox based soaking solutions that should be employed before setting foot in the Beartooth Country streams. Educate yourself and feel the force!

Don't harass anyone; discretion is always the better part of valor. Try to get along with everyone...and get their license plate numbers if they are a real pain in the ass.