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RIO

FALL FISHING ON THE UPPER RIO GRANDE

The Rio Grande is the fourth longest river in the United States and the 20th longest river in the world. Its source is high in the San Juan Mountains in southwestern Colorado.

Snowmelt, alpine springs and passing afternoon storms feed clear mountain streams that combine to form the headwaters of this famous waterway. The river generally flows south and east out of Colorado, eventually forming the border of Texas and Mexico, and ultimately emptying into the Gulf of Mexico, 1,900 miles downstream. Along the way, it provides vital moisture to arid steppe and agricultural lands, as well as excellent fishing opportunities, especially on the upper river.



About 175 miles of the Rio Grande are in Colorado before it enters New Mexico at Rio Grande del Norte National Monument, south of Alamosa. However, the river near South Fork is the place that caught our angler's eyes, enough to coax my husband, Jack, and me into a road trip with our fishing rods. This section of the Upper Rio Grande is known for the trophy brown trout and rainbow trout that fin a 20-mile stretch of Gold Medal water, the longest length of Gold Medal water in the state. Anglers also look for native cutthroat trout in numerous mountain lakes in the area and smaller brown trout above the old mining town of Creede, but the big browns and rainbows in the river were the focus of our outing.

The Upper Rio Grande — from Creede to South Fork and the Gold Medal stretch from South Fork to Del Norte — is particularly enticing to fly casters, not only due to the size of the trout but also because of their willingness to rise to a dry fly. However, there was a snag, at least for Jack and me. The earliest we could get there was the first week of October.

Prime time for fishing around South Fork is from mid-June to mid-July, when people float the river from Collier State Wildlife Area (SWA), several miles below Creede, through South Fork to Del Norte. By October, the river would likely be too shallow for a reliable float. For wading, there are a couple of half-mile stretches of riverbank in addition to Collier SWA that the state leases for angler access. (Above Creede, there are also stretches of Forest Service and BLM land along the river.)

Insider Info. What is the prime time? "The caddis hatch in May and early June, but the river is high," explained John Alves, CPW's senior aquatic biologist for southwestern Colorado, who also fishes the Upper Rio Grande. "The fish love it, but it's not great fishing. The water is too high."

According to Alves, the stonefly hatch that starts in mid-June, and then the mayfly hatch that overlaps with it, are when the trout fishing gets the most exciting. Stoneflies crawl onto the shore and into the willows to metamorphose into flying insects, leaving their exoskeletons behind. Then they mate, and the females lay eggs. When their skeletons litter the riverbank, it's a clue that the trout are close at hand, gorging on whatever sits on the surface of the water, including a dry fly.

As summer wanes and the water level in the river decreases, the fish get tougher to hook. For starters, the massive stonefly and mayfly hatches have subsided, so trout no longer aggressively seek hatching insects (though they'll still rise for them if a hatch occurs), and they're more skittish, due to the clearer, shallower water. They're also pickier about what they eat after several months of fishing pressure. Most big trout head into the deeper holes and dine on suckers and whatever smaller fish swim by.

We knew this, so we added some bead-head woolly buggers and a few streamer patterns to our fly boxes before driving to South Fork.

Summing up South Fork. Upon our arrival, our jaws dropped at the stunning beauty of the river. The aspens and cottonwoods glowed a deep gold, framing the rock-strewn river. Above the magnificent foliage, taupe rock bands and deep green conifers alternated in stripes up the hillsides and shallow canyon walls.

We spotted a mule deer buck beside the road as we passed through South Fork, its hard, multi-tined antlers serving as a reminder that big-game season was also open.

Originally the site of a timber mill, South Fork was established in 1882. It served as a stagecoach stop, then as a railroad settlement that mainly served the silver mines of Creede. Interestingly, South Fork didn't become a statutory town, i.e., a legally recognized town, until 1992, making it the youngest statutory town in Colorado.

The snowcapped Del Norte Peak (elevation 12,385 feet) crowned the view as we pulled into Collier SWA. The SWA follows the Rio Grande for several miles. It's a known birding spot, where songbirds like wrens, flycatchers, towhees and vireos are among the many species one might see. An American dipper hopped from rock to rock along the shore as we strung our rods.

For fish, we found brown trout; not the 20-inch trophies that we hoped to catch, but several 15-inch fish that were as golden as the cottonwoods, colored up for their annual fall spawning run. We were pleased to hook them given the time of year and even more excited by their vibrant hues. After taking a few photos, we let each of them go.

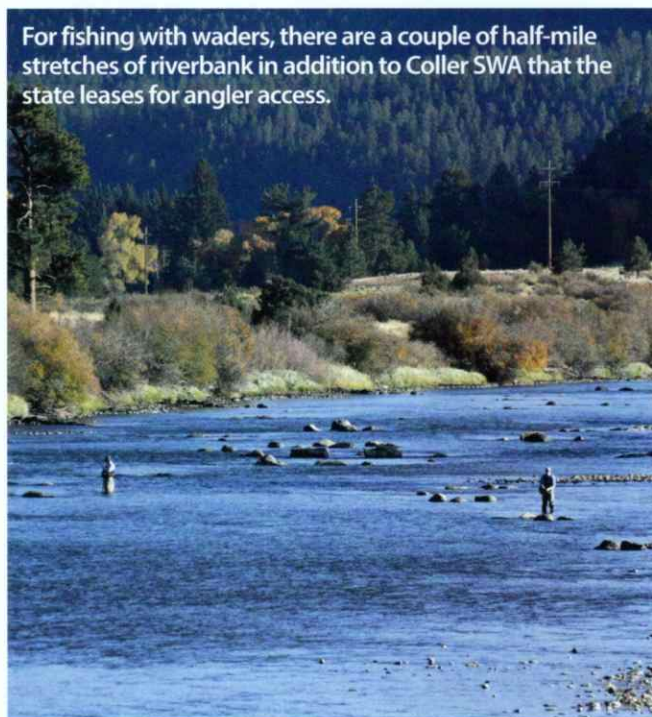
Browns Versus Rainbows. Brown trout are not stocked in the Upper Rio Grande by the state of Colorado. They reproduce naturally. There are special regulations regarding which brown trout you can keep or not, depending on where you land one. For example, in the Gold Medal water from South Fork to Del Norte, so designated because there are at least 12 fish per acre of water greater than 14 inches long, it's okay to keep two brown trout greater than 16 inches.

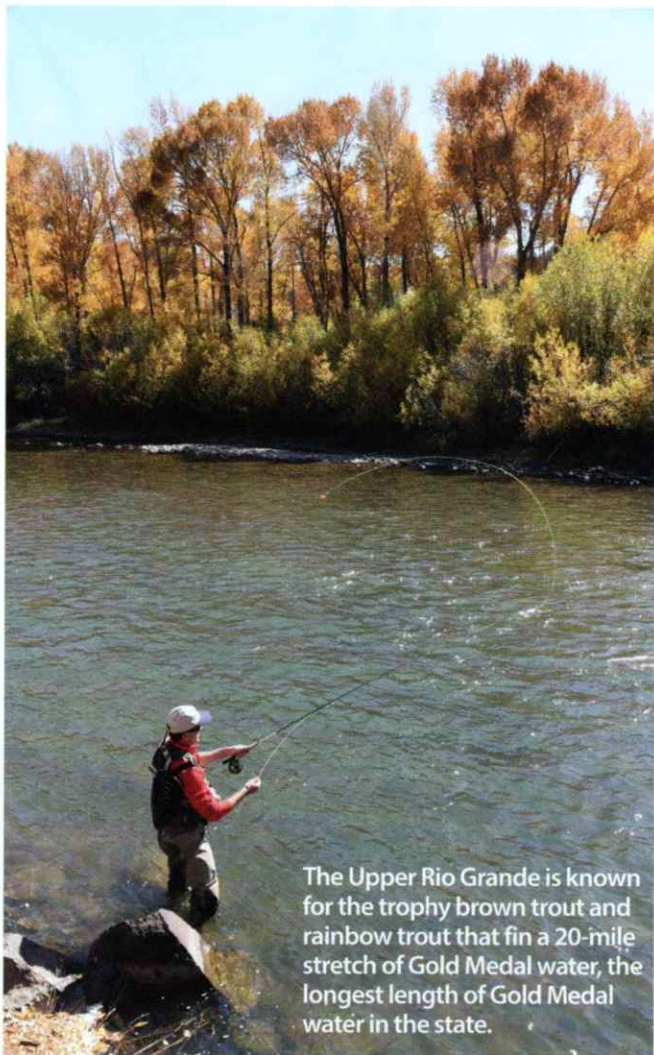
"In the Gold Medal section of the river, brown trout live about seven to eight years then die," explained Alves. "There are a few 20- to 21-inch brown trout, but most of the bigger fish are 16 to 18 inches. It's okay for anglers to keep a couple of those fish because they're going to leave the population soon anyway."

On the other hand, above South Fork, you can only keep brown trout under 12 inches. According to Alves, the density of fish is greater, but those fish are generally smaller. By thinning them out, it gives the remaining fish more food and room to grow to quality size.

Rainbow trout are a different story. During the mid-1990s, the population of rainbow trout in the Rio Grande, like rainbow trout in many other rivers in Colorado, declined due to whirling disease and were no longer self-sustaining. As a management strategy, CPW stocked fingerling rainbows at a rate of 10 to 15 pounds of fish per river acre in the Gold Medal section.

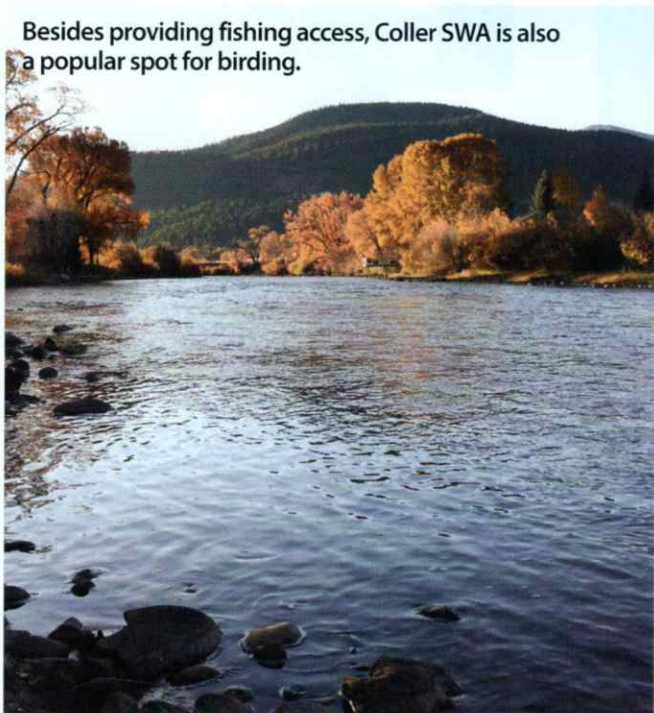
For fishing with waders, there are a couple of half-mile stretches of riverbank in addition to Collier SWA that the state leases for angler access.





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Besides providing fishing access, Collier SWA is also a popular spot for birding.



"We first tried Colorado River rainbow trout, hoping they would resist whirling disease, then we tried Hofer trout which we crossed with Colorado River rainbows. That worked pretty well," says Alves. "Starting this year, we're stocking with Gunnison River rainbow trout, which are similar, but more resistant to whirling disease than Colorado River rainbows. We need to protect these fish so that they survive and create a reproducing population, which is why anglers need to release them immediately back into the water."

After catching several more brown trout, it became our self-imposed challenge to net a rainbow trout.

Fish On! It took a while. Jack and I spread out along the riverbank.

"Got one!" I shouted, but it was another brown trout. We caught three more brown trout and were about give up, when Jack's rod tip wiggled then curled toward the river again. This time a 14-inch rainbow trout came to his net. It was silver with a telltale cranberry stripe down both sides, and healthy. In fact, it was so feisty that it escaped back into the dark water as soon as the hook left its jaw. It wasn't as pretty a fish as the brown trout, but it was still fun to see it.

While we didn't cast a line into the Upper Rio Grande at the best time to fish it, we caught the river at one of its most colorful, scenic moments and landed quite a few trout. It would have been nice to land a trophy, but we weren't disappointed. The fish we caught were aquatic ticklers, giving us a taste of what the river has to offer and inviting us to come back for more. 🐟

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WHAT IS A STATE WILDLIFE AREA?

Collier State Wildlife Area (SWA) between Creede and South Fork is just one of the 350 SWAs in Colorado. SWAs are parcels of state land or private land that are open to the public for various recreational purposes based on the location and what's available there, typically hunting and/or fishing with a valid license, but also wildlife watching, hiking, camping, paddling or simply relaxing in a natural setting.

SWAs cover about 860 square miles of the state and are managed by Colorado Parks and Wildlife for the benefit of the wildlife there. The land and its care are paid for by sportspeople through their purchase of hunting and fishing licenses. People need a valid hunting or fishing license to access a SWA, even to hike or bird watch.

For more information and to find the closest SWA and what you can do there, see the Colorado State Recreation Lands brochure.

DID YOU KNOW?

In 2007, 90 rock structures were installed along a 2.3-mile section of the Rio Grande at Collier SWA as part of a trout habitat enhancement project. These structures stabilized the riverbank, providing overhead cover, resting areas and feeding habitat for trout. The project was a cooperative effort between CPW, the San Luis Valley Chapter of Trout Unlimited and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

