BIG HORN RIVER ALLIANCE

FALL/WINTER NEWSLETTER 2025

William McMahan, BHRA's Research Associate, looks upstream at the Bighorn River from the St. Xavier Bridge.

2025 YEAR IN REVIEW

Each year on the Bighorn River tells a slightly different story. In 2023, historic summer rainstorms defined the season; in 2024, it was the strength of the hatches. Looking back on 2025 and the numbers now in hand, this year will be remembered for one thing above all: the welcome rebound of the Bighorn rainbow trout population.

In this newsletter you will read about how the rainbow trout population experienced a notable increase, and more from our agency partners responsible for management of the river and its wild trout. You will also read fishing reviews from long-time Bighorn anglers, anglers whose daily encounters on the river see what the data can't capture. Together, these reflections of the year remind us that the Bighorn's story is written in both numbers and experience – and that a remarkable wild trout fishery isn't the result of chance, but of countless people, decisions and conditions working in concert.

As we celebrate the signs of a healthy river and thriving fishery, we're also reminded that these outcomes reflect years of work happening beyond the visible edges of river management. Through drone technology, BHRA monitors the timing and duration of the rainbow trout spawn - precise data that helps water managers understand how release decisions support successful reproduction. At the same time, our side-channel reactivation projects continue to restore essential habitat, reconnecting historic off-river pathways that provide juvenile trout and native fish with refuge, food, and rearing conditions during critical life stages. Together, these efforts form the backbone of a healthier, more resilient Bighorn River.

In the months ahead, we look forward to sharing BHRA's accomplishments in our 2025 Annual Report - from research advances to restoration milestones to the growing strength of our partnerships. But as we close out the year on solid footing and sustain the momentum you've helped create, we're aiming to raise $70K in year-end giving. Your support now ensures that this science-driven, habitat-focused work continues - and that the Bighorn River remains healthy, connected, and resilient heading into 2026.

MAKE A YEAR-END GIFT TODAY!

BIGHORN
RIVER ALLIANCE

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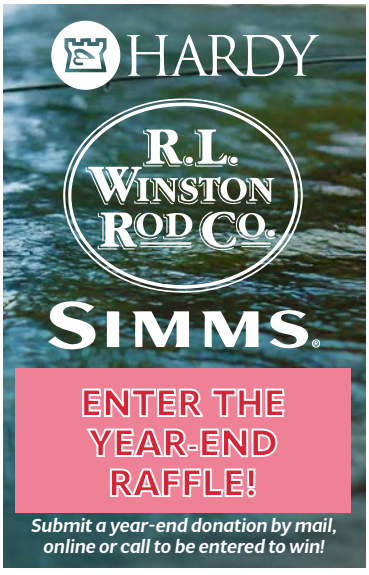


2025 YEAR IN REVIEW

WATER YEAR SUMMARY

J. Brooks Stephens,
Civil Engineer, Reservoir and River Operations, BOR

The 2025 water year (October 1 – September 30) ranked as the ninth driest in the past three decades, with total inflow into Bighorn Lake reaching just 69% of the 30-year average. Consequently, Bighorn River flows were maintained between 2,000 and 3,500 cubic feet per second (cfs) throughout the year as water managers worked to balance upstream reservoir storage with downstream river needs.

At the start of the water year river flows were lowered to a winter release rate of 2,210 cfs, based on projected inflows and a target reservoir elevation of 3,617 feet by the end of March. Minor adjustments were made throughout the winter, with flows at 2,280 cfs in early April, when they were decreased to 2,000 cfs in anticipation of spring runoff.

Unseasonably warm temperatures in May triggered an early snowmelt, prompting a 14-day increase in river releases to 3,500 cfs - the year's peak flow – in late May/early June. The rest of June brought continued hot and dry conditions. With snowpack already depleted, runoff forecasts sharply dropped and upstream reservoirs reduced releases to focus on irrigation demand. As a result, river flows progressively decreased until reaching 2,000 cfs by mid-July, where they remained through the end of the water year. The season ended with none of the upstream reservoirs filling to capacity.

Looking ahead to the 2026 water year, winter release rates for the Bighorn River (November through February) are projected to be 2,050 cfs, which is approximately 83% of average. As in previous years, the Bureau of Reclamation will continue regular communication with the Bighorn River Alliance to share updates on forecasts, current conditions, and operational plans.

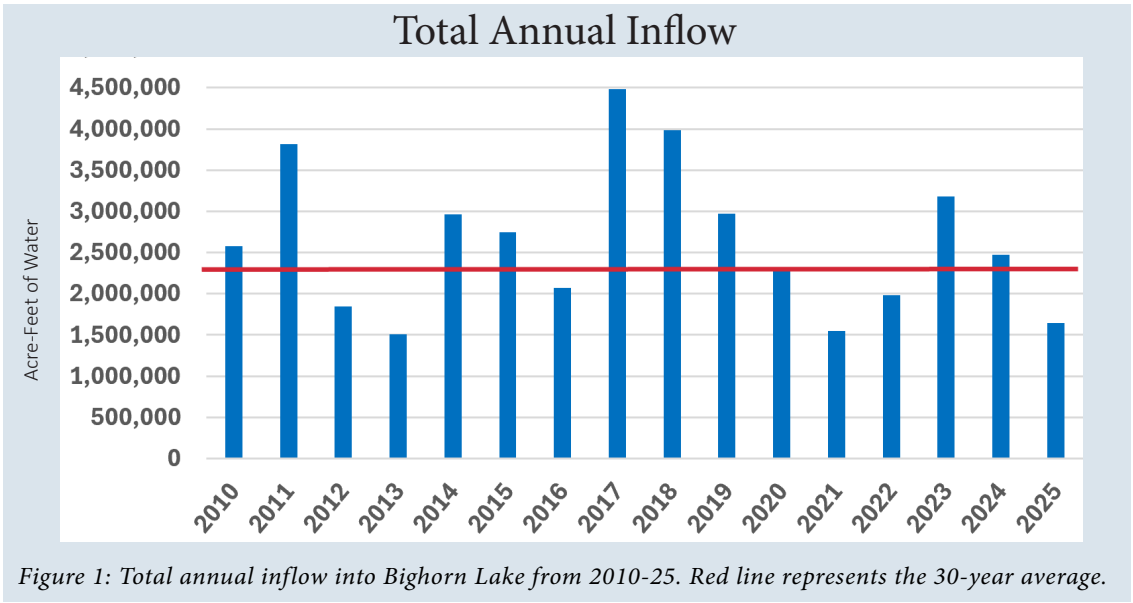


Figure 1: Total annual inflow into Bighorn Lake from 2010-25. Red line represents the 30-year average.

INVESTING IN THE BIGHORN - TODAY & TOMORROW

BHRA is proud to announce the launch of our Planned Giving Program! Debuting on our website before year's end, this initiative offers meaningful ways for supporters to ensure their love for the Bighorn River endures today and tomorrow, while aligning with their financial and conservation goals. Together, we can keep the Bighorn healthy, connected, and thriving for generations to come.

THE BIGHORN FISHERIES

Demi Blythe,
Fisheries Biologist, FWP

Every spring and fall, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) hits the water to check-in on our Bighorn River wild trout. These surveys are done just below Three Mile Access (Upper Section) in the spring and down by Mallard's Landing (Lower Section) in the fall and have been part of the Bighorn River sampling since 1992.

In 2025, surveys from both Upper and Lower river sections showed encouraging results. In the Upper Section we estimated 2,446 trout-per-mile (1,245 brown trout and 1,222 rainbows) longer than seven inches (Figure 2). Both species looked great, with excellent body condition and the kind of healthy weight that makes anglers grin.

In the Lower Section, we estimated 2,187 trout-per-mile (531 brown trout and a whopping 1,642 rainbows) longer than seven inches (Figure 3). Brown trout numbers were right in line with recent years, but the rainbow population increased noticeably compared to the past five. FWP crews also encountered plenty of smaller fish in the mix including juveniles under six inches and a cohort of both species between 8 and 12 inches.

Although river flows were lower-than-average in 2025, the river stayed relatively steady throughout the runoff period. This kind of stability is beneficial for rainbows as it supports favorable conditions during their spawning period. Lower flows can also boost productivity by increasing sunlight on the riverbed, which fuels algae and aquatic insect production.

Also, BHRA's recent side-channel reconnection work seems to be paying off. These reactivated habitats provide critical rearing habitat for juvenile wild trout and refuge areas from predators like brown trout and high flows. Even during drier years, like this year, the side channels stay connected longer and help young fish survive to adulthood and could be contributing to the healthy recruitment we saw during 2025 surveys.

As we close out 2025, both brown and rainbow trout are doing well, recruitment looks strong, and the river is producing healthy, well-fed fish across multiple year-classes. After a low but stable water year and promising survey results, there's plenty to be optimistic about fishing the Bighorn River as we head into 2026.

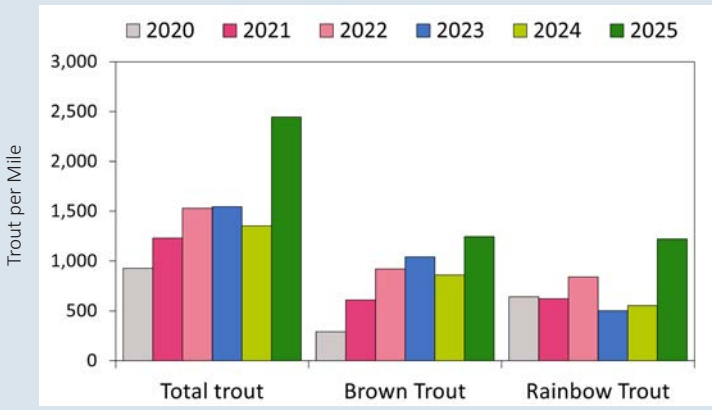


Figure 2. FWP trout estimates for fish greater than 7" on the Upper Section of the Bighorn River, Montana from 2020–2025.

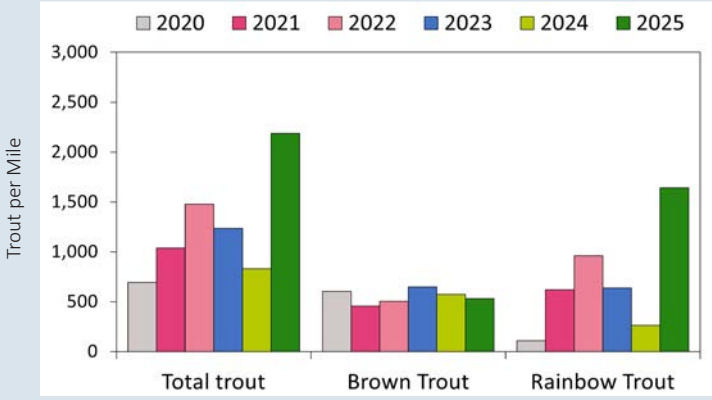


Figure 3. FWP trout estimates for fish greater than 7" on the Lower Section of the Bighorn River, Montana from 2020–2025.

FOLLOWING THE FINS: BIGHORN TROUT GET MICROCHIPPED

During the 2025 trout population surveys on the Bighorn River, FWP biologists implanted 3,383 brown and rainbow trout with PIT (Passive Integrated Transponder) tags. These tiny, rice-sized tags -which are internally implanted and not visible to anglers- contain unique serial numbers specific to the trout they are implanted in. When trout are captured during future FWP surveys, biologists will use a specialized reader to detect if a tag is present, and then record its unique ID, allowing them to track growth, movement, and recaptures of individual fish! Overtime, FWP hopes this data will provide a picture of how trout use different sections of the Bighorn River, while also helping refine population estimates.

THE BIGHORN FLY-FISHING EXPERIENCE

John Sindland,
Guide & Board Chair

Most anglers would agree that 2025 was a memorable year on the Bighorn. After several seasons of steady recovery, the river has certainly more than bounced back. From my own time on the water, I'd say the river fished remarkably well this season. As most know, I'm a devoted dry-fly angler, and early spring left me wanting - those first hatches were nearly absent. But summer turned things around in a big way. The arrival of the PMDs and Black Caddis brought back the joy of watching trout rise, and with it, renewed enthusiasm from anglers who live for that surface take. It may not have been perfect, but it was very, very good - the kind of season that makes us excited for next year.

While no single account can capture every angler's experience, I've done my best to provide you with other observations provided by long-time guides Mike Kelly, Dell Despain, and Hale Harris. Together, these gentleman bring more than a century of collective experience on the Bighorn (just don't call them old guys).

Mike Kelly - Spring started with a bang this year, great nymphing and some truly impressive fish. It was probably the most consistent spring I've seen in years. The dry-fly action didn't really take off until the PMDs began hatching in mid-to-late July, but nymphing remained strong all summer. The fish were in fantastic shape, and there were more than a few runs into the backing! As summer turned to fall, a lot of young trout started showing up. If what I saw this fall carries into next, 2026 should be another great season on the Bighorn.

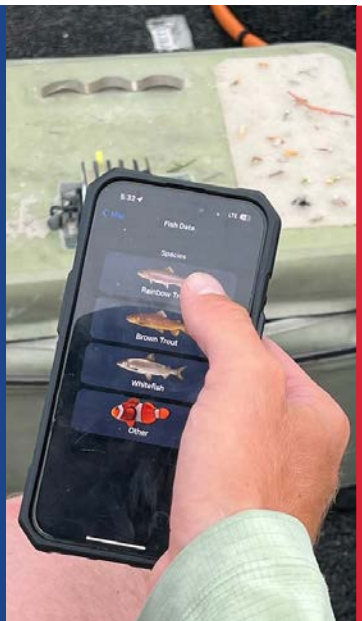
Dell Despain - The season started like it always does for me, cold water in April had fish holding in slower runs, with success coming with midges, sowbugs, and scuds. Spring algae was a bit of a hassle, but it lightened up by mid-summer. When water temps climbed into the 50s, PMDs and Yellow Sallies appeared, and fishing turned first-rate. The Sallies lingered longer than I remember from past years, with caddis mixing in and keeping the nymphing excellent. I'd call the year damn good. The size of the trout was outstanding.

Hale Harris - Despite inconsistent insect activity and persistent algae early in the year, anglers who adapted to conditions found extraordinary fishing especially with nymphs, and later during the impressive Black Caddis emergence. The usually reliable Baetis hatch was weak this year, but when the PMDs arrived, they brought welcome relief. Though the hatch was shorter than usual, it produced several weeks of great dry-fly fishing. Throughout the season, subsurface action carried the day. Scuds, sowbugs, and midge larvae kept trout feeding steadily, and anglers who adjusted depth, weight, and drift found excellent success.

SCAN HERE TO READ FULL 2025 FISHING REVIEW

FISHLOG REVEALS BIG TROUT IN 2025

Between the months of May-October and from data collected by 3 Bighorn guides, a total of 1,477 trout (694 brown trout; 783 rainbow trout) were caught and recorded using the BHRA FishLog App in 2025. While this number is similar to total trout caught in 2024, we did see the predominate species switch from brown trout in 2024, to rainbow trout in 2025, paralleling recent FWP survey data that showed an increase in rainbow numbers. Interestingly, the most notable finding from 2025 data was the number of large trout being caught, with 44% of total catches being over 18 inches in length!



3 WAYS TO HELP US REACH OUR YEAR-END GOAL

- Donate to the BHRA on #GivingTuesday (12/2/25)
- Enter the Year-End Raffle with a year-end gift
- Satisfy your RMD by 12/31/25 with a QCD to the Alliance