

FISH APPRECIATION

New app answers “What fish is that?”

Most anglers can identify a handful of the 90 fish species swimming in Montana: rainbow trout, brown trout, mountain whitefish, walleye, yellow perch, goldeye, and maybe one of the state’s two cutthroat trout species. But that’s about it.

Very few can tell a carp from a carpsucker or a peamouth from a pikeminnow. That’s changing fast, however.

Montana State University (MSU) recently

released its *Fishes of Montana* app, which makes it easy for students, anglers, and others to identify species as soon as they are caught.

The app can be downloaded for free on Android and iOS handheld devices thanks to a \$10,000 grant from Patagonia. Once downloaded, *Fishes of Montana* requires no cellular coverage or wireless connection.

Let’s say you’re fishing the lower Yellowstone River and land a slender, dark fish you can’t identify. While allowing the fish to stay in the water, you take out your phone, click on the app, and go to “Search by Characteristics.” The app provides options for various physical traits. In this hypothetical case: “Fins” (your fish has a single dorsal fin), “Tail” (forked), “Adipose Fin” (absent), “Mouth” (downward facing), and “Barbels” (not apparent). Now the app shows images of three species swimming in that part of eastern Montana that fit your description. One of them looks just like the fish you caught: a blue sucker. Voila!

Fishes of Montana contains a complete species list that includes common and scientific names, and notes whether a species is native or introduced, and whether it is a threatened species or a game fish. The app also displays a glossary, maps of major drainages, diagrams

of fish anatomy, and links to additional resources.

The app was produced by MSU researchers with technical assistance from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks field biologists. MountainWorks developed the app, and Conservation BenchMarks managed the project. Both companies are based in Bozeman.

Correct species identification is critical for fish conservation. For instance, anglers need to know the difference between brook trout and similar-looking young bull trout, a federally protected species. And between shovel-nose sturgeon and pallid sturgeon, another protected fish. Harvest limits often differ between cutthroat trout and similar-looking rainbow trout, and between walleye and sauger.

“It’s also just fun to know which species are swimming in the waters where you fish,” says David Schmetterling, FWP Fisheries Research Program coordinator in Missoula.

For anglers who are unable to identify a species or want to share information, the app contains a direct email link to Schmetterling inviting them to attach photos. “What I especially like about the way *Fishes of Montana* was developed is how it promotes communication between the people using the app and those of us out here managing and conserving Montana’s fisheries,” he says. ■

“
It’s also just fun to know which species are swimming in the waters where you fish.”

