

# Yellowstone National Park



## Fishing Regulations



**Know the fish, know the rules**

***Precious habitat • Special protection • Exceptional fishing***

# Purpose of Yellowstone Fishing Regulations

Fishing regulations in Yellowstone National Park are structured to strongly support native fish conservation goals. Cutthroat trout are the sole, native trout of the park and were the dominant fish species here prior to Euroamerican settlement. Cutthroat trout, Arctic grayling, mountain whitefish, and other native fishes are important to the ecology of Yellowstone.

## Introduced nonnative fish cause loss of native fish

The abundance of native fish has been reduced because of impacts by introduced nonnative fish, including brook, brown, lake, and rainbow trout. These nonnative species continue to contribute to the decline in the park's native fish population by competing for food and habitat, preying on native fish, and degrading the genetic integrity of native fish through hybridization.

## Anglers assist with native species conservation

Angling is one way that the nonnative fish can be selectively removed from an area without damaging the native fishery. Within the Native Trout Conservation Area, anglers are strongly encouraged, and in some cases required, to harvest nonnative fishes. This harvest will help to save the native fish and the natural ecosystems they support.

# Stay Safe and Legal

You are responsible for following all park regulations. Consult Yellowstone's park newspaper, Backcountry Trip Planner, or rangers at visitor centers and backcountry offices to learn more.

- Stay on established trails in thermal areas for your safety and to protect these fragile areas.
- Do not discard fish carcasses or entrails along stream banks or the lake shore as they will attract bears.
- Do not feed any animals, including birds, squirrels, and coyotes.

**Bear Warning** • Bears and other wildlife may appear in areas frequented by people—even on trails, boardwalks, and along roads. Do not approach wildlife and remain at least 100 yards (92 meters) away from bears and wolves, and 25 yards (23 meters) away from all other wildlife.

- **Be alert**—watch for bears and bear sign, like fresh tracks or scat.
- **Make noise** in areas where visibility is limited.
- **Carry bear spray** and know how to use it.
- **Avoid hiking or fishing alone.** Try to stay with a group of three or more people.
- **DO NOT RUN** if you encounter a bear.



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# General Regulations

## Fishing

Fishing/angling is defined as any activity using an attended single rod or line for the purpose of attempting to attract, capture, or possess any fish from waters within Yellowstone National Park. All other methods to attract, capture, or possess fish are prohibited.

### Fishing hours and season dates

The season begins the Saturday of Memorial Day weekend (usually the last weekend in May) and extends through the first Sunday in November. Exceptions are listed on pages 6–13.

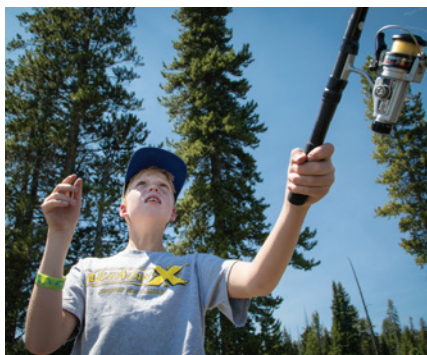
Hours are daily from sunrise to sunset. Fishing with an artificial light is prohibited. Some areas are closed to human entry, have trail or seasonal closures, off-trail travel and daylight hour limitations, or party size recommendations. See the Bear Management Area restrictions in the Backcountry Trip Planner for specific rules and information.

Streams may be temporarily closed due to low water levels and high water temperatures to protect fish populations.

### Fishing permits

Anglers 16 years of age or older must be in possession of a valid Yellowstone National Park fishing permit to fish in the park.

Park rangers may check permits and inspect tackle, fish, creels, or other containers where fish or tackle may be stored.



Anglers 15 years of age or younger have two options:

1. Children 15 or younger may fish without a permit if they are fishing under the direct supervision of an adult who has a valid park fishing permit.
2. Children 15 or younger may obtain a free permit that must be signed by a responsible adult; with this permit, a child can fish without direct adult supervision.

With either option, the accompanying adult is responsible for the child's actions and must ensure the child complies with all fishing regulations and provisions.

### Felt-soled Footgear Prohibited

To reduce the potential for introduction or spread of aquatic invasive species, footgear with absorbent felt or other fibrous material on the soles are prohibited while fishing in Yellowstone.

# General Regulations



A single pointed hook is the best choice for fishing in Yellowstone. Treble hooks (3 points) can severely injure fish and are often constructed with toxic lead solder.

## Tackle, lure, and hook restrictions

Each angler may use only one rod which must be attended at all times and used for angling only—intentional snagging of fish is not allowed.

Only lead-free artificial lures (e.g. spoon or spinner) or flies may be used. Leaded fishing tackle such as leaded split-shot sinkers, weighted jigs (lead molded to a hook), and soft lead-weighted ribbon for nymph fishing are not allowed.

Hooks must have points that are barbless, or the barbs must be pinched down by pliers. Lures may have only one hook with a single, double, or treble configuration.

Each fly may have only one hook. Up to two flies may be used on a single leader (commonly referred to as “dropper,” “dry and dropper,” or “hopper and dropper”).

Except for feathers and other typical fly-tying materials, the hook must be bare. No organic or inorganic baits are allowed. *Organic baits* include

fish or fish parts, minnows, salmon eggs, worms, insects, or foodstuffs such as bread or corn. *Inorganic baits* include rubber worms and plastic “twister” tails. Scented attractants (liquid and solid baits) are illegal. Putting any substance in the water for the purpose of attracting fish (chumming) is illegal.

## Exceptions

Non-toxic split-shot, sinkers, and jig heads molded with bismuth-tin, molybdenum, or tungsten are allowed. Lead core line and heavy (> 4 lb.) downrigger weights used to fish for deep-dwelling lake trout are permissible because they are too large to be ingested by wildlife.

Artificial lures are not allowed on the Firehole River, Madison River, and lower Gibbon River (below Gibbon Falls), these streams are flyfishing only.

## Possession limits

All native fish must be released unharmed. Natives include cutthroat trout, mountain whitefish, and Arctic grayling.

## Native Trout Conservation Area

No possession limit for nonnative fish, including brown, brook, rainbow, and lake trout (see pages 6–13).

- All rainbow trout, brook trout, and identifiable cutthroat/rainbow hybrids caught in the Lamar River drainage (including portions of Slough and Soda Butte creeks) and the Yellowstone River drainage

# General Regulations

below Lower Falls and above Knowles Falls *must be killed—it is illegal to release them alive.* (See page 8.)

- All lake trout caught from Yellowstone Lake *must be killed—it is illegal to release them alive.*

## Nonnative Trout Tolerance Area

All native fish must be released unharmed. Possession limits exist for nonnative fish in this area. An angler must cease fishing in the area immediately after filling the possession limit. (See pages 7 and 10.)



# General Regulations

- Firehole River, Madison River, lower Gibbon River (downstream of Gibbon Falls)—possession of up to five brook trout is allowed. Catch and release all rainbow and brown trout. Whitefish are an important native species in the Madison River and they must be released.
- Lewis River system above Lewis Falls, including Lewis and Shoshone lakes and their tributaries—possession of five combined brook, brown or lake trout; only one of which may be a brown trout.

It is the responsibility of the angler to be able to identify fish by species. Unintentionally killed fish should be returned to the water so they can be consumed by wildlife.



Brook trout markings.

## Evidence of species in possession

Skin must remain attached so the fish species can be visibly identified. Gills and entrails may be removed in the field, but must be discarded only within the waters where the fish were caught.

## Disposal of fish and entrails

Dispose of fish and/or fish entrails within the waters where the fish



All vessels require a permit.

was caught but not within 100 feet (30.5 m) of boat ramps, docks, or backcountry campsites. Fish can also be disposed of in park trash cans.

## Bridge and boat dock restrictions

No fishing from any road bridge or boat dock.

## Boating

### Vessel inspections & permits

All vessels—including float tubes—require a boat permit, a life vest for each passenger, and an emergency sound device such as a whistle or air horn. All vessels must be checked by National Park Service inspectors to ensure that they are free of aquatic invasive species before entering any park waters. See Yellowstone's Boating Regulations for details:

**[www.nps.gov/yell/planyourvisit/boating.htm](http://www.nps.gov/yell/planyourvisit/boating.htm)**

# Regional Regulations

If a stream or lake is not listed by name or as a tributary, general regulations apply. You must follow bear management and hydrothermal area restrictions listed in the Backcountry Trip Planner, which is available in backcountry offices or at [www.nps.gov/yell/planyourvisit/publications.htm](http://www.nps.gov/yell/planyourvisit/publications.htm).



## Northwest Region:

Includes the Madison and Gallatin river drainages, including Firehole and Gibbon rivers and tributaries.

### Permanently closed to fishing:

- Firehole River from road bridge .5 mile (.8 km) upstream of Old Faithful to road bridge at Biscuit Basin, 200 yards (182 m) either side of Midway footbridge.
- Madison River from Seven Mile Bridge upstream 250 yards (226 m).

**Flyfishing only:** Madison River, Firehole River, Gibbon River below Gibbon Falls (not including their tributaries). Use only artificial flies regardless of the type of rod or line.

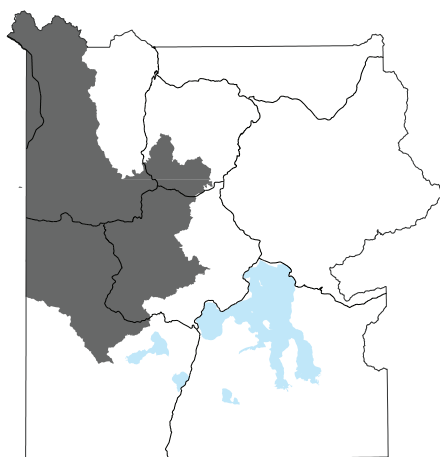
### Possession limits

#### ***Native Trout Conservation Area:***

- Catch and release all native fish.
- No possession limit on nonnative fish.

#### ***Nonnative Trout Tolerance Area:***

- Limit of 5 brook trout.
- Catch and release all rainbow and brown trout.



### Where to take young anglers

**Norris:** Gibbon River at Virginia Meadows or other meadows; Solfatara Creek near Norris campground.

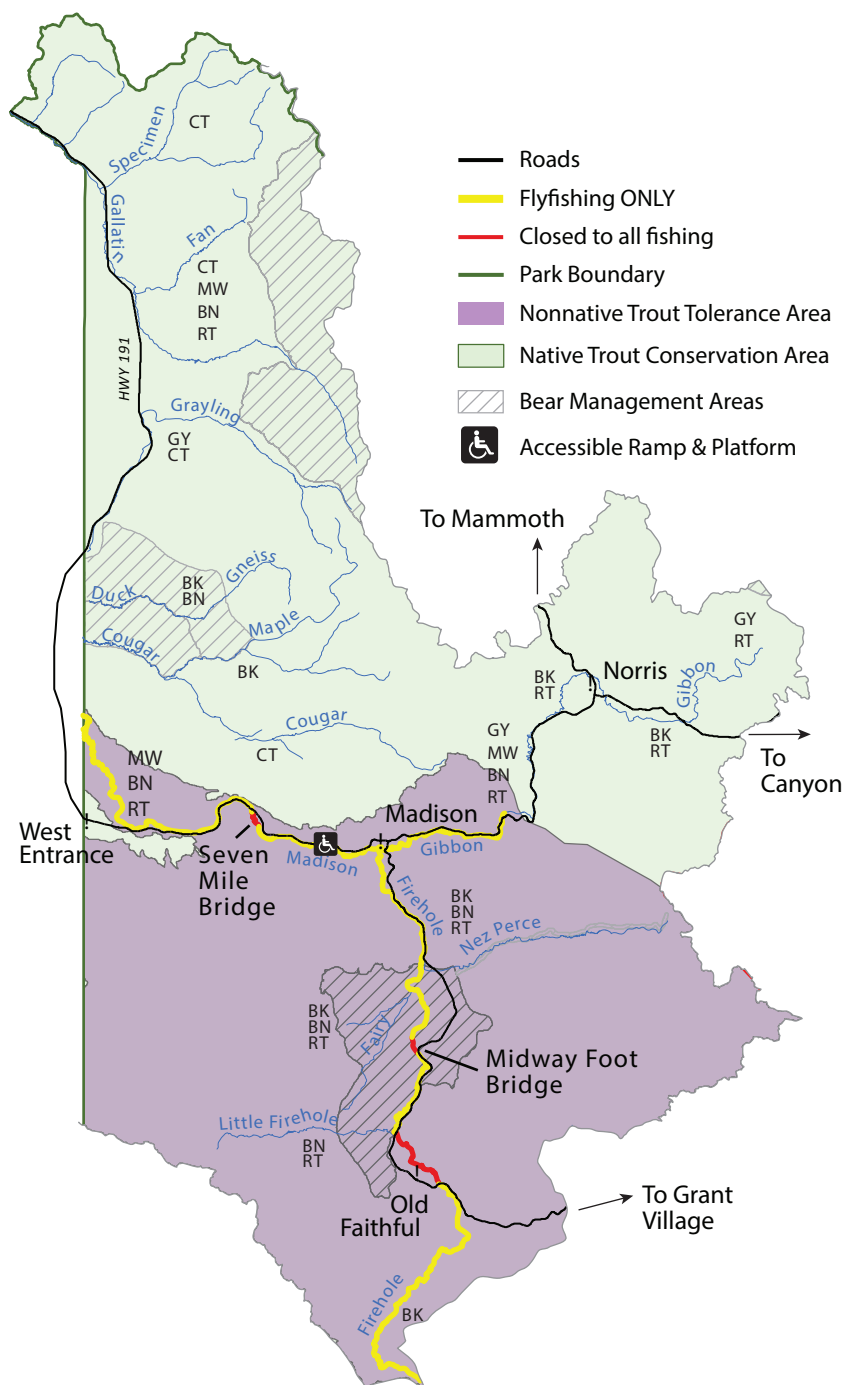
**Madison:** Gibbon River near Tuff Cliffs; Large meadow areas of the Firehole, Gibbon, and Madison rivers near Madison Junction.

**Old Faithful:** Firehole River at picnic areas; Nez Perce Creek.

### Accessible ramp & platform

At the Mount Haynes Overlook, approximately 3.5 miles (5.6 km) west of Madison Junction. Please see the *Yellowstone Accessibility Guide* or [www.nps.gov/yell](http://www.nps.gov/yell) for more information.

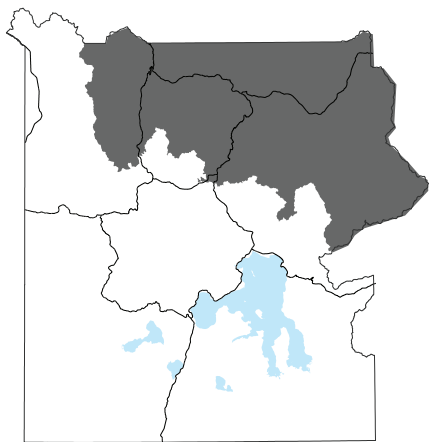
# Northwest Region Regulations



# Northeast Region Regulations

## Northeast Region:

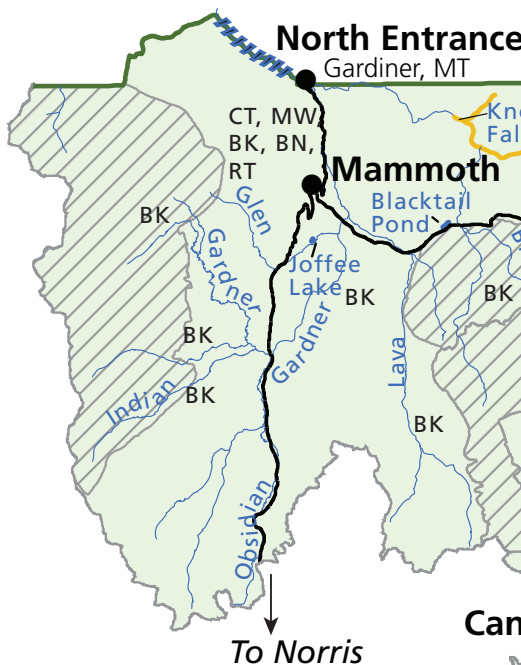
Includes the Yellowstone and Lamar rivers and tributaries between the north park boundary and Chittenden Bridge near Canyon.



- Blacktail Pond area is closed to public use and travel, including angling, until **July 1** to protect nesting birds and sensitive vegetation.
- Only a State of Montana fishing license is required to fish the Yellowstone River, downstream of Gardiner, Montana.

### Permanently closed to fishing:

- Trout Lake inlet stream is permanently closed to fishing to protect spawning cutthroat trout.
- Yellowstone River, from Chittenden Bridge near Canyon downstream through the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone to a point directly below Silver Cord Cascade, is permanently closed to fishing to ensure angler safety.



### Possession limits

#### *Native Trout Conservation Area:*

- Catch and release all native fish.
- No possession limit on non-native fish.

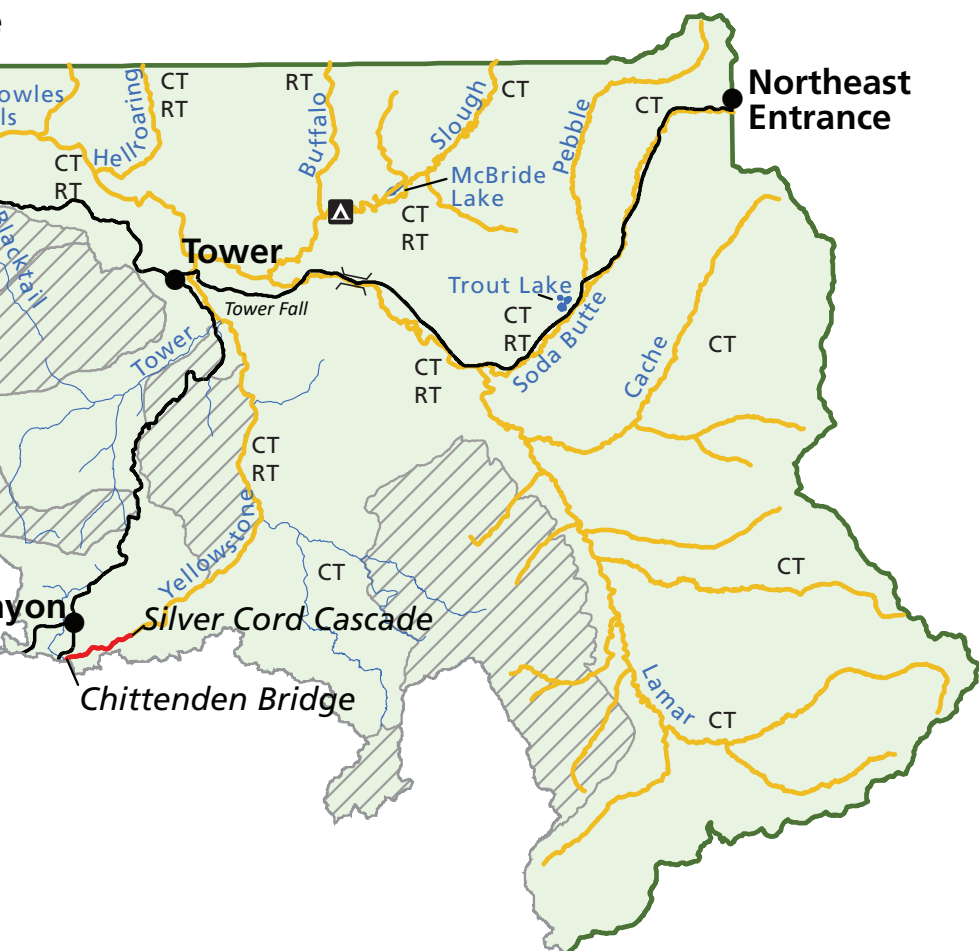
*All nonnative fish, including rainbow trout, brook trout, and identifiable cutthroat/rainbow hybrids must be killed in these areas:*

- Lamar River drainage including all tributaries and lakes.
- Yellowstone River below Lower Falls and above Knowles Falls, including north side tributaries

In areas downstream of these locations, killing of nonnative fish is recommended.

**If you don't know, let it go.**

# Northeast Region Regulations



- Roads
- Park Boundary
- Bear Management Areas
- Native Trout Conservation Area
- Closed to all fishing
- Campground

- All rainbow trout, brook trout, and identifiable cutthroat/rainbow trout hybrids must be killed.
- Yellowstone River downstream of Gardiner, MT: Only a State of Montana fishing license required.

# Southwest Region Regulations

## Southwest Region:



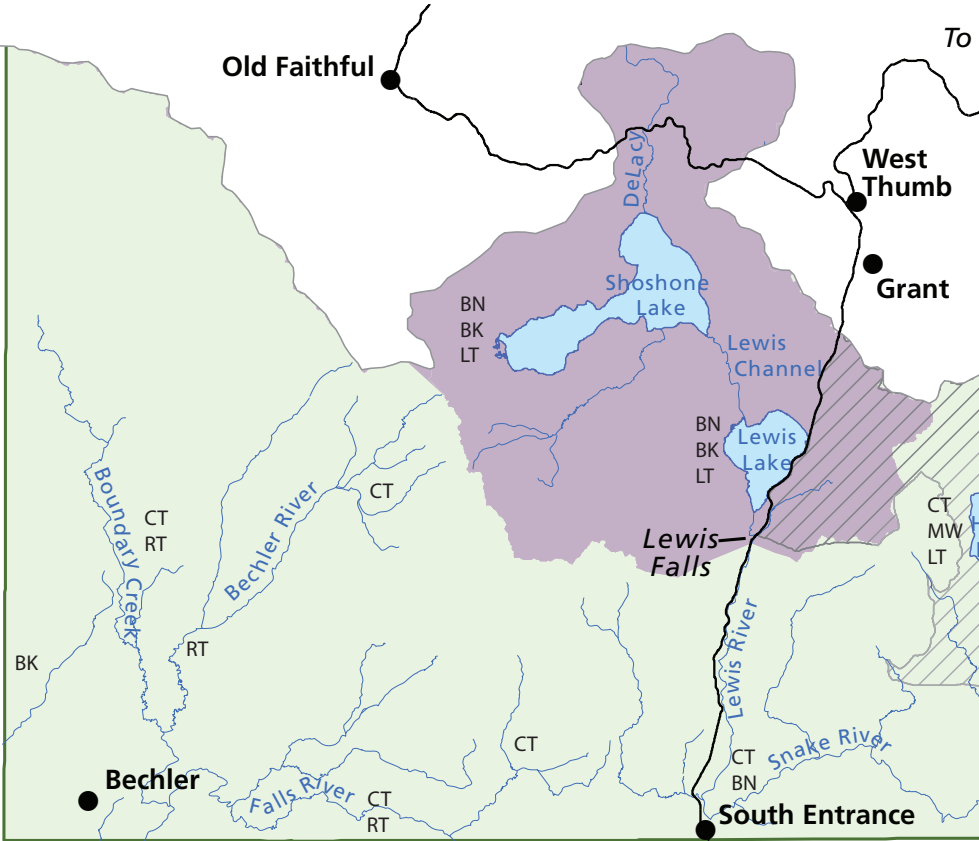
Includes the Snake and Lewis rivers and tributaries; Heart Lake; Lewis and Shoshone lakes; Falls and Bechler rivers and tributaries.

### *Heart Lake opens July 1*

### Possession limits

### *Nonnative Trout Tolerance Area:*

- Waters above Lewis Falls, including Lewis and Shoshone lakes and the Lewis Channel—possession limit of five nonnative fish in combination, only one of which can be a brown trout.



# Southwest Region Regulations

- Do not discard lake trout carcasses along the lake shore as they will likely attract bears.

## ***Native Trout Conservation Area:***

- Catch and release all native fish.
- No possession limit on nonnative fish.

## **Where to take young anglers**

*Grant:* Aster Creek near Lewis Falls; Lewis Lake shoreline; pullouts along the South Entrance Road.



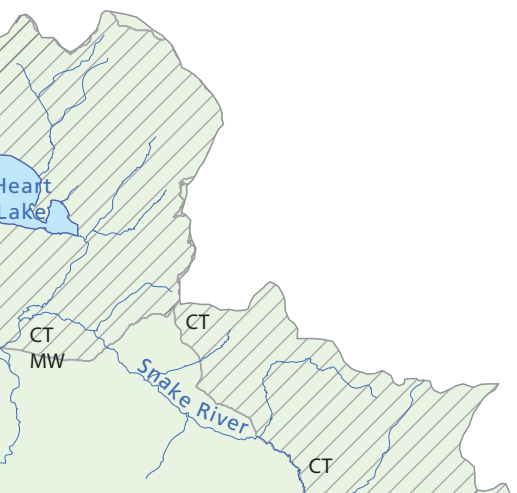
— Roads

— Park Boundary

Native Trout Conservation Area

Nonnative Trout Tolerance Area

Bear Management Areas



Western shore of Shoshone Lake.

# Southeast Region Regulations

## Southeast Region:

Includes the Yellowstone River upstream of Chittenden Bridge near Canyon, Yellowstone Lake and its tributaries, Middle Creek of the North Fork Shoshone River.

### ***Yellowstone River opens July 15.***

#### **Permanently closed to fishing on the Yellowstone River:**

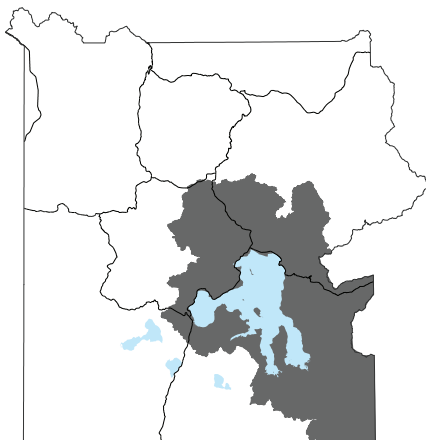
- Fishing Bridge and an area one mile (1.6 km) downstream (toward Canyon) and 1/4 mile (.4 km) upstream (toward Yellowstone Lake) from the bridge.
- The Yellowstone River 100 yards (91 m) up- and downstream of LeHardys Rapids.
- The Yellowstone River and its tributaries in Hayden Valley from the confluence of Alum Creek upstream to Sulphur Cauldron.

### ***Yellowstone Lake opens with the general season***

Streams flowing into Yellowstone Lake, its tributaries, and areas within 100 yards (91 m) of each stream's outlet open **July 15**. Access to many areas is restricted by Bear Management Area Closures, see the Yellowstone Backcountry Trip Planner for details.

#### **Permanently closed to fishing along Yellowstone Lake:**

- The shoreline of Yellowstone Lake from West Thumb Geyser Basin to Little Thumb Creek is closed to protect fragile thermal resources.



- Bridge Bay Marina/Harbor and Grant Village Marina/Harbor and their channels to the lake.
- Pelican Creek from its mouth to a point two miles (3.2 km) upstream.

### **Possession limits**

#### ***Native Trout Conservation Area:***

- Catch and release all native fish.
- No possession limit on nonnative fish. All lake trout must be killed.

### **Where to take young anglers**

*Lake Village:* Along Gull Point Drive or at Sand Point.

*Grant:* Aster Creek near Lewis Falls; Lewis Lake shoreline; Yellowstone Lake shoreline near Grant Marina.

### **Accessible ramp & platform**

An accessible fishing area is located at the Grant Village boat launch.

## A wide, calm lake reflecting a large, white, fluffy cloud in a blue sky. The shoreline is lined with tall, thin trees, and distant mountains are visible in the background.

**Legend:**

- Roads
- Closed to all fishing
- Park Boundary
- Native Trout Conservation Area
- Bear Management Areas

# Fish Identification—Native

Each individual angler must be able to correctly identify various fish species and comply with appropriate rules and regulations.

**ALL NATIVE FISH ARE CATCH-AND-RELEASE ONLY**

## Cutthroat Trout—CT



**Widely distributed in many drainages.**



**dark spots on light background**

**few spots on head**

**only species with red jaw slash**

### Cutthroat trout subspecies

Two subspecies of cutthroat trout are found in Yellowstone: the west-slope cutthroat and the Yellowstone cutthroat (which has both large- and finespotted varieties). All fish with a red slash are considered cutthroat (or cutthroat/rainbow hybrids).

**If it has a red slash, put it back.**



Westslope cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarkii lewisii*).



Yellowstone cutthroat trout (large-spotted form; *Oncorhynchus clarkii bouvieri*).

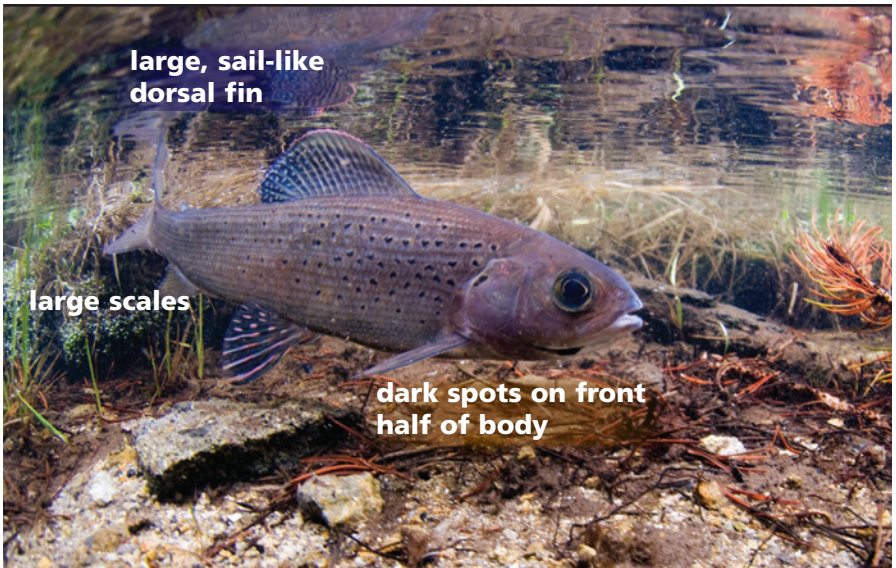
# Fish Identification—Native

## Mountain Whitefish—MW

**Distributed throughout Snake and Lewis rivers, other areas as noted on map.**



## Arctic Grayling—GY



**Distributed throughout Gibbon River, sometimes in Madison and Firehole rivers.**



# Fish Identification—Nonnative

## Rainbow Trout—RT



**Widely distributed due to historic stocking. Not present in Yellowstone Lake, Yellowstone River above the Upper Falls, or the Snake River.**



**numerous spots on head**

**often white on edge of fins**

**small scales**

### Hybridized (genetically impure) cutthroat trout

In waters where rainbow trout have been introduced, there has been a serious degradation of the cutthroat trout population through interbreeding of the two species. Cutthroat/rainbow trout hybrids exist throughout the Bechler, Falls, Gallatin, Gardner, and Lamar rivers, and the Yellowstone River below the Upper Falls.

Cutthroat/rainbow trout hybrids have color and markings consistent with both species, making identification

difficult. However, rainbows and hybrids will have white tips on the anal and paired pelvic fins.

Trout that have any indication of a red/orange jaw slash are fully protected by catch-and-release regulations—except in the Lamar River drainage and the Yellowstone River and northern tributaries between Lower Falls and Knowles Falls.

**If you don't know, let it go.**



**white tips on fins**



**red jaw slash**

# Fish Identification—Nonnative

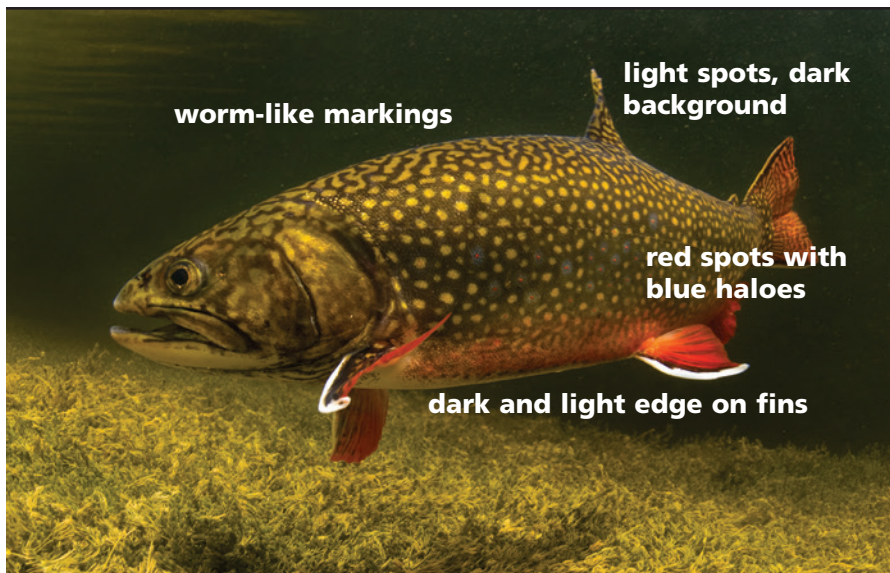
## Brown Trout—BN

Distributed in Gallatin, Gibbon, Firehole, Madison, Lewis, Snake, Gardner, and the Yellowstone rivers. Not present in Yellowstone Lake, Bechler or Falls rivers.



pale haloes  
around black spots

## Brook Trout—BK



worm-like markings

light spots, dark  
background

red spots with  
blue haloes

dark and light edge on fins

Widely distributed due to historic stocking. Not present in Yellowstone Lake, Yellowstone River above the Upper Falls, or the Gallatin River.



# Fish Identification—Nonnative

## Lake Trout—LT



### All lake trout **MUST BE KILLED** in Yellowstone Lake

If you do not want to keep the fish, puncture the air bladder and drop it into water as deep as possible. In the backcountry, dispose of fish entrails and remains in fast moving or deep water. Do not discard trout carcasses along streams as they will attract bears.



# Releasing Fish



Hold the fish with wet hands, beneath the belly, behind the pectoral fins. Use forceps or small pliers to remove the hook.

For all native fish and any nonnative fish you intend to release, bring the fish in as quickly as possible. Do not play the fish to exhaustion.

Unhook the fish in quiet water such as an eddy or slow spot. Do not drag the fish across land. Use forceps or small needle-nosed pliers to quickly remove the hook.

Always make sure your hands are wet if you must handle the fish. Dry hands damage a fish's protective mucous film. Hold the fish with one hand around the tail section and the other beneath the belly, just behind the pectoral fins. Never grab or hold a fish through the gills unless it is already dead.

If you want a photo of the fish, make sure the photographer is ready before you handle the fish. Make it quick.

Never just throw a fish back into the water. If a fish becomes passive, it is probably close to exhaustion. Gently remove the hook within calm water, then lightly cradle the fish with

your hands to see what it does. If it struggles to keep itself upright, hold the fish around its tail and beneath its belly with its head facing upstream into the current. Move the fish gently back and forth toward and away from the current. You should notice the gills opening and closing due to the rush of water. This is like giving a fish mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. When the fish has recovered, it should swim away on its own.

## Tackle, lures, and hooks

Hooks and lures typically have barbs when purchased. With small pliers you must pinch down the barbs. Without barbs more skill is required in landing and bringing in fish but hook removal is easier and less traumatic to the fish.

Spinning lures typically have three hooks called treble hooks. With wire cutters you can snip off one of the hooks or snap one off with pliers; you also must pinch down all the barbs. Two hooks are still effective, easier to remove, and less traumatic.

If the fish is deeply hooked, cut the line, do not pull out the hook. Most fish can survive with hooks left in.



# Frequently Asked Questions

## **Why are the same fish species regulated differently in different areas of the park?**

Park fishing regulations are designed to protect native fish and aquatic ecosystems, provide recreational opportunities, and also preserve the tradition of angling in Yellowstone.

Cutthroat trout, Arctic grayling, mountain whitefish, and other native fishes are important to the ecology of Yellowstone. Because cutthroat trout and Arctic grayling inhabit relatively shallow waters, many animals depend on them as a food source, especially during spring when the fish spawn in small lake inlets and tributary streams.

Angling is an important part of the park's cultural history. Nonnative trout are important to the angler experience in Yellowstone, but they contribute to the decline in the park's native cutthroat trout and Arctic grayling by competing for food and habitat, preying on native fish, and degrading the genetic integrity of native fish by hybridizing with them.

Yellowstone is making a substantial, on-the-ground effort to conserve native fish in several areas. These actions, which are currently focused



in the Lamar and Grayling Creek drainages and Yellowstone Lake, are described in the park's native fish conservation plan. Goals are to reduce the risk of extinction, restore and maintain the ecological role, and create sustainable angling and viewing opportunities for native fish.

## **Why can't we fish from Fishing Bridge?**

Fishing Bridge, situated over a cutthroat trout spawning area, was once a popular place to fish. Declining numbers of cutthroat trout caused park officials to close the bridge to fishing to protect the spawning fish.

## **Why are barbless hooks required?**

Barbless hooks reduce injuries and the time needed to handle fish, and improve the overall condition of trout in heavily-fished waters of the park.

## **Why is fishing lead-free in Yellowstone?**

Lead is a toxic environmental contaminant. Wildlife such as waterfowl, cranes, and shorebirds, are vulnerable to lead poisoning. Of particular concern in Yellowstone are the alarmingly low populations of trumpeter swans and loons.



# Aquatic Invasive Species

## STOP Aquatic Invasive Species



All vessels must be checked by National Park Service inspectors to ensure that they are free of aquatic invasive species before entering any park waters. See Yellowstone's Boating Regulations for details: <http://www.nps.gov/yell/planyourvisit/boating.htm>.

Before you enter Yellowstone National Park and any time you move to another body of water within the park:

### CLEAN • INSPECT • DRY

1. **REMOVE ALL** water, mud, plants, fish, tiny animals, or other foreign material from your boats, trailers, and other equipment—including waders, boots, clothing, and nets—before you enter Yellowstone National Park.
2. **DO NOT BRING BAIT** into Yellowstone National Park. No natural or organic bait such as minnows, salmon eggs, worms, insects, or foodstuffs—alive or dead—are allowed. See General Regulations on pages 2 and 3 for details.
3. **DO NOT DUMP WATER** from other sources into Yellowstone waters. Drain your boat hull and live well in a safe location (a flat, paved, dirt, or gravel area) away from all park surface waters.
4. **NEVER MOVE** water, fish, other animals, or plants from one stream or lake to another. It is illegal to transport live fish within the park.
5. **THOROUGHLY CLEAN** everything that comes in contact with water before leaving your fishing site. Ensure gear is *clean* and *dry* before fishing another stream or lake.

See Yellowstone's Aquatic Invasive Species brochure for additional details [www.nps.gov/yell/planyourvisit/fishingexotics.htm](http://www.nps.gov/yell/planyourvisit/fishingexotics.htm)

# For More Information

If you have questions about information in this guide, please contact:

Visitor Services Office

P.O. Box 168

Yellowstone National Park, WY 82190

307-344-2107

For more information about Yellowstone fisheries, go to:

**[www.nps.gov/yell/planyourvisit/fishing.htm](http://www.nps.gov/yell/planyourvisit/fishing.htm)**

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