

LOW WATER, HIGH VALUE: WHAT THE BIGHORN IS TEACHING US

Since April 16, the Bighorn River has flowed at 1,500 cubic feet per second (cfs) - the lowest sustained summer release observed since 2007. Current minimum and median inflow projections suggest the river will likely remain near this release through the remainder of the summer, making 2026 one of the longest periods of sustained low flows the Bighorn has experienced in nearly two decades. While these conditions naturally raise concerns among anglers, outfitters and businesses that depend on the river, they also provide a rare opportunity to better understand how the Bighorn responds under extreme drought scenarios.

Fortunately, BHRA and its membership have built the scientific foundation needed to learn from years exactly like this. Monthly water quality monitoring, macroinvertebrate sampling, spawning surveys, guide observations through FishLog, and real-time temperature monitoring allow reduced flow impacts to the river, its fishery, and the fishing experience, to be measured.

Rather than relying on assumptions, we are actively collecting the data needed to guide future management and conservation decisions.

One of the most important questions this season is how BHRA's restored side channels perform. The channels were designed to reactivate and provide habitat at river flows of approximately 2,000 cfs, making this year's sustained 1,500 cfs release an unexpected test of their lower limits. While preliminary discharge measurements reveal that five of the nine restored side channels continue to convey water, additional monitoring is underway to determine whether those flows provide adequate habitat for trout.

Other data collected point to encouraging signs. Spring spawn assessments showed a banner rainbow trout spawn - a credit to BHRA water management negotiations that advocated for flow stability throughout the critical reproductive period. Reports



Member Pat Shelton and guide Ron Ford showing that Bighorn trout are in great shape.

from the river suggest trout remain in impeccable condition and impressive size, thanks to the cold-water releases from Yellowtail Dam and abundant subsurface food sources. Some guides are citing average rainbow trout length at twenty inches; a twenty-seven inch brown was recently landed.

While none of us wished for a low-water year, it has reinforced the important niche BHRA plays in monitoring the Bighorn River through long-term science. Thanks to the support of our membership, we are poised to document this historic season in a way that will benefit the Bighorn River long after river flows return to normal.

We have monitored the river through the high flow periods, and we are prepared to do so through the low - because of you.

Anne Marie Emery
Executive Director





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OUR WORK



Different flows. New Opportunities. Brad Boone on the Bighorn River. Photo: John Sindland

FISHING THE BIGHORN AT 1,500 CFS

While lower water changes how the river fishes and how anglers experience it, it also creates new opportunities and challenges. As BHRA works to better understand the ecological effects of this year's low-flow conditions, we also want to help anglers prepare for what they'll encounter on the water. To do that, we've combined insights from BHRA's ongoing scientific monitoring with the firsthand observations of seasoned Bighorn River guides who have successfully fished through previous low-water years. Together, these perspectives offer a practical look at what anglers can expect and how to make the most of the Bighorn during a season of 1,500 cfs flows.

YOU CAN READ THE FULL BLOG POST HERE →
[BIGHORNIVERALLIANCE.ORG/POST/FISHING-1500](https://bighornriveralliance.org/post/fishing-1500)



COMMUNITY RESPONDS TO INJURED EAGLE

When BHRA received a call from Board Chair John Sindland and Pat Cathey about an injured juvenile Bald Eagle along the banks of the Bighorn River, a remarkable partnership quickly came together to give the bird its best chance.

Mobilizing with the Crow Tribal Fish & Game Department and BHRA volunteer Dennis Fischer, our partners carefully recovered the eagle by drift boat, and BHRA staff then drove it to a veterinary clinic in Billings before its final transfer to the Montana Raptor Conservation Center in Bozeman.

Although the eagle ultimately could not be saved, the response serves as a powerful reminder of the people who care deeply about the Bighorn and the wildlife that call it home. Conservation is not always measured by successful outcomes. Sometimes it is measured by a community's willingness to act when needed. BHRA is grateful for the systems of support that mobilize together.



Dennis Fischer & tribal member Jesse Madill retrieve eagle



Benonaiah Bird lands a beautiful rainbow trout with help from guide Carter Klatt.



Caison Cummins shows her first Bighorn Brown caught on a fly-rod.

FIRST CAST RETURNS FOR A SECOND YEAR

For the second consecutive year, BHRA's FIRST CAST program brought together Bighorn River guides and Crow youth for a day of fly-fishing, mentorship and connection on one of Montana's most remarkable rivers.

The program reflects our belief that conserving the Bighorn River means more than protecting water, fish, and habitat. It also means recognizing the river's place within the Crow Reservation and celebrating the people, culture and landscapes that make the Bighorn unlike any other fishery in the world. By introducing local Crow youth to fly-fishing alongside experienced guides, FIRST CAST creates an opportunity to build lasting connections with the river while inspiring the next generation of its stewards.

This year's program welcomed eleven outstanding young participants - Aubrielle Pryor, Benonaiah Bird, Dakota Takes Enemy, Delonte Elkshoulder, Caison Cummins, Caelan Plainfeather, Haven Plentyhawk, Hiram Morning,

Kenyon Grant, Tayshaun Stewart, and Blake Iron - who spent the day learning casting techniques, reading water, landing trout, and enjoying time on the Bighorn. Their enthusiasm, curiosity and excitement reminded all of us why programs like this matter.

None of it would have been possible without the incredible generosity of the guides who volunteered their time. BHRA extends its sincere gratitude to **Carter Klatt, Ethan Green, Shalon Hastings, Gabe Bland, Jeremy Gilbertson** and mentor **Tom Scott** for stepping up to share not only their knowledge of the river, but their passion for fishing and conservation. We also thank Crow tribe member Dana Wilson for his partnership, the BHRA membership for ensuring each participant walked away with their own rod and the following businesses for their product support: Kingfisher Lodge, Bighorn Angler, Yellowtail Market, Simms, Patagonia, and Scheels.



2026 FIRST CAST Guides, Partners and Mentors (left to right): Jeremy Gilbertson, Shalon Hastings, Gabe Bland, Carter Klatt, Ethan Green, Dana Wilson and Tom Scott.

RESEARCH ASSOCIATE MOVES TO NEW OPPORTUNITY

After two years with the BHRA, Research Associate William “Mac” McMahan is departing to begin a new chapter with the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality, where he will continue his career in natural resource science.

During his time with BHRA, Mac strengthened the BHRA research program. He helped standardize the organization’s long-term water quality and macroinvertebrate monitoring efforts - creating consistent field and laboratory

protocols that will improve the value of these datasets for years to come. Beyond the office, Mac was a dependable presence in the field. Whether collecting monthly water quality samples on the river and lake, surveying discharge in restored side channels, or keeping our boats, vehicles, and monitoring instruments ready for use, he approached each day with professionalism and a willingness to work in whatever weather conditions Montana presented. We wish him well in his future endeavors.



2026 ADIPOSE BOAT RAFFLE WINNER ANNOUNCED

Congratulations to Zach Brehm of Billings, Montana, the winner of the 2026 Adipose Boat Raffle! Made possible through BHRA’s partnership with Adipose Boatworks, this year’s raffle was a tremendous success, with 173 supporters purchasing all 300 tickets in support of Bighorn River conservation. Zach has participated in the raffle every year since 2020, making this year’s drawing especially rewarding. We are thrilled his

dedication was rewarded and hope he enjoys many memorable days on the water in his new drift boat. Thank you to everyone who purchased a ticket and to Adipose Boatworks for their continued generosity and partnership in making this fundraiser possible.



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