

BREAKING Update: Lolo Peak fire's evacuation orders, warnings now include 1,150 homes

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## **Blackfoot bounty: Scenic river retains fishing legacy**

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GREENOUGH — Derek Snodgrass prefers the Clark Fork River for fishing, but the Blackfoot for family.

“There’s nothing like catching fish with your old man or your brother,” the Missoula angler said on a recent float down western Montana’s most famous waterway. “We’re going to do a ‘River Runs Through It’ thing. We’ve been fishing here as a family since childhood, but it means more now that we’re older and busier. We have to make it happen.”

Author Norman Maclean made that happen with his novella about fathers, sons and fly fishing in 1976. It recounted a time 40 years earlier when the “Big Blackfoot” River was the lure for big fishermen, and the Clark Fork was drowned behind Milltown Dam and tons of toxic mine waste. Today most anglers agree with Snodgrass that the Clark Fork fishes better, but the Blackfoot shows off Montana best.

That's particularly true through the roughly 18 river miles between Russell Gates and Whittaker Bridge fishing access sites. The river channel makes a couple huge loops away from Highway 200, past cliffs of 1.5-billion-year-old mudstone — some of the oldest exposed rock in the world. One-sixth of Maclean's story takes place on that bit of river, recounting the last time the author, his brother Paul and father John got to fish together.

Volunteer river-keeper Jerry O'Connell said after exploring much of the reach he's found at least two different sites that line up with Maclean's descriptions. One stands just downstream from the Riverbend fishing access site, where impressive rock cliffs soar up from river left.

"From this spot the scenario fits," O'Connell said. "But this is also a shorter walk. There's another spot that fits better."

Known as Red Rocks Beach (and formerly as the Blackfoot's nude beach), O'Connell's more likely scene lies just upstream from Whittaker Bridge. The fact it didn't make the movie has probably saved it from tourist carnage: it's that show-stopping.

Ironically, the Robert Redford-directed movie of the story didn't film the Blackfoot. At the time, Redford said Missoula's downtown had lost too much historic character for backgrounds, so he set up operations in Bozeman and Livingston. That put much of the water work on the Gallatin and Boulder rivers.

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The reach will probably receive some extra attention in September when the 2017 Footsteps of Norman Maclean Festival revives embers of interest in the book that made it famous. The festival runs Sept. 8-10, with one day dedicated to recollections from the

movie's screenwriters, fishing coaches and other participants, including Tom Skerritt, the actor who played John Maclean.

Meanwhile, the river may just squeak under summer heat thresholds that have already limited fishing on other waterways. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks fisheries managers have imposed "hoot owl" restrictions on the upper Clark Fork and lower Bitterroot rivers that require anglers to leave fish alone after 2 p.m. That's to reduce stress on trout already suffering from water temperatures above 73 degrees.

Through the Blackfoot Challenge drought response agreement — a coalition that includes Blackfoot Valley landowners, anglers and farmers — the Blackfoot River has an even stricter protection threshold. Irrigators voluntarily reduce their water use and anglers cut back on their fishing when the river flow falls below 700 cubic feet per second and/or the water temperatures rise above 71 degrees for three consecutive days. The flow level crossed that line on Aug. 10, but a series of cool days kept the water cold enough to keep gates and access open.

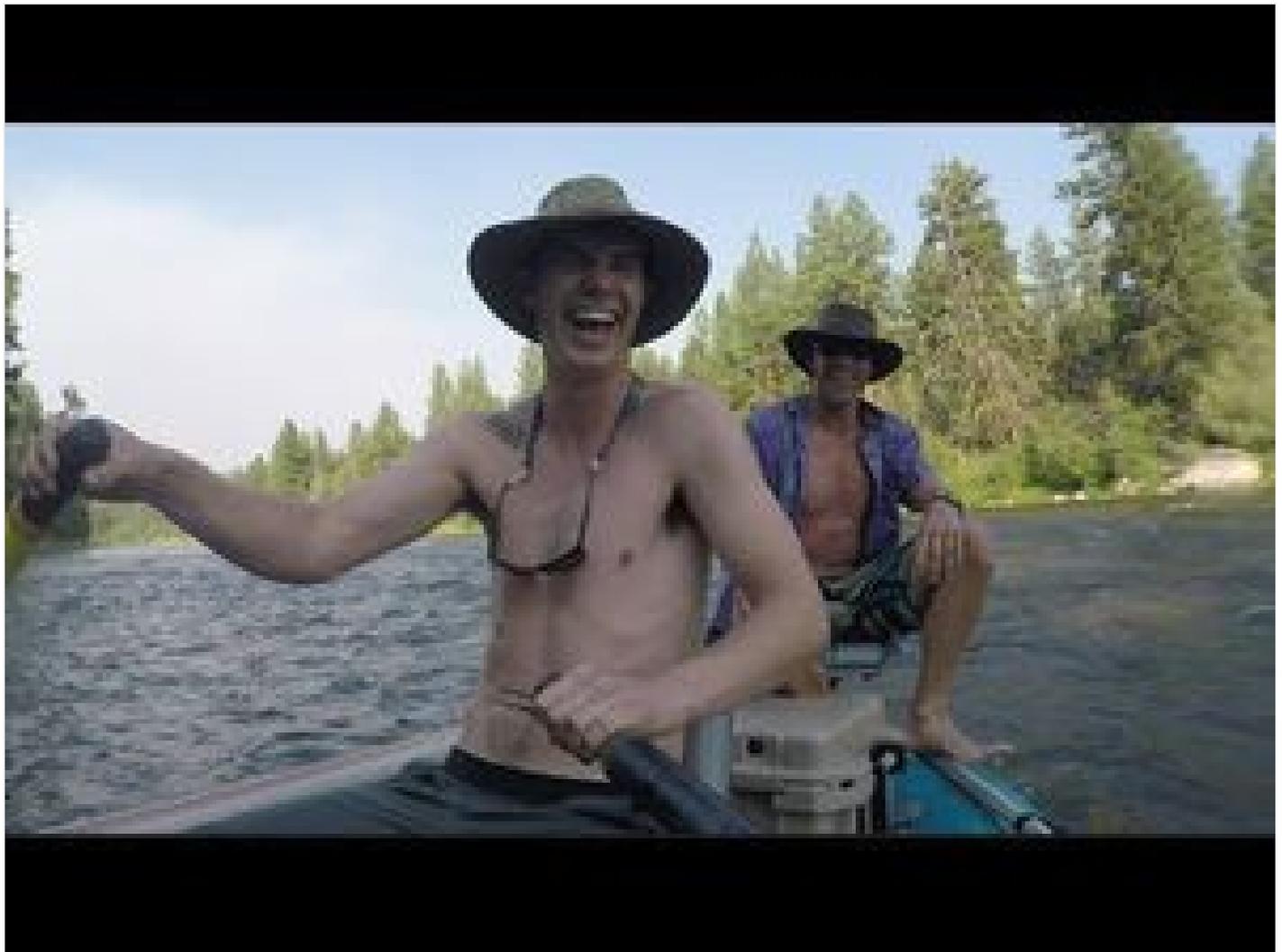
"We haven't gotten to 71 (on the Blackfoot) all summer," said Pat Saffel, FWP's Region 2 fisheries manager in Missoula. Region 2 biologists know from experience that the area's warmest period is usually the third week of July to the third week of August. So even though a series of cool days have come through, the restrictions on the Clark Fork and Bitterroot will probably remain in place. The Blackfoot might escape.

Even the smoke can be an advantage for anglers. Missoulian Angler owner Taylor Scott said his guides were finding some counter-intuitive success in the middle of forest fire season.

“It creates synthetic cloud cover, which fish love,” Scott said. “Bright, sunny days aren’t typically what we want. With the haze, fish may feel safer from birds of prey. And we have some extra (fly) hatches coming out on cloudy days.”

All of which made for a fine day on the water for Snodgrass.

“I try not to take it for granted,” he said of the Blackfoot’s bounty. “You find people who come so far to fish this. I met this guy in an airport in Santiago, Chile. He was talking about ‘Oh yeah, Patagonia was great, but I was in this place called Missoula, fishing the Blackfoot, and it was even better.’”



The Blackfoot River: The blood in their veins

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