



ALL PHOTOS BY RYAN MICHELLE SCAVO

La Jara Creek, CO

A Rose by Any Other Name

By Chris Duerksen

It's early July. My home water, the Arkansas River near Salida, Colorado, is running twice normal levels—practically enough to float a battleship—yet its banks are already beginning to fill with anglers, more and more being attracted by its coveted state designation as Gold Medal Water in 2014.

I decide to flee south, having heard whispered tales among some fishing buddies about La Jara Creek, hidden in a 15-mile-long remote canyon where 20-inch wild browns supposedly lurk. I am skeptical because the creek was little more than a trickle late last summer when I hurried over it to my annual trip to the more famous Conejos and Los Pinos Rivers farther south. I check online and find the state water gauge for the creek registering around 10 cubic feet per second, low but fishable.

Soon I am heading south over Poncha Pass, gassing up in Alamosa, just north of the New Mexico border, then turning off US Route 285 at the small town of La Jara. I drive west into a different world, a slower pace, old churches, small farms, two-lane roads, and abandoned adobe houses. Now I am in the nearest thing resembling civilization, the tiny frayed community of Capulin. I continue driving a half hour from the last bit of pavement outside town, and after dodging a couple of dozen rabbits in this aptly named Conejos County (conejos is Spanish for rabbits), I arrive at La Jara Reservoir—and am shocked to find it almost bone dry, and La Jara Creek below it barely a trickle.

Heart sinking, I turn downstream on a rough four-wheel-drive U.S. Forest Service road for another 2.5 miles, fording the creek and hoping for the best. I finally come to a gate blocking access to the canyon and state land trust board property and wildlife management area below. I walk down to the creek for a peek. It has more water here than above thanks to a couple of spring-fed feeder rivulets, and I spy a pair of decent trout darting for cover.

So with high hopes, I don my waders and hike another hour into the canyon, paralleling the beautiful creek the whole way. As I descend into a meadow, I spook a cow elk and her calf. They clamber up the rocky slope into the woods as marmots chastise me for the intrusion. I take that as a sign to start fishing—then two days of nonstop fun begins.

The Cradle of Colorado
La Jara Creek, named for the brambly thickets of wild roses and bushes that crowd its banks in places, is located in the San Luis Valley, often called the cradle of Colorado. The valley is home to the oldest church site in Colorado in nearby Conejos, just south of La Jara, as well as the oldest town and store in San Luis to the east. The mighty Rio Grande flows down its midsection where La Jara Creek joins it south of Alamosa, the area's biggest city, a thriving metropolis of 9,000.

The valley, flanked by the rugged Sangre de Cristo and San Juan Mountains on three sides, looks like an upside-down horseshoe from the air, the huge intermountain basin being open to the south where it abuts New Mexico.



In the lower section of the creek, the valley widens with spruce and fir giving way to ponderosa pine, piñon, and cottonwoods. The water takes on a calmer character, with some large fish lurking in deeper pools at big bends in the creek and below scattered beaver ponds (above). Access to much of the best water on both sections of the creek is by four-wheel-drive vehicle followed by hiking along old roads. Bushwhacking through the narrows and scrambling over rockslides in the upper section rewards intrepid anglers (left).

Formed by earthquakes and volcanoes, this high desert gets less than 8 inches of precipitation annually, many of the mountain streams disappearing into the valley floor's porous soil. Because the valley is oddly tipped—higher on the south than the north, the water table is high as witnessed by the extensive marshes in the numerous national wildlife refuges and hot springs that dot the terrain.

These mountains and valleys have been full of game and fish for eons; Ice Age hunters chased bison, mammoths, and camels here. They were followed by the Pueblo people who prized the turquoise deposits, then the Navajo, Ute, and other tribes contested dominion over the valley.

The Spanish claimed all the land drained by the Rio Grande del Norte in 1598 and held sway well into the 1800s, giving the valley many of its place names and Hispanic flavor that dominates even today. Eventually, the territory was wrested away from the Spanish and Utes by the United States, led by famous characters like Zebulon Pike and Kit Carson. A gold rush in the 1860s and '70s led to an





Both the upper and lower stretches of the creek, all on public land, are framed by spectacular bluffs and ridges. Here the author fishes one of the deep, productive holes created by big boulders along the upper section (above).

in the valley, finding the fellow coming back to camp with a massive cutthroat trout slung over his shoulder like a “leg of lamb.” Today, the range of the distinct native Rio Grande cutthroat trout is much diminished, but they appear to be bouncing back in more remote high-country streams.

Waters and Strategies

La Jara Creek is a small stream, rarely more than 20 feet across, although it has some pools that are waist deep and more, especially in the upper meadows. The creek has three distinct sections. This first day, I was sampling the upper section where a series of lush alpine meadows carpeted with wildflowers alternate with short steep pocket water stretches that require scrambling over big boulders above the creek or hugging the water and bushwhacking downstream.

The creek then runs into the middle section—a long, deep canyon bracketed by 10,000-foot-high mesas and formidable palisades, reachable only by foot from either above or below. Here, plunge pools and pocket water dominate.

In the lower section, accessible by a narrow, washboard county road from the town of Capulin, spruce and fir give way to ponderosa pine, cottonwood, piñon, and juniper. The stream gradient eases, precipitation is minimal, and the water begins to warm. In all three sections, the water always seems to be a bit cloudy, which doesn’t appear to bother the trout at all.

Fat, feisty brown trout dominate the fishery from the high country to the plains, feasting on the abundant caddisflies and mayflies in the upper sections as well as big stoneflies in the lower. They are joined in the upper section headwaters by small, but hefty brook trout that resemble little footballs.

As I wade carefully into the tail end of a pool, I am hoping that a rain last night might spark some feeding. Like on many small waters, stealth is more important than pattern most of

influx of Americans followed by others after the Civil War looking for free land and a new start. Most notable were bands of Mormon farmers that founded a number of small settlements, including the little town of Manassa where favorite son, Jack Dempsey, aka the Manassa Mauler, was born in 1895 and went on to heavyweight boxing fame. Today, the Amish have joined the scene, excelling in farming and woodworking.

Fishing in this area has been famed even since the late 1800s. An old newspaper recounts the story of an early Colorado governor who took an eastern friend fishing

the time. The slightly turbid water helps provide some cover. My go-to combination in the upper two sections is a Royal Coachman Trude paired with a red Two-Bit Hooker, both size 18. Grasshopper patterns are also effective—there are many hoppers in both the upper and lower sections during the summer—and Lightning Bug nymphs catch their share, especially in the fall.

I see a trout rise in midpool only 30 feet away and carefully lay my fly 10 feet above the dimple. Then I watch as a 12-inch brown rises slowly, sips in the fly, and disappears. I almost forget to set the hook, but break out of

my trance, and he's on. After a spirited tussle, the fat trout comes to the net. I pull five more from this first pool and the action continues all morning.

The high grass in the upper meadows provides good cover, and there is plenty of casting room. In the narrows between the meadow stretches, if I wade carefully and stay low, the fish don't seem to mind. The creek is just wide enough to cast into without too many hangups in the bordering trees and brush if I'm attentive and look over my shoulder before I start waving my wand. I find the biggest distractions are the outrageously glorious wildflowers flourishing all around—shooting stars, firecracker penstemons, mountain bluebells, and monkshoods lead the show.

By the end of the day, I have caught and released numerous 6- to 12-inch trout, as well as a few stretching to 15 inches. The two biggest come from one pool where the water plunges over a riffle into a deep run along a giant boulder. I dub it the weight-watcher pool because in addition to the two fatties I caught, I coax rises from three other hefty trout but miss them when I jerk the Royal Coachman Trude right out of their eager, gaping mouths.

But alas, the reputed 20-inch monsters elude me. I savor the day with a good Thai dinner in Alamosa at May-Wa's restaurant on Main Street and hit the sack early at my hotel.

Big Wide Beautiful Meadows

The next morning, the forecast of big storms in the high country drives me down to the lower creek section a few



With excellent results, young Forest Scavo instructs his father, Sam, on the fine points of La Jara Creek fishing (above). Scrappy wild brown trout abound in La Jara Creek, with a few brook trout joining the mix in the upper section. Browns up to 17 inches hide in deep pools beneath boulders and at big bends in the creek (below).

miles above Capulin. The turnoff in the town is at the main intersection by the post office; from there, I drive south on County Road 8, past the historic Catholic church, and over La Jara Creek at the edge of town. It's a circuitous 10-mile route on this decent gravel road that rejoins the creek in what is called Vincente Canyon, state land board property that is jointly managed with the Colorado Division of Parks & Wildlife as a state wildlife area. I am happy



to see there's not much traffic as I drive farther up. In fact, cheeky prairie dogs have brazenly dug their holes right in the road. They dive for cover as I rumble up the canyon and a pronghorn dodges across my path.

Soon, the road skirts the creek, so I stop and roll down the window for a look at a long, deep pool and immediately spot some small trout dimpling the surface. A western meadowlark chortles merrily in the meadow beyond—always a good omen for this Kansas farm boy to hear his home-state bird.

I continue upstream past a couple of attractive rustic campsites to a bridge over the creek. The water is placid here, meandering through the wide valley, pocked by occasional beaver ponds. From here on up, the road is much rougher, with some slick muddy spots—suitable for a four-wheel-drive vehicle only.

A mile or so above the bridge, the canyon walls pinch in, and the creek plunges and rushes like a freestone mountain stream. And just as quickly, the valley widens and the creek takes on a calmer meadow character.

I reconnoiter up another few miles, resisting the urge to bail out and sample the promising-looking water because I can see on my topo map that a couple of big wide beautiful meadows are up ahead, all of it public under the jurisdiction of the state land board. Finally, I hit a ford that looks too deep to risk, park, and unfurl my rod. Here, the rock walls are lower than in the upper section, and the creek goes serpentine as it emerges from the steep middle canyon section above. Big sunflowers are everywhere, a riot of yellow in the landscape.

Slick pools separated by shallow riffles predominate, with occasional deep holes at S-bends. To avoid spooking the fish that often sit and feed at the tail end of pools, I frequently end up casting from my knees from the riffles below or the tall grass along the creek. Sometimes I need to make a sidearm cast to reach a good run underneath an overhanging spruce. Caddisflies flutter about everywhere and even a few Green Drakes. Matching the hatch does not prove to be essential, however, with any showy dry seeming to work.

Again, most of the pudgy dozens of brownies I hook and release are in the 6- to 12-inch range, but a healthy 17-incher surprises me as I drift my dry/dropper rig next to a big rock up against the bank—by far the biggest fish of the day. The bite continues for the rest of the day until late afternoon as I get to the top of the last meadow where the creek is flanked by spectacular palisades on the north.

On the way up, I saw a flock of wild turkeys, a small weasel, and lots of elk and deer tracks. It's a little Shangri-la. The only disconcerting notes are the ATV tracks that have churned up part of the meadow and creek and a couple of trashed primitive campsites near the pristine palisades. I learn later that the state land board has only one hard-working manager who is responsible for overseeing the thousands of acres in the valley it administers. I start to pick up some of the cans the yahoos left behind when I'm startled by a big clap of thunder followed by a lightning show just ahead in the tight canyon above. It's moving my way and sends me hustling back to the SUV.

But as I trundle back down the bumpy track, I can't resist sampling a short meadow stretch about a half mile below the ford where I parked. It has S-bends and beaver ponds, and quickly produces several nice browns, a couple going 14 inches.

Back on the road, I soon approach the bridge that marks the lower stretch, and from the corner of my eye I catch a few rises in a pool where the water lazily curves in a big S-bend near the road. I succumb again, pull back on my waders, and head downstream, bushwhacking through the wild roses and thorny currant bushes protecting the creek. The water here is noticeably warmer and interspersed with beaver dams.

I sneak up from below one of the ponds and carefully flip a dry/dropper rig at the outlet that has a good flow and bang, I connect with a frisky 13-inch brown. Two more nice browns follow in quick succession, one on the nymph and

one on the dry, a Royal Trude. The beaver pond above doesn't produce anything, but the next big bend pool with fresh flow does—two corpulent browns. I round the next bend and find the creek completely overgrown, and take that as a signal from the fishing gods that it is finally time to call it a day.

Conservation Issues

As I drive home that afternoon, the ubiquitous, big, center-pivot irrigation systems remind me of the troubling water issues in the valley. On the upper section of La Jara Creek, I had been stunned to see La Jara Reservoir, touted on the state parks website as a good fishing spot, almost dry—and La Jara Creek just below almost completely de-watered for a mile or so, just a trickle. This is the tailwater that reportedly used to harbor lunker browns. No more. Like much of Colorado and the West, creeks and rivers that look free-flowing and natural are in actuality part of

Green Hotwire BH CDC Caddis



PHOTO BY SOUTHWEST FLY FISHING

Hook:	TMC 2487, sizes 14–18
Thread:	Black waxed nylon
Head:	Gold 3/32-in. or 7/64-in. cyclops bead
Abdomen:	Medium green Ultrawire
Collar:	Peacock herl
Casing:	Slate-gray CDC puff

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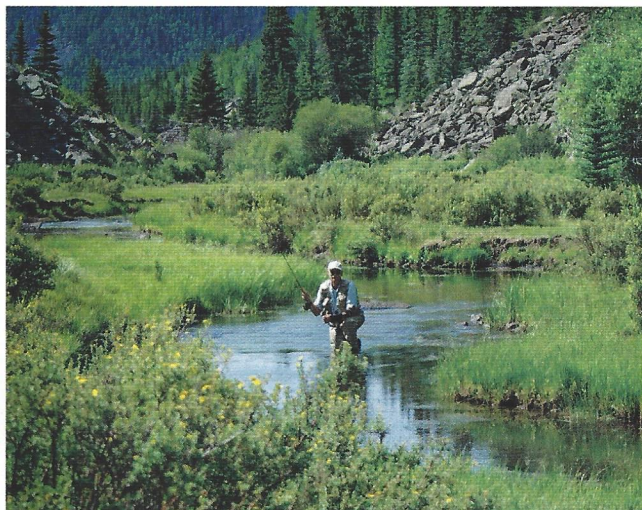
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PHOTO BY SOUTHWEST FLY FISHING

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La Jara Creek NOTEBOOK



a big plumbing system designed to irrigate farms, supply drinking water to cities, and fulfill water treaty obligations to other states and Mexico.

When I visited the upper section in early fall with my fishing buddy, George Vaughn, the level at Capulin had dropped from 10 cfs to under 4, reflecting the meager snow year in the south San Juan Mountains. Normal level is around 12 cfs. I wondered if the trout would survive the paltry flow, and was happy when we found some nice browns holed up in deeper pools. At this low water level, the trout were extremely skittish and demanded a stealthy approach. We managed to catch a couple of dozen browns on Royal Coachman Trudes and Lightning Bugs in the deeper pools, but spent a lot of our time casting while kneeling, or from behind big boulders so as not to spook the fish.

I would learn that later in the year, the Colorado Division of Parks & Wildlife and the local state water commission representative got together and adjusted the water flow regime from the reservoir above to help ensure a steadier flow into La Jara Creek. It seems to be working because by the next summer, with the aid of a bigger snowpack and more runoff, the reservoir was again nearly full and life-giving water was running through the spillway into La Jara Creek.

Serendipitously, the trout in La Jara Creek may find formidable allies in two birds that frequent the same territory—the endangered diminutive southwestern willow flycatcher and the yellow-billed cuckoo, which is a candidate for the federal endangered species list. Both prefer, as noted in San Luis Valley Regional Habitat Conservation Plan Draft for Public Review, “...woody riparian vegetation containing dense willow thickets adjacent to wet meadow habitat,” such as that along La Jara Creek, especially the upper and lower sections.

The Rio Grande Water Conservation District and San Luis Valley landowners, facing the threat of having to obtain federal permits for activities affecting prime riparian habitat, cooperated with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, other federal agencies, and local governments to produce in 2012 what in federal lingo is called an HCP—a habitat conservation plan. The primary goal is the preservation of critical bird habitat in the valley, including along La Jara Creek.

While the HCP does not guarantee adequate water flow in the valley's creeks, it does shine a bright light on the protection of riparian areas. That gives me hope that this little jewel will continue to delight anglers looking for solitude and eager fish in a beautiful wild setting. ➔

Chris Duerksen, www.hooknfly.com, is a Colorado-based writer and retired attorney who advised local governments across the United States on land protection and sustainable development issues.

When: Late June–early July is prime. Flows of 10–20 cfs are optimal. The creek is fishable earlier and later in the year depending on water levels. Flows: Rio Grande watershed tab at www.dwr.state.co.us/surfacewater/default.aspx.

Where: Southern CO, southwest of Alamosa.

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

Useful fly patterns: Two-Bit Hooker, Rainbow Warrior, Lightning Bug, Green Hotwire BH CDC Caddis, Elk Hair Caddis, Royal Wulff, hopper patterns, Royal Coachman Trude.

Necessary accessories: Hat, drinking water or a water filter, polarized sunglasses, rain gear, lightweight chest waders and boots or hip waders, insect repellent, net.

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

Fly shops/guides: *Salida:* ArkAnglers, (719) 539-4223, www.arkanglers.com. 34591 SR 17: Conejos River Anglers, (719) 376-5660, www.conejosriveranglers.com.



Books/maps: *49 Trout Streams of Southern Colorado* by Mark D. Williams and W. Chad McPhail; *The San Luis Valley: Land of the Six-Armed Cross* by Virginia Simmons. *Colorado Atlas & Gazetteer* by DeLorme Mapping.