



PHOTO BY JODY BOL

Treasure Creek, CO

It's Worth the Drive

By Chris Duerksen

It's in the 70s. No, not the temperature, but my age. I am officially a septuagenarian and on my annual birthday outing in late July, determined to catch (and release) as many fish as my years on Earth. In this case, size really doesn't matter. The physicality of fly fishing is getting to be increasingly challenging, so I must pick my waters carefully.

My destination is a little-visited creek secluded at 10,000 feet in westernmost Conejos County, Colorado, near the New Mexico border. I discovered this gem of a creek through some dedicated sleuthing. My first tip was a cryptic reference on an angling website: "It's worth the drive. That's all I will say."

Then I queried the guides at the local fly shop, Conejos River Anglers, just outside of Antonito. Even though several had guided me on the Conejos River, they seemed nonchalant about Treasure Creek and reticent to give me any details. But their reticence betrayed them. I figured I was on to something.

At daybreak the next morning, I leave my travel trailer, aka mobile fish camp, at Ponderosa Campground on the Conejos River. It's only 31 miles to Treasure Creek according to Google Maps, but navigating the narrow, washboard-riddled, occasionally rough road over Stunner Pass takes two hours. I had entertained thoughts of pulling my trailer over the pass on Forest Road 250 to Stunner Campground, located just below the confluence of Treasure Creek and the Alamosa River, but when I hit the steep, sharp switchbacks above the little resort at Platoro Reservoir, I thank my lucky stars that I had abandoned that notion.

Inching my way slowly over the pass, I continue down another set of treacherous switchbacks rendered slippery courtesy of rain last night. Finally, I reach the bridge that spans the Alamosa River just below diminutive Stunner Campground, about 2 miles below the mouth of Treasure Creek. I jump out of my SUV for a peek, and my heart misses a beat: the Alamosa is running a milky yellow with streamside rocks coated bright orange—a sure sign of heavy-metal mining pollution. Have I been duped?



PHOTO BY JODY BOL

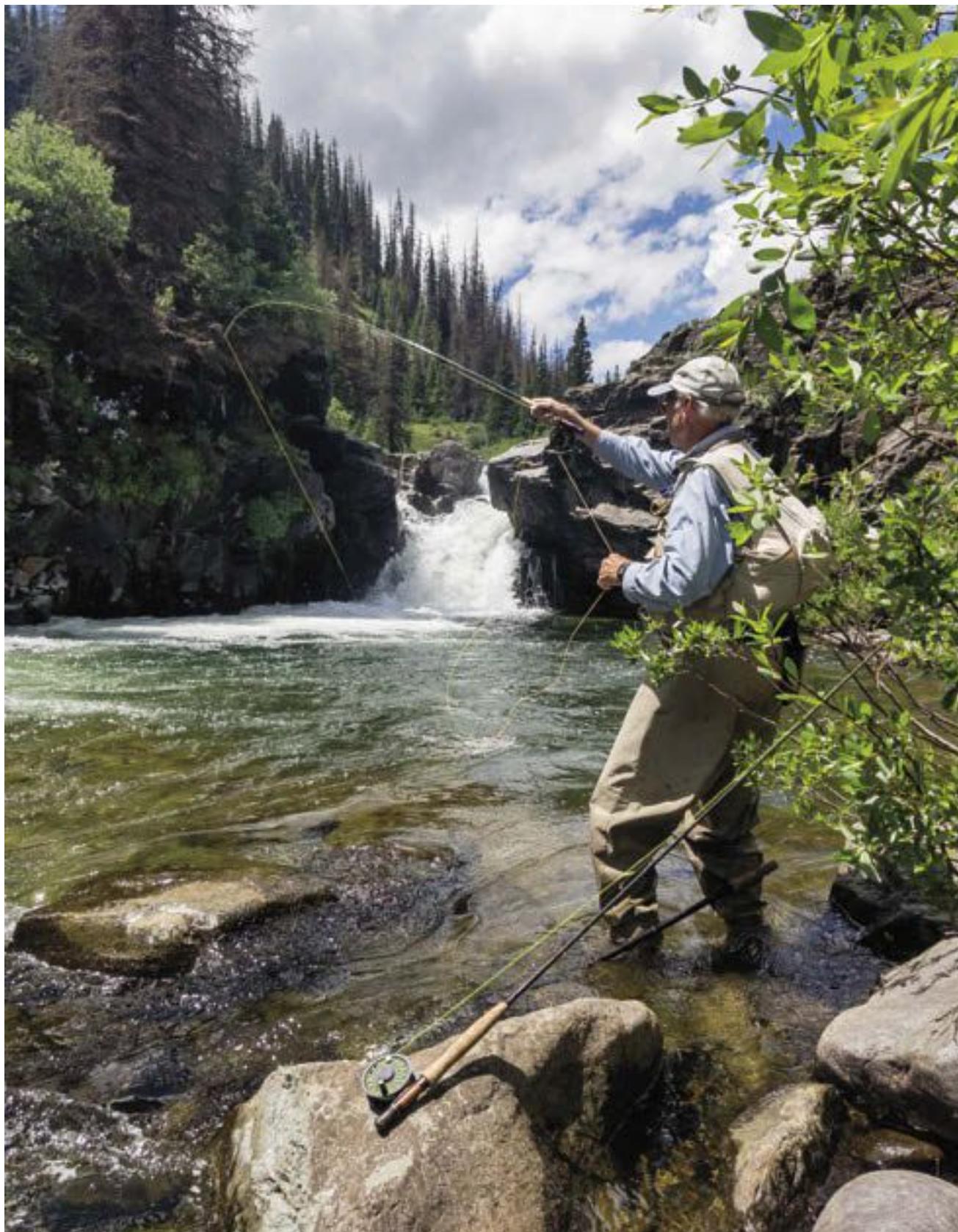


PHOTO BY JODY BOL

In the canyon section, solitude and scenery reign, along with plentiful cutthroat. Larger fish hold in deep plunge pools below waterfalls where fast-sinking nymphs are often the tickets (above). Treasure Creek provides a sanctuary for the rare Rio Grande cutthroat, found only in tributaries of the Rio Grande River. These trout now occupy only about 10 percent of their historic range. State and federal wildlife agencies have ambitious recovery efforts underway for the cutts, but serious threats remain in the form of climate change, as well as wildfires in the area's beetle-killed forests (top left). Horse Thief Canyon, with its steep, rocky walls and fast current, demands cautious descents from the trail above to the creek, and then careful wading with a staff, but a good payoff awaits (lower left).



I turn south onto FR 380, a decent gravel road, do a quick circuit of the primitive campground for possible future use, then gun my SUV up the valley to get a look at Treasure Creek. I cross several small creeks, a couple of which show signs of mining pollution, take a sharp turnoff onto FR 243 as I drive past a pair of small lakes, and break into a big meadow about 4 miles above the campground. Then I veer to the left on a faint track, hoping for a view of Treasure Creek, but find my way blocked



by a big, muddy water hole. It doesn't look too bad, so I creep forward, then groan as I feel my vehicle wallowing in the mire. A quick shift into four-wheel drive, and I am slip-sliding away. Close call. When the track peters out, I walk to a nearby ridge that overlooks Treasure Creek where it descends into colorfully named Horse Thief Canyon...and see a pair of fine trout finning in the crystal-clear pool below. Ka-ching!

As is the case in many mountain valleys in Colorado, mining played a significant role in shaping what we see today in the Alamosa River drainage. Stunner Campground derives its name from a rowdy mining camp called Stunner that, at its peak in 1892, was home to 400 miners, gamblers, and assorted hangers-on. Gold was the game. The names of the mines reflected the hopes and travails of the hearty souls who toiled here: Cornucopia, Snow Storm, and, of course, one named after a miner's daughter, The Louise. But it didn't last long. The miners moved on to bonanzas in places like nearby Summitville.

Today, all that remains are some foundations and cabin remnants, along with pollution from those mines. The death knell for the Alamosa River would be sounded a hundred years later, courtesy of the infamous Summitville Mine disaster that unleashed thousands of gallons of cyanide- and heavy-metal-laced runoff into Wightman Creek and then into the river a few miles downstream. Somehow Treasure Creek has been spared.

Lay of the Land

In stark contrast to the ghoulishly colored Alamosa River, Treasure Creek forms crystal-clear runs and deep, shimmering green pools.

PHOTO BY JODY BOEL

It's small, seldom more than 15 feet wide. Late June and July seem to be the best months to test the creek. Water levels can get low in late summer and fall. Not surprisingly, the weather can change suddenly and dramatically at this elevation. I've been rained on every afternoon of every trip up here, and with the high elevation, summer temperatures can quickly fall from the 70s into the 40s. A rain jacket and warm clothing are essential items, even in midsummer. The thunderstorms can be spectacular—and frightening as well as perilous if you are caught out in one of the wide-open meadow stretches.



PHOTO BY JODY BOL

Treasure Creek divides nicely into three sections, each of which can easily take a full day to fish, although a three-day trip would be perfect to sample them all. To that end, Stunner Campground has five good sites with picnic tables and a vault toilet, but no drinking water (and the Alamosa River's water that flows by the campground is too polluted to drink). There are primitive, unofficial camping spots in Horse Thief Park that have access to water from Treasure Creek, but no restrooms or other facilities. Both places call for a bit of roughing it—and take plenty of water.

The headwaters/upper meadows section of the creek begins where FR 243 dead ends at the boundary of the South San Juan Wilderness about 7 miles southwest of Stunner Campground. There, the creek tumbles down a steep grade from the

wilderness forest into a valley almost 3 miles long, broad and wide open at its lower end. In summer, the meadow reach of the creek is typically less than 10 feet wide, especially on the upper section. Despite its small stature, this upper stretch of Treasure Creek holds plenty of trout, including some lunkers secreted in the few deep pools.

There is little cover to conceal your approach, so stealth is key. Move low and slow, and kneel when you cast unless you want to see trout scattering helter-skelter. Keep an eye out for big storms that come barreling over the Continental Divide just above. For the more adventurous, a mile or so hike on a rough, faint trail at the end of FR 243 leading up the mountain into the wilderness area will take you to a little-visited stretch



PHOTO BY JODY BOL

Stunner campground sits near the historic Stunner townsite that was home to a rowdy mining camp in the 1890s. Today, it serves as a good base camp for exploring all three sections of Treasure Creek (top). Below the abandoned bridge, Treasure Creek begins its plunge into a brief fast-water canyon stretch above Horse Thief Park. Short, accurate casts into pockets behind midstream boulders induce slashing strikes (above). Polluted mine runoff and natural acidic water in Wightman, Iron, and other creeks in the drainage have killed fish in miles of the Alamosa River (left).

where the creek winds enticingly through another meadow.

The middle stretch of Treasure Creek can aptly be labeled the bridge section. Below the first meadow, Treasure Creek executes a series of tight bends as it rushes below a line of ridges and flows down about 0.75 mile to a closed bridge over the creek on an abandoned side road visible just off FR 243. The bridge is a good place to park, reconnoiter, and have lunch.

Below the bridge, the creek plunges into a short, deeply incised gorge—expect difficult wading over very slippery rocks, somewhat of an oddity for a high-mountain, freestone stream. Felt soles, a wading staff, and chest waders are best for the stretch below the bridge if you fancy a chance at the creek's biggest trout—up to 18 inches. The short canyon walls are painted with a stunning profusion of wildflowers, including columbine, paintbrush, mountain bluebells, and bistort, growing from every nook and cranny. Waterfalls and deep emerald pools here are mesmerizing, a bonus on top of the brilliantly colored Rio Grande cutthroat trout. Below this canyon stretch, Treasure Creek scurries through another wide valley for about a mile, forming alluring S-bend pools before plunging into Horse Thief Canyon.

The lowermost and third stretch of the creek begins at Horse Thief Park, where I almost got stuck in the mud hole, and runs about a mile downstream to the confluence with Cascade Creek, creating the Alamosa River. The creek here flows mostly through a narrow canyon, with a series of dazzling, picturesque plunge-pools interspersed with fast runs. There are few open stretches except for a short, serpentine meadow section about another mile downstream (which is technically the Alamosa River, but I think of it as lower Treasure Creek). If you want solitude and lots of fish, albeit smaller, this is the best bet.

Colorful Cutthroat

On my birthday trip, opting for lots of fish and solitude, I pick the lower section. I decide to hike down the trail on the north side to just below the confluence with Cascade Creek and work back up to my vehicle. It's all I can do to resist



PHOTO BY JOEY BOU

Barr's Tung Teaser



Hook:	TMC 3761, sizes 12–18
Bead:	Tungsten bead sized to hook
Thread:	70 Denier UTC Ultra Thread
Tail:	White goose biots
Rib:	Gold or copper wire
Abdomen:	Arizona Peacock Dubbing
Flashback:	Pearl Flashabou
Wing case:	Mottled Thin Skin
Thorax:	Arizona Peacock Dubbing
Legs:	Partridge or India hen
Back:	Liquid Fusion, Clear Cure Goo, or 5-Minute Epoxy

wading in prematurely whenever I wander off the trail above the creek to scope out the water. In every shimmering plunge pool, I can see trout in the depths. The trail is overgrown in spots, and I have to shinny over downed trees here and there, but the going isn't too bad even though I'm wearing waders. I'm carrying two 5-weight rods, one with a dry/dropper rig, the other with two nymphs. As it turns out, the dry/dropper is all I need.

It's a bit after 10 a.m. by the time I emerge into a clearing and carefully wade into a riffle just below a crystal-clear pool bracketed at the upper end by a pair of angular boulders. I can see several trout in the lower end, casually picking off goodies floating by. There's no real hatch going on, but a check of the creek-bed rocks reveals loads of mayfly nymphs and caddisfly larvae, so I'm using a showy (and easy for aging eyes to see) size

16 Royal Coachman Trude, with a size 16 Tung Teaser on a 2-foot dropper tippet. I kneel slowly and cast upstream; the flies land 10 feet above the trout. One fish immediately jets forward and nails the dry and as he cavorts around the pool, one of his buddies slams the nymph—a double to start the day.

I soon land two handsome Rio Grande cutthroat, each about 12 inches long and sporting the distinctive colors of their kind—flaming orange-red slashes under their gills, bright red bellies, and backs and tails adorned with black spots.

That first pool produces a half-dozen fish, as does the next...and the next. As I work upstream, the action in the plunge pools is fast and furious. Frequently, I must make backhand casts to avoid the clutching branches of the trees that crowd the banks. In the fast riffles and runs, there are fewer fish and they are usually smaller, but wherever there is a pocket of quiet water behind a big rock, I can count on a trout rushing for my fly. However short, pinpoint casts are a requisite, as

is quick reaction time when eager trout dart out lickety-split to grab the fly.

By 5 p.m., I think I have passed the 70-fish mark. The day has flown by. These beautiful cutthroat have proven unselective, taking every kind of pattern I've tried—



PHOTO BY JODY BOL

The lower, narrow canyon, accessed by a faint trail, serves up wilderness along with eager Rio Grande cutthroats. Dazzling plunge pools are interspersed with fast runs; bushy attractor dry flies, especially hoppers in late summer, are perfect for these waters (above). Remember to pinch down the barbs so you can quickly release these rare cutthroat trout (opposite).

attractor dries and nymphs, both mayfly and caddisfly imitations. The key has been stealth—staying low and being sneaky. Still, I end up spooking plenty of these wild trout. One of the most effective techniques has been to clamber out of the stream and reconnoiter the pools from the ridge above, spot the trout, then descend and work the water carefully. That’s how I zero in on a large cutt in one of the last pools just below Horse Thief Park. Here, Treasure Creek wedges into a tight little gorge, framed by 20-foot-high dark-gray granite walls and a 5-foot waterfall at the upper end. Tall spruce trees guard this scenic cleft.

From my vantage point, I can see a dozen trout in the depths. I carefully pick my way back down the steep, rocky slope, slide into the water, then ease carefully upstream to within casting distance of the pod of fish below the waterfall. Black clouds

on the horizon and flashes of distant lighting convince me to ignore the smaller fish at the tail end of the pool and go for broke. I throw a long cast, my flies alighting in the foamy flow just below the waterfall. The Trude swirls slowly toward

me and then is gone in a flash. I do a double take. Did I just lose sight of the fly in the white bubbles or was it a strike?

Instinctively, I set the hook and feel the weight of a hefty fish twisting on the line, then boring deep. Now I’m happy I have my 5-weight rod rather than a wispy 3-weight. It takes a minute before I can work the fish up to get a glimpse, and I see that this largest cutt of the day has fallen for the Tung Teaser. I ease the 15-inch trout into the net. A perfect way to end the day. A crack of thunder and a few spits of rain soon have me double-timing back to the SUV and escaping down the valley.

Royal Trude



- Hook:** TMC 100, sizes 14–18
- Thread:** Black UNI-Thread, size 8/0
- Tail:** Golden pheasant tippet
- Body:** Peacock herl and red floss
- Wing:** White calf tail
- Hackle:** Brown/mahogany dry-fly hackle

Requiem for Rio Grandes?

I decide to take the long way home along the Alamosa River and north through the tiny burgs of Jasper and Capulin to check out the water and then circle back south to partake of some good Mexican food in Antonito. What I see is shocking. Rain higher up has turned the Alamosa into a pumpkin-colored torrent. I know the river is dead as a doornail thanks to cyanide and other heavy metals that seeped out of a leaky gold-mining operation—what's known as the Summitville disaster. In the 1980s, a new and supposedly safe open-pit mining technique using cyanide leach pads was proposed to squeeze larger quantities of gold from the old mining area. Basically, tons of gold-bearing rocks are crushed then doused with a cyanide solution that precipitates out the gold.

In the early 1980s, governmental officials at all levels, scientists, and mining industry professionals all hailed the new technology and downplayed possible environmental problems. As reported by the *Los Angeles Times* on August 8, 1993 (“Regulators Ignored Open-Pit Gold Mine in Colorado Until Calamity Hit”), Colorado state legislators overrode the state mining regulatory agency that had rejected a mining permit application at Summitville by a Canadian company named, ominously, Galactic Resources Ltd. The legislature then doubled down by cutting the number of mining regulators to seven people for the entire state. Elected officials from Rio Grande County, where the mine was located, were seduced by

the siren's call of jobs and tax revenues for a poor jurisdiction with high unemployment. The stage was set for what has been called the worst environmental mining disaster in United States history.

By 1991, toxic metals and cyanide were leaking through damaged pad liners into Wightman Creek and flowing into the Alamosa River (fortunately downstream from Treasure Creek). Most aquatic life was killed along a 17-mile stretch of the river to Terrace Reservoir and in the scenic, popular reservoir itself. In the end, the Canadian owner and founder of Galactic Resources, mining mogul Robert Friedland, hightailed it out of the United States to avoid prosecution. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the state had to take over the cleanup—with costs now somewhere between \$200 and \$300 million by most estimates, exceeding by just a bit the paltry \$3 million bond the company was required to post. The feds and the state of Colorado did eventually extract nearly \$30 million dollars from Friedland to settle the case. Galactic Resources reportedly extracted almost \$100 million in gold from the mine during its short life.

Long-term impacts on groundwater in the San Luis Valley is still being assessed as well as impacts of using the contaminated water for irrigating crops and on wildlife and livestock drinking river water. EPA officials believe the river will not be back to normal for 100 years.

There is a lot of blame to go around, but, of course, the real culprit is the Federal General Mining Act of 1872 that

was enacted to encourage development in the West. Basically, by putting up a sign and paying a few bucks, anyone can stake a hard rock or placer claim to mine gold, silver, copper, uranium, and other minerals on federal land in the West except in national parks and designated wilderness areas. (For an informative exposé on the act, do an online search for the article, “The General Mining Act of 1872 has Left a Legacy of Riches and Ruin,” which ran in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* on June 10, 2001.)

Creeks in pristine areas throughout Colorado are dotted with mining claims. Some are never worked, but others are worked and worked hard. Estimates are that between 1872 and 2012, mining companies produced



PHOTO BY SARAH JESSUP

American dippers, colloquially called water ouzels, are frequent companions along Treasure Creek. Their presence indicates abundant insect life in a stream, and they dive and walk underwater to feed (above). In summer, along with great fishing, Treasure Creek features a fabulous wildflower display that includes Colorado columbines, the state flower, along with paintbrushes, elephant heads, and monkshoods along the upper meadow stretch (right).

Treasure Creek NOTEBOOK

more than \$230 billion from lands claimed under the act. While Congress has subsequently enacted mine reclamation laws, they have often proved to be inadequate, and efforts to reform the 1872 act have regularly gone down in flames under both Democratic and Republican administrations.

It makes me wonder, given the lax nature of mining regulation in most western states, along with other development pressures, if efforts to save the threatened Rio Grande cutthroat can succeed. As the name suggests, this rare trout is found only in tributaries of the Rio Grande in southern Colorado and northern New Mexico. Its range formerly covered all of southern Colorado, New Mexico, and even parts of Texas, but that range is now greatly reduced because of habitat damage, drought, competition from nonnative species, and interbreeding with rainbows and some of the other 14 subspecies of cutthroat trout. Spanish explorer Francisco Vázquez de Coronado recorded seeing these beautiful trout in the 1540s in the Pecos River near Santa Fe. Today, 400-plus years later, native populations of Rio Grande cutthroat are found only in a few high headwater streams like Treasure Creek.

The Rio Grande cutthroat is one of the most beautiful fish I have ever seen. Its vibrantly colored cheeks and belly are striking and distinctive, as are the irregularly shaped spots concentrated on its back and behind the dorsal fin, distinguishing it immediately from all other trout and even its cutthroat brethren to the north. It is almost a religious experience to catch, cradle, and release such an uncommon creature.

It is heartening to know that ambitious conservation efforts are underway. Since 1970, thousands of cutts have been reintroduced to streams where they were wiped out, and the species now, according to the Colorado Parks & Wildlife, occupies approximately 800 miles of waterways. Biologists estimate that 127 conservation populations now exist in Colorado and New Mexico, and 57 of those populations are considered secure. Proving that the government isn't always all thumbs, state and federal agencies signed a conservation agreement for Rio Grande cutthroat trout in 2003, creating the Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout Conservation Team. The goal is to assure the "long-term viability of Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout throughout its historic range by minimizing or removing threats to the species and promoting conservation."

This agreement was updated in 2013. Not that everything is hunky-dory: the species still occupies barely more than 10 percent of its historic range, and in 2016, the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental group, sued the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service for failing to list the Rio Grande cutthroat as an endangered species. So stay tuned. And in the meantime, gently explore this little gem, Treasure Creek. 🍷

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PHOTO BY JODY BOL

When: July–September is best. Water levels can get low in late summer depending on snowpack from the previous winter.

Where: Southern CO, south of Del Norte and west of Antonito.

Appropriate gear: 3- to 5-wt. rods, floating lines, 5X–6X tippets.

Useful fly patterns: Barr's Tung Teaser, Two-Bit Hooker, CDC Green Hotwire Caddis, Royal Trude, Adams, Royal Wulff.

Necessary accessories: Hat, drinking water or water filter, polarized sunglasses, rain gear, lightweight chest waders and boots with felt soles, wading staff for canyon sections, insect repellent, catch-and-release net.

Nonresident license: \$9/1 day; \$21/5 days; \$56/annual.

Fly shops/guides: *Antonito:* Conejos River Anglers, (719) 376-5660, www.conejosriveranglers.com. *Salida:* ArkAnglers, (719) 539-4223, www.arkanglers.com. *South Fork:* Rio Outfitters, (719) 588-7273, www.riooutfitters.com.

Books/maps: *The San Luis Valley: Land of the Six-Armed Cross* by Virginia Simmons; *Hidden History of the Upper Rio Grande* by Sandra Wagner and Carol Ann Wetherill. *Colorado Atlas & Gazetteer* by DeLorme Mapping.