



A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO

ALBERTA FISHING

Walleye · Pike · Perch · Whitefish · Trout

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01 Tackle Fundamentals

The right rod, reel, and line for the job make fishing easier, more effective, and more enjoyable. You don't need an arsenal — three or four well-chosen setups will cover nearly every Alberta freshwater situation.

Rod Action & Power Cheat Sheet

Power (ultralight → heavy) describes how much pressure it takes to bend the rod, and is matched to the lure weight and fish size. **Action** (slow, moderate, fast, extra-fast) describes where the rod bends — fast actions bend mostly at the tip for quick hook sets, moderate actions bend deeper for fighting fish and protecting light lines.

Recommended Setups for Alberta Species

Target	Rod	Reel	Main Line / Leader
Walleye — jig & cast	6'6"–7' medium-light, fast	Spinning, 2000–2500 size	10 lb braid + 8–10 lb fluorocarbon leader
Walleye — troll	7'–7'6" medium, moderate	Line-counter baitcast	10 lb mono or 15 lb braid
Pike — cast	7'–7'6" medium-heavy, fast	Baitcast 200-class	50–65 lb braid + 40+ lb fluorocarbon or wire leader
Perch / whitefish (open water)	6'–6'6" light/ultralight, fast	Spinning, 1000–2000	6 lb braid + 4–6 lb fluorocarbon
Perch / whitefish (ice)	24"–32" light ice rod	Inline or small spinning	3–6 lb fluorocarbon or mono
Pike (ice)	36"–40" medium-heavy ice or tip-up	Quality drag reel / tip-up spool	20–30 lb tip-up line + heavy fluoro/wire leader
Trout — river fly	9' 5-wt (general); 6-wt for streamers	Matching WF floating line	9' tapered leader to 4X–6X tippet
Trout — spin cast	6'–6'6" ultralight/light, fast	Spinning, 1000–2000	4–6 lb mono or 6 lb braid + fluoro

Braid, Fluorocarbon & Monofilament — When to Use What

- **Braid** — tiny diameter for its strength, zero stretch, superior sensitivity, casts far. Use as main line on nearly everything. Downsides: highly visible in clear water (always add a fluorocarbon leader) and cuts on sharp structure.
- **Fluorocarbon** — near-invisible underwater, sinks, abrasion-resistant. Ideal as a leader tied to braid. Use straight as main line for ice fishing in clear water.
- **Monofilament** — stretches (forgiving on treble-hook lures like crankbaits), floats, cheap, ties easy knots. Use for trolling crankbaits and for beginners.

Hooks, Knots & Terminal Tackle

- **Learn three knots well:** the Improved Clinch (lure to line), the Palomar (strong, fast), and the FG or Alberto knot (braid to leader). That covers 95% of applications.
- **Match hook size to bait, not fish.** A #4 octopus hook works for 15 lb walleye on a minnow; a 5/0 worm hook is overkill.

- **Barbless is law in Alberta** on most trout waters and strongly encouraged everywhere. Pinch the barb with pliers before you tie on.
- **Check the regs for bait rules** — many waters are Bait Ban (unscented lures only), and live baitfish are prohibited province-wide.

■ THREE SETUPS THAT COVER EVERYTHING

If you only own three rods: (1) a 6'6" medium-light spinning combo with 10 lb braid and fluorocarbon leader for walleye, perch, and smaller pike; (2) a 7' medium-heavy baitcaster with 50 lb braid for pike and big walleye trolling; (3) a 9' 5-weight fly rod with floating line for trout. That combination covers every fish on the cover of this guide.

02 Walleye

Walleye

Sander vitreus

Identification

Olive-gold body with darker mottling and a white belly. The signature is the eye — large, opaque, and glassy, reflecting green in the dark thanks to a light-gathering *tapetum lucidum*. Two distinct dorsal fins (front spiny, rear soft). The lower lobe of the tail has a white tip. Sharp teeth, but nothing like a pike's. Adults commonly 1–3 kg in Alberta; trophy fish over 5 kg are possible in Cold Lake, Lesser Slave, and some northern waters.

Where to Find Them

Alberta is the **northern edge** of walleye range, so they grow slowly and populations are tightly managed. Key Alberta walleye waters include **Lake Athabasca, Lesser Slave Lake, Cold Lake, Pigeon Lake, Lac Ste. Anne, Calling Lake, the North Saskatchewan River system**, and many smaller managed lakes. Walleye love *structure*: drop-offs, points, rocky humps, weed edges, river current seams, and soft-to-hard bottom transitions. They avoid bright light — fish them deeper on sunny days, shallower at dawn, dusk, and under cloud.

Seasonal Tactics

SPRING (OPEN WATER TO MID-JUNE)

Walleye spawn over rocky shoals shortly after ice-off. In Alberta, most walleye waters are **closed during the spawn** (check regs). When seasons open, post-spawn fish move to nearby structure in 3–6 m of water. Jig and minnow presentations dominate. Work slow — fish are still recovering.

SUMMER (LATE JUNE TO AUGUST)

Fish drop to 4–10 m during the day and move shallower at low light. Trolling crankbaits along weed edges and breaklines covers water fast. Bottom-bouncers with spinner/worm harnesses are deadly on flats. In wind, drift-jig the downwind shore — walleye stack up where wave action stirs the bottom.

FALL (SEPTEMBER TO ICE-UP)

Peak season for big fish. Walleye feed heavily to put on fat. Focus on transition zones — the edges of shoals, main-lake points, and river mouths. Jigs with larger minnows produce the biggest fish of the year.

WINTER (THROUGH THE ICE)

Early ice: walleye stay shallower, 3–5 m on rocky shoreline structure. Mid-winter: they retreat to basin edges, 6–10 m. Late ice: back shallow as they pre-stage for spawn. Drill lots of holes and **move**. Alberta allows two lines through the ice — run a jigged rod in one hole, a deadstick with a minnow in another.

Top Walleye Lures & Presentations

- **Lead-head jigs (1/8–3/8 oz)** tipped with a frozen shiner, minnow head, or 3–4" soft-plastic paddletail. The single most versatile walleye tool — cast, drift, or vertically jig. Natural colors (perch, shiner) in clear water; chartreuse, orange, or glow in stained water.

- **Spinner/worm harnesses** on bottom bouncers (1–3 oz) — slow troll at 1–2 km/h. Colorado or Indiana blades in gold, copper, or firetiger.
- **Crankbaits** — Rapala Shad Rap (size 5 and 7), Berkley Flicker Shad, Salmo Hornet. Troll them along breaklines at 3–4.5 km/h. Perch, clown, and firetiger colors are proven producers.
- **Jigging spoons** (Swedish Pimple, Williams Wabler, Northland Buck-Shot Rattle Spoon) — especially effective through the ice. Tip with a minnow head.
- **Blade baits & lipless cranks** (Sonar, Rat-L-Trap) — fast search baits in pre-spawn and fall. The rattle triggers strikes in stained water.
- **Ned rigs & small finesse plastics** — when walleye are pressured or neutral. Drag them slowly along bottom structure.

■ THE ALBERTA WALLEYE LICENCE

Alberta uses a special walleye tag system on many lakes — a limited number of tags are awarded by draw each year, with defined slot sizes and possession limits. Without a tag on a tagged lake, it's catch-and-release only. Check the *Guide to Sportfishing Regulations* every season; rules change frequently.

03 Northern Pike

Northern Pike

Esox lucius

Identification

Long, torpedo-shaped body; flattened duck-like snout; single soft-rayed dorsal fin set far back near the tail. Colour is dark olive-green with rows of light bean-shaped spots along the flanks (cf. the larger light-on-dark vertical bars of a muskie, which doesn't occur in Alberta). Mouth is a bear trap of needle teeth — **always use a leader**. Average Alberta fish run 50–80 cm; trophy pike over 100 cm (40 inches) are realistic in Cold Lake, Lesser Slave, Pigeon, and remote northern waters.

Where to Find Them

Pike are ambush predators. They hold in **weeds, reeds, drowned timber, and shoreline cover**, then explode on anything fish-sized that swims past. In lakes, target weed edges, cabbage beds, and bays with soft bottoms. In rivers, look at slack water behind obstructions, weedy backwaters, and inflow mouths. Big pike relate to deeper edges in summer but return to cover in cooler months.

Seasonal Tactics

SPRING (ICE-OFF TO EARLY JUNE)

The best big-pike window of the year. Large post-spawn females cruise shallow bays warming in the sun, looking for easy meals. Water as shallow as 0.5 m can hold a 40" fish. Large soft swimbaits retrieved *slowly* over the tops of emerging weeds are devastating. Work parallel to shorelines and pause at the boat — most follows strike at the last second.

SUMMER

Smaller pike stay in weeds; trophies drop to the deep edges of cabbage beds and main-lake points in 4–7 m. Spinnerbaits, chatterbaits, large inline spinners (Mepps Musky Killer, Blue Fox #6), and big Daredevil-style spoons all produce. Topwater frogs and buzzbaits in early morning and evening are pure excitement fishing.

FALL

Cool water gets pike active again. They hunt baitfish schools — find the bait, find the pike. Jerkbait (Rapala X-Rap size 12–14, Husky Jerk) worked with a hard twitch-twitch-pause are the signature fall tactic. Fall is the best time to catch the biggest fish of your life.

WINTER (ICE FISHING)

Tip-ups (where legal as one of two lines) with quick-strike rigs and large shiners over 3–6 m of weedy flats produce non-stop action. Jigged large spoons (Williams Wabler W60, Buck-Shot Spoon 3/8 oz) tipped with a minnow head draw pike from a distance. Set tip-ups over the edges of first-break weed lines at first light.

Top Pike Lures

- **Large soft swimbaits** — Storm 360GT Searchbait 5½", Rapala Peto, Savage Gear 4Play. Retrieve slowly, just over the weeds.
- **Spoons** — Eppinger Daredevil (red/white, five-of-diamonds), Williams Wabler W60, Mepps Syclops. Cast long, retrieve steadily.
- **Inline spinners and spinnerbaits** — Mepps Musky Killer, Blue Fox Vibrax, Northland Reed-Runner.
- **Jerkbaits** — Rapala X-Rap 12/14, Husky Jerk, Smithwick Rogue. Twitch-twitch-pause cadence is the key.
- **Topwater** — Zara Spook, buzzbaits, large frogs over weed mats in summer. Expect violent strikes.
- **Dead bait** — frozen smelt or ciscoes suspended under a float. Devastating for big fish in spring and through the ice.

■ LEADERS & HANDLING

Pike teeth will slice through mono and braid instantly. Use a **12"+ fluorocarbon leader of 40+ lb** for most casting, or a titanium/wire leader for big baits. Handle pike with jaw grips, not fingers in the gills. Keep the fish wet, support the belly, and release quickly — pike are harder to resuscitate than walleye. A pike over 80 cm (32") is a mature breeder and should always go back.

04 Yellow Perch

Yellow Perch

Perca flavescens

Identification

Unmistakable: golden-yellow to olive body with 6–8 dark vertical bars, bright orange pelvic and anal fins, two separate dorsal fins (front spiny). Small, sharp teeth and a rough gill cover — handle with care. Most Alberta perch are under 25 cm and half a kilogram, but "jumbo" perch over 30 cm (12") are realistic on lakes like Sylvan, Cross, and many managed waters.

Where to Find Them

Perch are schooling, structure-oriented fish found across Alberta except the foothills and mountains. They relate to **weed beds, submerged timber, rock piles, drop-offs, and soft-to-hard bottom transitions**, usually in 3–10 m of water. When you find one perch, you've usually found fifty — but the school moves throughout the day, so be ready to move with them.

Seasonal Tactics

SPRING & SUMMER (OPEN WATER)

Drift or slowly anchor over weed-edge transitions and jig small baits. A 1/16 or 1/8 oz jig tipped with a maggot, worm piece, or 1½" plastic grub is deadly. A slip-float rig with a small hook and a maggot or minnow 30–60 cm off bottom is the most forgiving presentation for kids and beginners.

FALL

Perch feed aggressively as water cools, stacking on deeper structure (6–10 m). Often the biggest perch of the year come in September and October. Small swimbaits and spoons start to outproduce live bait on the bigger fish.

WINTER (ICE FISHING)

Ice is peak perch season. They school tightly on classic mid-depth structure and bite all day long in good conditions. Drill a grid of 8–12 holes, hop between them every few minutes until you find the school, then stay put. A sonar/flasher unit is a game-changer — you'll see the school arrive, pick off the aggressive fish, and know when the school has moved on.

Top Perch Lures & Baits

- **Small jigs (1/32–1/8 oz)** in bright colours — chartreuse, orange, pink, glow. Tip with a maggot (legal most lakes), worm piece, or small plastic.
- **Tungsten ice jigs** — heavier for their size, sink fast to get through the aggressive smaller fish and reach bigger perch beneath.
- **Small jigging spoons** — Forage Minnow, Kastmaster 1/12–1/8 oz, Swedish Pimple. Tip with a minnow head or perch eye (legal in many Alberta waters — check regs).
- **Small soft plastics** — 1–2" Gulp! Minnows, Berkley PowerBait grubs, micro swimbaits. Work near bottom.
- **Live/preserved bait** (where legal) — maggots, mealworms, small minnows. Nothing beats live bait when perch are neutral.

■ PERCH ON ICE — THE THREE-HOLE TRICK

Drill three holes 30–60 cm apart. Drop your sonar transducer in the centre hole. Jig an aggressive lure (bright spoon or tungsten) in hole two to call fish in. Set a deadstick with a plain hook and maggot in hole three. Wary perch that refuse the jig usually can't resist the motionless bait. This is one of the deadliest finesse tricks in Alberta ice fishing.

05 Whitefish — Lake & Mountain

Alberta has two species anglers commonly lump together as "whitefish": the deep-water **lake whitefish** of big lakes, and the **mountain whitefish** of trout streams. They share a silvery look and excellent table quality but require very different tactics.

Lake Whitefish

Coregonus clupeaformis

Identification & Habits

Silvery sides, olive-green to blue back, small mouth tucked under a rounded snout (a distinguishing feature from trout), deeply forked tail. Adults commonly 1–2 kg; trophies to 4+ kg. They live in **deep, cold water in larger lakes** — Cold Lake, Lesser Slave, Pigeon, Sylvan, Lac Ste. Anne, and similar. Bottom-oriented feeders on insect larvae, small crustaceans, snails, and small baitfish.

Seasonal Tactics

Open water: largely overlooked. Deep jigging over mudflats in 10–25 m with small spoons or tube jigs can be productive but it's a technical game.

Ice fishing — this is where Alberta whitefish shine. Mid-winter whitefish school over mud and sand flats in 8–20 m. They are notoriously fussy:

- Jig **small** — 1/16 to 1/8 oz tungsten jigs, small spoons (Forage Minnow, Swedish Pimple 1/8 oz).
- Present **slowly**. Lift-and-pause — they almost always bite on the pause, after 10–15 seconds of stillness.
- Tip with maggots, mealworms, or a small piece of shrimp (where legal).
- Use a **deadstick** in a second hole. Whitefish often stare at a jig and refuse, then inhale a motionless bait.
- A sonar/flasher is almost essential — whitefish come and go in schools and you need to see them to know when to work the bait.

Mountain Whitefish

Identification & Habits

Slender, trout-shaped body, but silver with a smaller mouth set below a rounded snout and a distinctly adipose fin (like a trout). They inhabit the same **cold, clear rivers as trout** — the Bow, Oldman, North Saskatchewan, Red Deer, and tributaries. Size runs 25–45 cm.

Tactics

Most Alberta mountain whitefish are caught incidentally by trout anglers nymphing, but they're a worthy target in their own right and extend the season into late fall and winter when trout fishing slows.

- **Fly — nymphing is king.** A 9' 4–5 wt with a floating line and a long leader, indicator and two small nymphs (size 14–18). Top flies: Pheasant Tail, Hare's Ear, San Juan Worm, small scuds, and the *Copper John*. Drift deep and slow.
- **Spin — tiny jigs and floats.** A slip float with a split shot and a small maggot or worm on a #10–12 hook is simple and effective. Many stream waters are restricted to maggots only — check your zone.
- **Late fall and winter** offer excellent whitefish fishing when the rivers are open, often on slower deeper runs.

■ WHITEFISH MOUTHS

Both species have soft, small mouths that tear easily. Set the hook gently — a sharp strike will pull right out. Use small hooks (#10–14), play the fish with a light drag, and net them promptly. A lost whitefish is almost always a torn-out hook, not a straightened one.

06 Trout — Alberta's Headline Fishery

Southern and western Alberta hold some of the finest trout water in North America — the **Bow River** below Calgary is a world-class wild-trout fishery with roughly 2,000–3,000 trout per mile averaging close to 19 inches. Add the Oldman, Crowsnest, Livingstone, Red Deer, and dozens of mountain streams, and Alberta rewards trout anglers at every level.

Rainbow Trout

Oncorhynchus mykiss

Pink-to-red lateral stripe, black spots on body and tail, square-ish tail. Hard-fighting, often airborne. Wild Bow River rainbows run 40–55 cm with trophies to 65 cm. Also heavily stocked in put-and-take lakes.

Brown Trout

Salmo trutta

Golden-brown body with black and red spots (red spots with pale halos), squared tail with few or no spots. Browns are selective and wary — the trophy fish of Alberta rivers, particularly the Bow. Large browns feed heavily on baitfish and are most aggressive at low light.

Brook Trout

Salvelinus fontinalis

Not a true trout but a char. Dark olive-green with distinctive wormy (vermiculated) markings on the back, red spots with blue halos on the flanks, and white leading edges on the lower fins. Found in cold headwater streams and beaver ponds. Generally smaller than rainbows and browns — a 35 cm brookie is a trophy.

Cutthroat Trout

Native to Alberta's mountain streams. Named for the orange-red slash under each jaw. Heavily spotted, especially toward the tail. Eager surface feeders — the ideal dry-fly trout. Mostly in Rocky Mountain streams: the Highwood, Sheep, Livingstone, and upper reaches of the Oldman system. Westslope cutthroat are **Threatened** in Alberta and fisheries are typically catch-and-release.

Bull Trout

Salvelinus confluentus

Alberta's **provincial fish**. Large, predatory char with olive-to-grey sides covered in pale yellow-to-orange spots (no black spots on the back or dorsal fin — a key ID point). "No black, put it back" is the rule drilled into every Alberta angler. Bulls are **catch-and-release only, province-wide**, and heavily regulated. Found in cold rivers and connected lakes; 60–90 cm fish are realistic, with trophies to 100 cm+.

Fly Fishing Tactics Through the Seasons

SPRING (APRIL TO EARLY JUNE)

The Bow opens up with hatches of **midges** and **Blue-Winged Olives (Baetis)**. Nymph deep with Pheasant Tails, Copper Johns, and Hare's Ears in sizes 14–18. As BWOs pop, a size-16 dry with a small nymph dropper is the classic setup. Mountain streams are often still running high with runoff — wait for clearing water in late June.

SUMMER (LATE JUNE TO AUGUST)

Peak dry-fly season. The Bow sees **caddis** (Elk Hair Caddis, X-Caddis sizes 14–16), **Pale Morning Duns** (size 16–18), **stoneflies** on mountain streams (Stimulators, Chubby Chernobyls), and in hot afternoons, **hoppers** (Chernobyl Ant, Morrish Hopper, Chaos Hopper). Cutthroat streams light up — cast upstream to pocket water with a size-12 attractor dry and hang on. Evening caddis spinner falls can produce astonishing rises.

FALL (SEPTEMBER TO OCTOBER)

Brown trout get aggressive as spawning approaches. **Streamer season**: sink-tip or fast-sinking line, 6-weight rod minimum, and big articulated patterns — Sex Dungeon, Circus Peanut, Drunk and Disorderly. Swing them on the far bank and strip back. BWOs return on cool afternoons. Size-18 dries to sipping pods of fish are technical and rewarding.

WINTER (NOVEMBER TO MARCH)

The Bow stays open through Calgary and supports a surprisingly good winter fishery for anglers willing to bundle up. Deep nymphing with small midges (size 18–22) and red San Juan Worms in slow, deep seams. Fish move slowly — small flies, slow drifts, lots of weight.

Spin Fishing for Trout

Not every trout water is fly-only. On lake-stocked rainbows and many mountain streams, a light spin rod with small lures is effective and accessible:

- **Inline spinners** — Mepps Aglia and Panther Martin in #0–#2. Gold for stained water, silver for clear. Deadly on cutthroats and brookies.
- **Small spoons** — Little Cleo 1/8–1/4 oz, Kastmaster, Dardevle midgets.
- **Small crankbaits** — Rapala Original Floater F5/F7, countdown minnows.
- **Soft plastics on light jig heads** — 2" grubs, Berkley PowerBait worms for stocked trout.
- **PowerBait and roe** on bottom rigs — a lake-trout staple for stocked rainbows (bait ban rules don't apply to most stocked ponds, but always check).

Stillwater Trout

Alberta's stocked trout lakes (Beaver, Dolberg, Mitchell, Ironside, Muir, many more) fish differently than rivers. The go-to presentations:

- **Fly from a float tube or boat:** chironomid pupae under an indicator in 4–6 m is the single most productive lake-trout tactic. Leeches and damsel nymphs on a slow intermediate line also produce.
- **Spin from shore:** small spoons, spinners, or bait on a slip sinker.
- **Ice fishing:** small jigs tipped with maggots or PowerBait, small spoons, or a plain hook with a pinch of roe.

■ BULL TROUT — NO BLACK, PUT IT BACK

Bull trout have *no black spots* on the back, sides, or dorsal fin — only pale yellow, pink, or orange ones. If you see any black spots, it's a brook trout, brown trout, or rainbow. Bull trout are Alberta's provincial fish, species of Special Concern, and **catch-and-release only, province-wide, with single barbless hooks**. Release them in the water if at all possible.

07 Regulations, Ethics & Resources

Alberta's fisheries are actively managed to balance angling opportunity with conservation. Regulations change every year, vary by waterbody, and carry real penalties if ignored. The onus is on the angler to know the rules for the water they are fishing.

■ THE FISHERMAN'S CONTRACT

Alberta's fisheries — particularly walleye, bull trout, and cutthroat — exist in their current form because anglers followed the rules, voluntarily released more fish than they kept, and spoke up when they saw abuse. The regulations that sting today are the regulations that keep the fish alive for your kids. Fish hard, fish often, and fish legally.

Licensing

Every angler 16 and older needs a valid Alberta sportfishing licence (Albertan, Canadian, or Non-resident). Anglers under 16 and residents 65+ fish free but still need a free **WIN card**. Purchase online via **AlbertaRELM** (albertarelm.com) or at licence issuers. Print or download the current **Alberta Guide to Sportfishing Regulations** — it is your legal reference, not a suggestion.

Key Rules Every Alberta Angler Should Know

- **Barbless hooks are mandatory** on most flowing waters and many lakes.
- **Live baitfish are prohibited province-wide.** Dead, preserved minnows legal in some waters — check zone-specific rules.
- **Bait Bans** apply to many streams and lakes (unscented lures only, some maggot exceptions) — check ES zones and lake-specific rules.
- **Walleye tags** required on many lakes — catch-and-release only without a tag.
- **Bull trout** are zero-retention everywhere in Alberta.
- **Size and slot limits** vary widely — a 50 cm walleye may be legal on one lake, illegal on the next.
- **Boat inspections** are mandatory at some border crossings. Clean, Drain, Dry every time.

Ethical Catch-and-Release

- Use barbless, single hooks; replace trebles on release lures.
- Land fish fast — long fights produce lactic acid that can kill hours later.
- Wet hands before handling; keep fish in the water when possible; limit out-of-water photos to under 10 seconds.
- Never hold vertically by the jaw — support the belly. Revive exhausted fish upright, facing current, until they swim off.
- If a fish bleeds heavily from the gills, consider keeping it (if legal) — it likely won't survive release.

Report a Poacher: 1-800-642-3800 (24/7). **Regs:** albertaregulations.ca/fishingregs. **Licences:** albertarelm.com. **MyWildAlberta.ca** and the **Fish Alberta** app offer stocking reports and advisories.