

# AIMING FOR 86



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*The Montana Standard, Butte, Montana*

Each in his own way, a schoolboy and a retiree are trying to catch as many of Montana's different fish species as possible.

Dave Hagengruber and his son Joe were in the middle of a summer weekend every fly angler dreams about.

Under the towering face of the Rocky Mountain Front, the pair were casting dry flies and catching one trout after another as they sampled several streams that pour out of the Bob Marshall Wilderness.

But Joe wasn't into it, his dad says. The boy was thinking about a fish species the size of a minnow—the Brook Stickleback (*Culaea inconstans*)—that he'd been trying to catch on another stream earlier that summer. "There we were, catching Cutthroats (*Oncorhynchus clarkii*) and Rainbows (*O. mykiss*) and Brook Trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*) all weekend long. I mean, the fishing was really good," says Dave. "Then Joe says, 'Please, please can we stop and go back to the stickleback place.'"

The Brook Stickleback is just one of the Montana fish species that have piqued Joe's interest in recent years. For this angler, it's not the quantity or size of fish that matters but rather the challenge of catching as many different species as possible. And the more obscure the fish, the better.

Joe Hagengruber, 12, has a mission to bag every one of the 86 fish species that swim in Montana. He's off to a good start.

So far he has caught 43 different species. "He's halfway there," says his dad, who coordinates the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Aquatic Education Program. In addition to the commonly caught Walleye (*Sander vitreus*), various trouts, and Mountain Whitefish (*Prosopium williamsoni*), Joe has hooked and landed Shovelnose Sturgeon (*Scaphirhynchus platyrhynchus*), Northern Redbelly Dace (*Chrosomus eos*), largescale sucker (*Catostomus macrocheilus*), and Northern Pikeminnow (*Ptychocheilus oregonensis*). Two of his catches turned out to be state records—a Spottail Shiner (*Notropis hudsonius*) and a Lake Chub (*Couesius plumbeus*), each weighing a whopping .02 pounds. "Nobody had ever submitted those little species for records before," says Dave.

Joe says that even though he likes fishing for trout, he considers many other species far more interesting to catch. He's now set his sights on landing, among other fish, a River Carpsucker (*Carpionodes carpio*), a Sicklefin Chub (*Macrhybopsis meeki*), and, his most ambitious goal, an Iowa

Darter (*Etheostoma exile*)—a colorful 3-inch-long member of the perch family found only in a few streams in the state's northeastern region. "I'm going for the more unique and challenging species," Joe says. "I like the minnows and other little fish because they're harder to catch."

Dave says his son has been crazy about fishing since he was old enough to hold a rod. He recalls a family fishing trip to the Tongue River when the then-five-year-old fished well past sunset. "We were sitting at the campfire and he was 50 feet away casting in the dark," Dave says. "Finally I had to go down and



Brook Stickleback, Warren County, OH. (Photo by Uland Thomas)



Mountain Whitefish. (Photo by Nate Tessler)



Iowa Darter, Virginia Lake, Carver County, MN (Photo by Konrad Schmidt)



Spottail Shiner, Dead Lake, Otter Tail County, MN. (Photo by Konrad Schmidt)

pick him up and carry him to the campsite. He was asleep by the time we got him to the tent. Then he was up at 6 a.m., crawling out of his sleeping bag saying, 'I've got to go fish. I had a dream I hooked a Northern [Pike] (*Esox lucius*) last night!'"

One day when father and son were fishing, Joe caught five different species. He's been hooked on variety ever since.

Dave bought him a copy of *Fishes of Montana*, by C. J. D. Brown. "He went through the book and made a list of all the species," Dave says. "When we drive somewhere, he reads the book as we go and tells me about the different fish. It's like his bible."

Hooking obscure fish such as Peamouth (*Mylocheilus caurinus*), Green Sunfish (*Lepomis cyanellus*), and Shorthead Redhorse (*Moxostoma macrolepidotum*) takes research, planning, and perseverance by both Hagengrubers. In his off hours, Dave calls local fisheries biologists to find the best spots, times of year, and techniques for catching various species. The pair has driven to Glendive to snag Paddlefish (*Polyodon spathula*) in the Yellowstone River, Tiber Reservoir to catch Spottail Shiners, and Fresno Reservoir for Lake Whitefish (*Coregonus clupeaformis*).

Dave says he helps when he can, but Joe's growing life list is largely the result of the boy's single-minded passion. "Last week we were ice fishing for Perch and Rainbows at Bynum Reservoir, and he spotted this little creek with open water," says Dave. "He thought there might be some Brook Sticklebacks in there, so he spent about three hours trying to catch those little guys before finally I had to go down and drag him back to the truck."

Joe caught several sticklebacks that day—using maggots as bait—and added another species to his list.

The young angler uses a spinning rod and reel for most species. To catch the tiniest specimens he prefers a simple cane pole with the line tied to the end. He came up with the idea as a way to fish brushy creeks using tiny hooks and the lightest of lines. "You don't cast it at all," Joe says. "You just drop it out there." When he hooks a minnow or other miniature fish,



Redband Trout, Columbia River. (Photo by Nate Tessler)

he lifts it straight up and out of the water and swings the catch slowly and smoothly to shore.

As Joe's list of remaining species shortens, it becomes harder to catch the next fish. The Hagengrubers are planning a backpacking trip this summer into the Beartooth Mountains to a lake known to hold Golden Trout (*O. aguabonita*). They also plan to work in a trip to the Yaak Valley to catch Redband [rainbow] Trout.

Joe says the most difficult fish he has tried to catch so far are the state's 21 different minnow species. Some live in only a few streams and can be tough to find, let alone catch. For the smallest species, Joe uses tiny size 22 hooks, about the size of this "c."

Already halfway to his goal, Joe says he can't predict when he might catch species No. 86. But the sixth grader has plenty of fishing seasons ahead to finish his life list. "I don't really have a time frame," he says. "I'm just trying to do what I can all my life."

Gardell Jensen is another angler devoted to catching as wide a range of fish species as he can. The 65-year-old retired chemical engineer grew up fishing for trout in mountain streams and reservoirs in his home state of Utah. About 30 years ago he moved to Great Falls, Montana. That's when he began keeping logs of his excursions, sorting his catch into two simple categories: "trout" and "trash fish." One day, Jensen had a revelation. He had caught what he was pretty sure was a species of sucker and was about to log it simply as "sucker" in the "trash fish" category when he realized he could do a better job of identifying fish species.

"I thought it was silly to just write down 'sucker,'" he says. "I knew there were a bunch of different species and thought I should learn what they were."

Jensen got his hands on a copy of *Fishes of Montana* and soon learned that Montana is home to nine different members of the sucker family. Thumbing through the guide, he returned to his log and recorded in more detail every species he'd caught that year.

The angler became "obsessed," as he puts it, with catching species he previously lumped together as trash fish. "Now I re-





Burbot, Old Mill Stream, Washington County, MN. (Photo by Konrad Schmidt)

ally enjoy whatever species I catch,” Jensen says. “I’m probably one of the few people in the world who gets excited by catching a sucker.”

Unlike Joe Hagengruber’s life-list goal, Jensen tries to catch as many different species as he can in a single year. Each New Year’s Day he hits the reset button and starts anew.

He’s learned not only about different species, but also the techniques needed to catch them and the way they fight. “I can usually tell from the first hit what kind of fish it is,” he says.

In 1995, his first year of keeping detailed records, he caught 12 different species. The number rose to 18 species in 1996 and then to 22 the following year. In 2008 he caught an amazing 35 different species. “I honestly didn’t think I’d ever break that record,” he says.

But he did.

Jensen retired from his job in late 2008, which gave him the entire next year to fish. In 2009 he caught a record 40 different species. It wasn’t easy. He traveled thousands of miles back and forth across the state looking for waters where he could catch new fish to add to his list.

**Joe Hagengruber’s life list in 2012: 43 species from 3–12 years old**

Arctic Grayling	Northern Pike
Black Bullhead	Northern Pikeminnow
Brook Stickleback	Northern Redbelly Dace
Brook Trout	Paddlefish
Brown Trout	Peamouth
Black Crappie	Pumpkinseed
Bluegill	Pygmy Whitefish
Bull Trout	Rainbow Trout
Burbot	Rock Bass
Channel Catfish	Shorthead Redhorse
Common Carp	Shovelnose Sturgeon
Fathead Minnow	Smallmouth Bass
Green Sunfish	Spottail Shiner
Goldeye	Stonecat
Kokanee	Walleye
Lake Chub	Westslope Cutthroat Trout
Lake Trout	White Crappie
Lake Whitefish	White Sucker
Largemouth Bass	Yellow Bullhead
Largescale Sucker	Yellow Perch
Longnose Sucker	Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout
Mountain Whitefish	

One morning, in search of a Yellow Bullhead (*Ameiurus natalis*), he drove six hours from Great Falls to Miles City. He fished Spotted Eagle Pond all day and by 9:30 that night still hadn’t caught one. He knew the park closed at 10. Jensen fished on, the only visitor remaining. Then, just a few minutes before he had to leave, he hooked a fish. As he pulled it near shore, he shined his flashlight into the dark water. It was a Yellow Bullhead. “I got pretty excited,” he says. “I knew Yellow Bullheads were in that pond, but I’d fished it many times before and had never caught one.”

Jensen moved to Idaho in 2010 for family reasons. But he still makes annual trips to Montana to meet up with a fishing buddy, Jim Brown of Great Falls.

His obsession for fish diversity lives on. Jensen says one of the greatest things about fishing for many different types of fish is visiting a wide range of Montana waters and landscapes. “Some species are found only in very specific areas,” he says. “I get to fish one end of the state to the other.”

Proud of his achievements and passion for fish diversity, Jensen says other anglers might want to consider broadening their angling horizons. Crowding continues to plague Montana’s more popular trout streams and rivers. Meanwhile Jensen explores waters where very few anglers ever fish, all the while probing the depths for Burbot (*Lota lota*), Freshwater Drum (*Aplodinotus grunniens*), Smallmouth Buffalo (*Ictiobus bubalus*), and other species that often outweigh Cutthroats, Rainbows, and Browns. “People need to understand that trout aren’t the only fish in the world that tug on a line and give a good fight,” he says. “They aren’t the only interesting fish that swim.”

There’s a 12-year-old angler in Helena who needs no convincing. “When Joe heard about Gardell,” says Dave Hagengruber, “he told me, ‘Dad, I have to meet that guy and find out how he caught so many fish in one year.’”

**Gardell Jensen’s amazing 2009 tally: 40 species in one year**

Arctic Grayling	Longnose Sucker
Bigmouth Buffalo	Mottled Sculpin
Black Bullhead	Mountain Whitefish
Black Crappie	Northern Pike
Bluegill	Northern Pikeminnow
Brook Trout	Peamouth
Brown Trout	Pumpkinseed Sunfish
Bull Trout	Rainbow Trout
Channel Catfish	Redside Shiner
Common Carp	Sauger
Flathead Chub	Shorthead Redhorse
Freshwater Drum	Smallmouth Bass
Golden Trout	Stonecat
Goldeye	Walleye
Green Sunfish	Westslope Cutthroat Trout
Lake Chub	White Crappie
Lake Trout	White Sucker
Lake Whitefish	Yellow Bullhead
Largemouth Bass	Yellow Perch
Largescale Sucker	Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout