

Casting about for a pandemic-friendly pastime? Eight reasons to consider fly-fishing.

Heather Balogh Rochfort • July 7, 2020 at 8:00 a.m. EDT



Tracy Nguyen-Chung, founder of Brown Folks Fishing, says: "The longer learning curve in this sport is part of the joy of the process." (Matty Wong)

"We've been doing this for 160 years, and the last time we saw a push this big was when Brad Pitt made 'A River Runs Through It,'" says Simon Perkins, the newly appointed president of fly-fishing giant [Orvis](#). The movie was based on the book of the same name by Norman Maclean.

Unlike spin (traditional) fishing, which uses bait to catch a lot of fish, fly-fishing uses artificial flies and overhead casting to fool a fish. Anglers can buy premade flies or make their own at home; fly-tying is a popular activity for people when they aren't on the water.

Fishing in general is on the rise. Minnesota, for example, is reporting a 26 percent increase in fishing licenses; Vermont has seen a 50 percent increase in resident fishing licenses. But for many anglers, fly-fishing is appealing because of its simplicity and the masterful in-water casting techniques that connect them with nature.

[Sally Jenkins: When the world gets too loud, it's time to go fishing](#)

"We've wanted to learn for years so that we could fly-fish while backpacking into high alpine lakes," says Katie Stapleton, a California resident who recently took up the activity.

Historically, this is a sport that flies under the radar. Although fly-fishing has seen an increased number of participants over the past decade, it's still small potatoes when compared with widespread outdoor activities, such as hiking.

Fly-fishing saw record participation in 2018 when [6.9 million people tackled it](#), according to Take Me Fishing, a sister brand of the nonprofit Recreational Boating & Fishing Foundation. But those numbers pale in comparison to [the 47.9 million hikers who hit the trail during the same year](#), as reported by the Outdoor Foundation, the philanthropic arm of Outdoor Industry Association.

When the coronavirus hit in March, fishing shops found themselves questioning their futures along with other businesses. But thanks to the Internet, a resurgence in online sales offered a much-needed glimmer of hope.

"It was like everyone realized this was their opportunity to do the things they always wanted to but never previously had the time," says Hilary Hutcheson, fly-fishing guide and owner of [Lary's Fly & Supply](#) in Columbia Falls, Mont.

Although Hutcheson didn't originally have an online shop, she quickly pivoted and watched sales boom through digital fly-tying lessons. "It was like arts and crafts for anglers," she jokes.

As the country reopened, outdoor recreation surged. According to Perkins, Orvis's online sales are raging, with its fish business up 100 percent compared with last year. Perkins also notes that sales on the Clearwater and Encounter entry-level rod kits were up 100 percent in early June, indicating that beginners are jumping into the sport.

[Another pandemic-friendly sport: Roller skating](#)

Tim West, owner of [Breckenridge Outfitters](#) in Breckenridge, Colo., has noticed the same thing. "Our guided trips are insanely busy," he says. "We've seen a lot of first-timers coming in because they couldn't travel or do other things like backcountry skiing, and that snowballed into guided trips once we were allowed."

Stapleton is one of those beginners who opted for a guided lesson. "After being shut inside through quarantine, we were dying to get outside in a safe way," says Stapleton, who completed a course at [Alpine Angling](#) in Carbondale, Colo. "It's like the perfect pandemic activity."

Here are eight reasons cited by practitioners to back that up:

Social distancing is the norm

Crowds are frowned upon when fly-fishing. Many anglers go solo, and even those who fish with friends opt to maintain their distance to avoid "cross-casting," or tangling one fishing line with another. Anglers always stand at least 75 to 100 feet away from each other, far surpassing the minimal social distancing requirement.

Water is everywhere

Traditionally, anglers prefer scenic rivers and lakes to partake in fly-fishing. However, when quarantine restrictions prohibited travel, people got creative and used whatever was accessible — even if it was a suburban pond or an urban river. "Fishing used to be narrowly defined," Perkins says. "But now, if you have water and a fly rod, you're fly-fishing."

It is relatively affordable

According to Orvis, an entry-level Encounter box kit, including the rod, reel and line, costs \$200. Flies are \$2 to \$3 each. Permits are also needed. Prices vary from state to state, but annual resident permits cost roughly \$50. And, once you make the initial investment, the costs dramatically subside.

You can consume your catch

Anglers are often fortunate enough to routinely fish, so they frequently practice "catch and release" and throw the fish back. However, when the pandemic led to empty store shelves, Tracy Nguyen-Chung in Portland, Ore., founder of [Brown Folks Fishing](#), noticed that some people were fly-fishing to feed their families. "The pandemic presented new challenges in seeking fresh food, so this provides a meaningful way to supplement groceries," she says.

It can improve mental health

[Chronic stress levels are up](#), says the American Psychological Association. Fortunately, time outside is proven to decrease anxiety levels, and fly-fishing itself has been shown to be [both meditative and calming](#). "You experience and understand nature on an intimate level," Perkins says. "It's a lifelong journey of discovery, and I think that's why it's becoming a safe way for people to connect and give themselves. People are leaning into their health right now, and this feeds their emotional strength."

It's a bonding activity

Families are getting on the water more than ever before. Many families quarantined together, so they feel comfortable taking fly-fishing lessons together, too. According to West, Breckenridge Outfitters is seeing an increase in parents and kids wanting to get on the water. "Trout don't live in ugly places," he says. "So why not enjoy the beautiful scenery as a family?"

It's a return to tradition

Hutcheson believes that many people turned to fly-fishing in the midst of the pandemic because it was a return to traditional skills. She notes that activities such as bread-making and gardening surged, too. "We may not outwardly realize it, but I think there is this deep-seated feeling of anxiety about what is happening in the world," Hutcheson says. "So, we acquire this skill and become part of the life cycle. That's how we know we are going to be okay."

Nguyen-Chung agrees, emphasizing that fly-fishing has always been culturally significant for many anglers of color. However, she adds, "I've actually fished a lot less during the pandemic as a queer Asian American woman." Because of hate crimes against the Asian community, she says, "it hasn't felt safe to go by myself."

You've got more free time

Some people may be out of work because of the pandemic, while others simply have surplus free time with the cancellations of events and travel. According to Nguyen-Chung, fly-fishing takes longer to learn because there is more to it than spin fishing, so this summer could be prime time to pick up a new skill. "The longer learning curve in this sport is part of the joy of the process," she says.

Stapleton, the new fly-fisher, agrees. Without her daily work commute (she now works remotely), she gained an additional two hours each day. "I'm not chasing traffic, so I can devote more to my hobbies," Stapleton says.

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