

# BIGHORN RIVER TRIP PLANNER AND ACCESS GUIDE





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# TRIP PLANNING





One of the best parts of going on a fishing trip to the Bighorn River is its rural location. The Bighorn River is located 90 miles southeast of Billings, in a part of Montana that has remained relatively unchanged in comparison to other parts of the state. The rural location, along with a lack of urban infrastructure can make initial trip planning to the Bighorn challenging for anglers new to the area. Therefore, a successful trip to the Bighorn starts well before you arrive.

This guide will provide you with the necessary information to plan and execute your next fishing trip to one of the world's greatest trout rivers.

An abundant population of Brown Trout make the Bighorn River a blue ribbon trout fishery.



## Getting Here

The Bighorn River is located approximately 90 miles southeast of Billings, Montana on the Crow Indian reservation. The majority of anglers fly into Billings, Montana and either rent a car or utilize the shuttle service located at the airport to reach Fort Smith, Montana.

There is also public airstrip on the north side of the Afterbay near Ft. Smith that private planes can use.

## SHUTTLE SERVICE TO FORT SMITH

If you do not want to rent a car, Big Sky Shuttle Service provides a shuttle between Billings and Fort Smith. This is a popular option since there is really no need for a car in Fort Smith.

Prices for this service is \$2/per mile and \$5 per person. Figure about 90 miles each way.

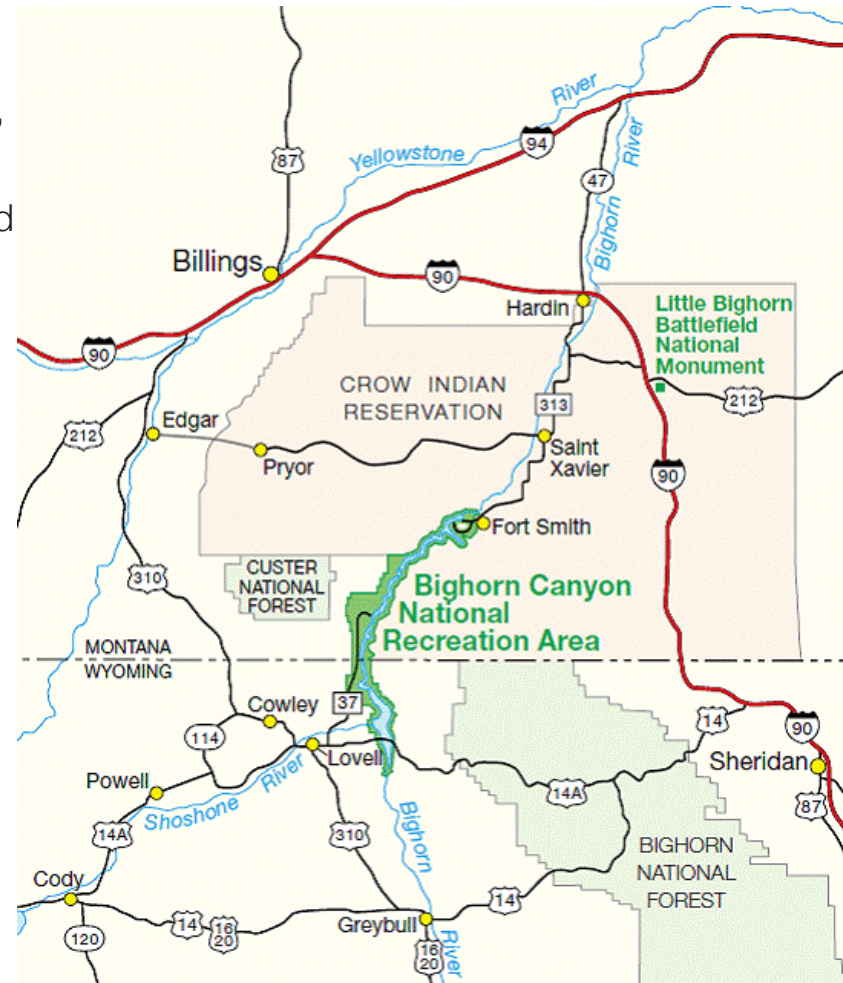
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## DRIVING FROM BILLINGS, MONTANA

Fort Smith is located approximately 90 miles South East of Billings, Montana. From Billings Logan International Airport drive east on Interstate 94 then exit on to I-90 south to Hardin. Take the first Hardin exit and turn right, veering right where the road forks, and continuing straight ahead thru the four way stop. This is Hwy 313. Follow Hwy 313 and the signs to Bighorn Canyon Recreation Area 20 miles to St. Xavier and turn left. In approximately another 20 miles you will arrive in the town of Fort Smith.

## DRIVING FROM SHERIDAN, WYOMING

Approximately 50 miles north of Sheridan Wyoming, turn left off I-90 at the Lodge Grass exit. Go through the town. Go into town cross the railroad tracks and stay to the left. About 4-5 miles out of town, at the top of a hill, you will see the sign indicating the right turn to Fort Smith. Take this road about 20 miles until it ends at HWY 313. Turn left at 313. In approximately 17 miles you will arrive in Fort Smith.







*Services in Fort Smith include fly shops, guided fishing trips, boat rentals, motels, lodges, cabin rentals, shuttles, groceries and gas, post office and laundry.*

## Fort Smith Area Information

### Local Dining

Unfortunately the once loved Polly's; also known as Hal's Café in recent years has closed. We are not sure when if ever this eatery will re-open. In 2014 the **Tailwater Restaurant** opened in what used to be Carol's Café near the Bighorn Access, 13 miles from Fort Smith. After an extensive remodel, they now serve anything from burgers, to pasta, and your choice of many hand cut steaks. Tailwater Restaurant – 406-666-2460

Currently the only restaurant open to the public in Fort Smith can be found at the **Bighorn Trout Shop**. With split seating the trout shop is available to the public by reservation only. Space here is limited, therefore it is important to make reservations well ahead of time. Bighorn Trout Shop – 406-666-2375

The Yellowtail Market located in Fort Smith offers a deli that serves sandwiches and fried chicken. You can also dine on microwaved frozen burritos in a pinch.

### Groceries and Gas in Fort Smith

The Yellowtail Market in Fort Smith offers basic dry goods, essentials like milk, juices, soft drinks, bottled water, frozen dinners and vegetables. They also sell diesel and unleaded gasoline.

### Wine, Beer, etc...

The Bighorn River flows through the Crow Indian Reservation, where the sale of alcoholic beverages is prohibited. Alcoholic beverages should be purchased in Hardin or Billings prior to your arrival. Many stop at the IGA grocery store in Hardin for wine and beer. You can also stop at the Albertson's in Billings on your way down from the airport to the highway which will be on your left.

### Cell Phone Service

Cell phone service is limited in Fort Smith. Verizon offers the areas best coverage working well in Fort Smith and the surrounding area. Unfortunately AT&T doesn't work at all in town. The nearest service for AT&T users is along the Bighorn Lake access road or down in St. Xavier. Just about every business in the area offers complimentary Wifi service.



## Other Attractions

### Little Bighorn Battlefield

Located south of Hardin, the Little Bighorn Battlefield is a must stop for those who want to learn the local history. A stop that can be made either on the way in to Fort Smith or on the way out, is sure to impress any history buff traveling through the area. Other features include Custer's last stand, and the Indian Memorial. Individual Fee of \$5.00 is required for those on foot, bike, or motorcycle. Private vehicle is \$10.00, and commercial sedan (1-6 people) is \$25.00.

### Bighorn Lake

This 70 mile lake is a geological marvel and is encompassed by towering rock walls and sheer cliffs for its entire length, making Bighorn Lake one of the west's most magnificent and beautiful landscapes. Here tourists can enjoy boating, swimming and of course fishing. Located 10 miles from Fort Smith, visitors can access the lake at Ok-a-beh Marina. Here you will find a boat launch, picnic tables, swimming area, concessions, boat gas and pontoon boat rentals.

Bighorn Lake is a tremendous fishery in its own right. Fly anglers will find the most success fishing for trout, smallmouth bass and carp. Anglers using conventional tackle will also target healthy populations of walleye.

This is a shot of Bighorn Lake just behind Yellowtail dam from the Okabeah Marina access road.





A wide-angle photograph of a river scene. In the foreground, a small white boat with three people is on the water. The middle ground shows a grassy bank with many green trees. The background is a clear blue sky with a few clouds. The text '2 BIGHORN RIVER ACCESS GUIDE' is overlaid at the bottom.

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# BIGHORN RIVER ACCESS GUIDE



## WADE FISHING THE BIGHORN

Thanks to the State of Montana and the National Park Service the Bighorn has abundant access for wade fisherman and walk in anglers. Thanks to Montana's renowned stream access laws anglers here can move freely within the high water mark of the river after utilizing a boat or one of the 5 major access points to gain access to the water.







## Access Points(Walk Wade and Boat Ramps)

There are 5 main access points here on the Bighorn, with the main three located on the upper thirteen miles. They go in order as follows, Afterbay Dam, Three Mile Access, Bighorn or Thirteen Mile Access, Mallards Landing Access, and Two Leggins Access encompassing 35 miles of highly productive trout water.

### Afterbay Access

Anglers do not have to drive far out of Fort Smith in order to gain access to great wade fishing. The Afterbay has what you need on either side of the river. The main wading access is located at the start of the boat ramp on the north side of the river. Anglers are able to work downstream either along the bank, or on the designated trail nearby. The trail will lead anglers down to the first island, nearly a half mile downstream.

Located on the south side of the Afterbay parking lot and across the river, is more of an undeveloped access point for anglers. Here anglers are not able to walk nearly as far downstream, but still have access to easy wade fishing. It is important that once you reach the gauge house the federal property will end, resulting in anglers to strictly conform to the high water mark law. Federal land will eventually end and become tribal property. In order to gain access one must possess a tribal trespass permit, only available for purchase in Crow Agency. *Wade Access Continued.....*

**The Three Mile Access Trail offers anglers abundant access to the Bighorn River.**





### **Three Mile Access**

Not only is 3 Mile used as a put in and take out, but is the best access for those strictly looking to wade fish. Able to walk upstream a mile and half, there is an easily accessible trail to get you from point to point. When approaching the river from the boat ramp one will notice a variety of islands that can be easily accessed with proper water flows. If wanting to wade downstream anglers must stay below the high water mark, as they will be surrounded by tribal land.

### **Bighorn Access**

Mainly a common access for strictly put ins and take outs, anglers are limited when it comes to wade fishing Bighorn Access. Able to fish the first flat, this a great opportunity to find trout podded up, and sipping dries. As anglers walk further upstream they will soon be restricted to walking below the high water mark, due to private land.

### **Mallards Landing Access**

Limited to foot traffic due to the long drive from town, Mallards surprisingly has a variety of wading opportunities to choose from. It is important to know that when wading near the boat ramp anglers must be cautious of the steep bank, and the abrupt drop off in the river. There is not exactly a clear trail for anglers to walk up river, but there are a few rough paths created by those who rarely wade Mallards. There are a multiple channels upstream that anglers will have access to. Crossing is not much of an issue depending on the rivers flow, but caution is to be taken.

### **Two Leggins Access**

There is not much of an opportunity for wade fisherman when considering to fish Two Leggins. The best wade fishing opportunity is to move up stream from the boat ramp.

The sun rises at Mallard's Landing access





Floating the Bighorn in a drift boat is a special experience

## FLOAT FISHING THE BIGHORN

Anglers use a variety of watercraft to cover the Bighorn River's relatively placid river flows. Drift boats being the most popular especially by local guides. Smaller craft also do a good job of getting anglers from spot to spot including pontoon boats, kayaks, rafts and canoes. All the accesses along the river are well established and provide concrete boat ramps where launching and retrieving your boat is relatively easy. It is important to note that once flows reach 7,000 cfs floating the Bighorn be-

comes much more hazardous. Novice oarsmen should use caution above these flows and inquire locally about the conditions at the put ins and take outs because high water can make retrieving your boat much more difficult.





Floating from a boat allows you to cover more water than on foot

**Afterbay Access – Three Mile Access** - This 3 mile float is relatively short, but it is deceptive because there is a lot of productive water to cover, possibly the most productive 3 miles of trout water in the world and just about all of it is wadeable. This is a good option for those just looking to wade fish or for those looking for a shorter evening float. There is one hazard about a mile down from the dam called the Suck Hole, which essentially is a large eddy/whirlpool created by an old concrete impoundment. Floaters finding there way into this hazard can get in a lot of trouble. It is best to stay as far river left as possible.

**Three Mile Access – Bighorn Access** – This float is about ten river miles in length and offers anglers a good mix of both wade fishing and float fishing opportunities. The Bighorn rapids are the only floating hazard of note in this stretch and isn't much of an issue if you keep your watercraft straight. For most this is a full day float. If you would like to make your day longer you can combine this float with the one above going from Afterbay Access – Bighorn Access a 13 mile float, to maximize the amount of water you cover.

**Bighorn Access – Mallard's Access** – This 9 mile stretch of river sees much less pressure relative to what is found in the thirteen miles up river. The water conditions are also less stable the further you get from the dam and fish counts start to decline. There are no real floating hazards to speak of as you float between these two access points.

**Mallard's Access – Two Leggins Access** – This 12 mile stretch of river will take you through the last of the productive trout water on the Bighorn. Down here floaters will encounter long flats in between heavily braided island channels. This section of the river is often off color throughout the year and anglers should inquire locally about the water conditions. There is a significant hazard to note at the end of this float – The Two Leggins Diversion Dam. This hazard should not be floated by novice oarsmen, but is floatable in most water conditions.





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## FISHING PREPARATION



## Introduction

Being that the Bighorn is one of the most user friendly rivers in Montana and has a one of the highest populations of trout per mile it is hard to have a bad time. However, there are few things you can do before you arrive to maximize your Bighorn River Fishing experience.

## Trip Duration

The first thing you should determine is how long your trip will be, this may affect how you decide to spend your time. Most anglers fish the river for 3 - 5 days. The average angler most often spends about 4 days and most fisherman are wore out and fully satiated with trout by that time.

## Walk/Wade or Float?

Many times the length of a trip is determined by how you choose to approach the river. There is abundant opportunity to both float and wade the Bighorn. Either way, one can have a very productive fishing trip. Wade anglers will need to plan on what part of the river they want to be in at what part of the day and be prepared for long days on foot to cover the most water. The upper river definitely offers the most wade fishing opportunity. Approaching the river by foot allows you to more methodically fish the river and have a more intimate experience. Purchasing a high quality river map will go a long way in determining the logistics of the day.

Float fisherman will have to determine whether to bring their own watercraft, rent a drift boat or hire a guide to take them down the river. All are easily do able in Fort Smith. Shuttles are easily available in Fort Smith as well. A fly shop can help you determine where you

should float based on the techniques you want to use, how long you want to be out there and the type of watercraft you are using. Purchasing a map will go a long way in helping you determine where you are on the river so you can set the pace of your day and you don't miss your take out point.





## **To Hire a Guide or Not to Hire a Guide That?**

Hiring a guide offers the angler several advantages if you are fishing the river for a first time or looking to learn a different section. Anglers that hire a guide for their whole trip are able to maximize their time on the water and often require a shorter trip say 3 days instead of 5. The guides are in tune with the daily rhythms of the river and can have their anglers dialed in pretty quick. They know what type of water the fish are holding in, what flies they are taking and what time of the day to be where.

Self-guided anglers need to determine the opportunity lost of not hiring a guide. The first thing that needs to be determined is the anglers skill level. A seasoned angler can do very well on their own without a guide on the Bighorn. Inexperienced anglers would be advised to at least hire a guide for a day to get a lay of the land. Each river presents it's own set of nuances regardless of how experienced you are with a rod and guide can help you decode them quickly. If self exploration is what you are after the Bighorn is a great DIY river and is one of the easiest rivers to wade so taking it on yourself is not to be feared.

## **Practice, Practice, Practice**

Regardless of how you choose to fish during your trip, practice as much as you can before you arrive. Just like a golfer hits the range before heading out on the course, fly fishers should take the time to practice their casting in the lawn for a few weeks before heading out on your trip. This is true for anglers of all abilities, especially for those new to fishing. A beginning angler that has the basic cast down before arriving for several days of guided fishing will have a much more enjoyable time and catch for more fish than having

never touched a fly rod before. I hate to see an angler that spent all this money on a trip to only learn how to cast by the end of the first day. Having the basic cast down will allow your guide to focus on other things such as your drift, presentation and line management the most important aspects of catching trout. Most local fly shops are good place to start and most often offer free casting lessons or beginners fly fishing classes at a minimal cost.







### **Spring(March, April, May)**

When fishing the spring season anglers should be prepared for just about any weather. Many years winter can run well into spring and other times it feels like summer in April. It is quite normal to see a blanket of snow in the months of March, April, and May. This is not all bad, as it can bring for some of the best spring insect emergences.

Water temperatures are typically in the 35 to 45 degrees. Air temperatures can vary anywhere from the 30s into 70s. Anglers will find consistent hatches of Midges and Blue Winged Olives this time of year. Both emergences create exceptional angling opportunity with both nymphs and dry flies.

#### **Average Spring Temperatures**

March	Low 25	High 53
April	Low 33	High 64
May	Low 43	High 73

### **Summer (June, July, August, and Early September)**

Anglers should expect to encounter air temperatures anywhere from the mid 70's to low 100's during the summer months. Many anglers wet wade at this time, but that is dependent upon the anglers comfort level. Water temperatures range from the low 50's to the mid 60's. It is smart to be well equipped with any form of sun protection. Having plenty of sunscreen on hand, and of course a quality hat to protect from harmful rays is crucial.

During the summer season the Bighorn is in full swing and anglers will find success employing a variety of tactics including nymph fishing, streamer fishing and dry fly fishing. Available hatches during the summer consist of Pale Morning Duns, Black Caddis, Yellow Sallies, Tan Caddis, and Tricos. Lets not forget Terrestrials, as both ants and hoppers can eagerly bring trout to the surface.

#### **Average Summer Temperatures**

June	Low 51	High 82
July	Low 57	High 91
August	Low 55	High 91







### Fall(September, October, November)

Temperatures in the Fall are similar to that of spring ranging from the low 30's to the upper 70's. Anglers should be prepared for just about any weather. Waders again find themselves to be very useful among both anglers and guides. Hatches this time of year consist of Blue Winged Olives, Pseudo's and some years Tricos as well. Anglers should expect streamer fishing to be very good during this time of year as the browns prepare to spawn. Dry fly fishing and nymph fishing remain consistent.

#### Average Fall Temperatures

September Low 45 High 79

October Low 33 High 65

November Low 22 High 48

Bighorn River Hatch Chart														
Hatches	Fly Size	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	July	August	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Hatch Time
Midges	18 - 24	X	X	XXX	XXX	XX	X						X	Morning/Early Afternoon
Blue Winged Olives	16 - 22			X	XXX	XXX	X				X	X		Late Morning/Early Afternoon
Pale Morning Dun	14 -18						X	XXX	X					Early Afternoon
Yellow Sally	12 14						XX	XX						Early Afternoon
Tan Caddis	12 14					X		XX	XX	X				Afternoon
Black Caddis	16 - 20							X	XXX	XX				Afternoon - Late Evening
Tricos	18 - 24							X	XXX	XX	X			Early - Mid Morning
Pseudos	20 - 24								X	XX	XX	X		Late Morning - Afternoon
Grasshoppers	6 14							X	XXX	XX				Afternoon
Ants/Beetles	12 16						X	X	X	X				Afternoon

**X - # OF X'S INDICATES INTENSITY OF THE HATCH**





## Recommended Equipment for the Bighorn

**Rod and Reel** - Most anglers on the Bighorn fish 4 - 6 weight rods matched with large arbor fly reels. Four and five weights for dry fly fishing, Five and 6 weights for nymph fishing. Streamer fisherman often bring a 7 or 8 weight rod as well.

**Fly Lines and Leaders** - Weight forward fly lines are the standard lines for the Bighorn. Anglers should also be prepared with 9' leaders and tippets ranging from 3X - 5X for nymphs and dry flies. Streamer fisherman are advised to bring along a sinking line.

**Waders** - Breathable waders are must in the spring and fall on the Bighorn. They are sometimes necessary during the summer months as well. Bring heavy socks to wear under your waders, as you may be standing in the water most of the day. Rubber bottom boots are not required as felt is still allowed in Montana. Felt boots provide better traction. Rubber bottom boots with studs work well, but they can be loud on the rocks and often not welcome in guide boats. Neoprene socks are good to have during the summer months when wet wading.

**Clothing** - Every angler shoe come equipped with a WATERPROOF raincoat not water resistant. Also a insulating layer of some kind such as a down coat or heavy fleece coat for the spring and fall seasons. Gloves and a winter hat are also good when fishing early or late in the year.

**Sun Protection** - There is not much shade on the Bighorn and the sun is intense at our elevation. Sunscreen and a hat often full brimmed are recommended. Lightweight long sleeve shirts and quick drying pants are also useful. Polarized sunglasses are a must as well both to fight off the sun and as eye protection especially if you are fishing from the boat. At times bugs can be bad, bug spray is recommended.