

South Park, CO

Mission Impossible: Searching for Fish and Solitude

By Chris Duerksen

The big broad valley that is Colorado's South Park is famous mainly for two things: the eponymous animated TV show and the great fishing on the South Platte River and its tributaries. The area's history reflects the history of the opening of the West. First came mountain men seeking beavers, followed by a rowdy silver and gold rush. The bonanza eventually gave way to cattle and big ranches, and today the valley and its waters, designated as a National Heritage Area, are magnets for anglers and tourists.

The problem is that, just over an hour away, are the booming Denver and Colorado Springs metro areas, with their millions of residents. The result is evident every day on Facebook, where smiling anglers proudly display photos of personal-best browns and rainbows on famous stretches of the South Platte like the Dream Stream and Elevenmile Canyon, while railing about the crowds.

Crowds are not my cup of tea when it comes to fishing. Still, I've been intrigued when I tool down US Highway 285 through South Park on the way to Denver and see only a smattering of anglers plying the South Fork South Platte above Antero Reservoir. Further whetting my angling appetite, I have heard tales of huge browns migrating out of Antero Reservoir up the South Fork in late summer and early fall. I started to strategize a future trip to avoid any competition. First, I pinpointed the several designated public-access parking areas along this stretch to avoid like the plague. Then I kept a sharp eye out for alternatives and discovered several walk-in access points from service-vehicle-only gates. The next step was to find a day when the wind isn't blowing like a banshee in South Park, an all-too-often condition.

Hiding in Plain Sight

That day finally arrives in August. On a Tuesday I cross the South Fork on Highway 285 near the Knight-Imler State Wildlife Area just before 9 a.m. In a few minutes I am at one of the previously identified service vehicle access gates. I park outside the fence and suit up for some fishing. The weather is cool, and the wind is light. I cover the short distance to the creek in about 10 minutes. My strategy is to stow my lunch under a bush near the creek, walk downstream until I begin to see too many boot marks, then work back upstream.

Despite the years-long drought gripping most of Colorado, the water level is fine—about 15 cubic feet per second—thanks to some timely summer rains billowing



Downstream from the confluence of its North and South Forks, Lost Creek offers miles of trout water flowing through public lands.

up from the south. The creek is narrow here, but there are plenty of undercut banks and deep pools to shelter fish. Stealth will be important, given the water clarity. I see no rises, so opt for a size 16 Royal Coachman Trude to imitate the many small hoppers I saw in the meadow as I walked in. Below it I drop a size 18 BH caddisfly larva pattern. I carry a second rod rigged with two nymphs below a BB split shot to plumb some of the deeper bend pools.

With the cool air and cold water, the going is slow at first. It's already dipping into the 40s at night in this perennially frigid valley. Finally, in the third pool, a fat brookie grabs the dry fly—the only brook trout I will see all day. As the temperature warms up, so does the fishing. I enjoy steady action in the picture-perfect bend pools and deeper runs right up against the undercut banks where pinpoint drifts are a must. The fish are 6- to 11-inch browns, fat and sassy. Half fall for the dry and half for the dropper nymph, which the bigger trout seem to prefer. Surprisingly, I strike out on the weighted double nymph combo.

I am enjoying a relaxing morning, resigned to the fact that I probably won't catch anything big, when I get a surprise in a fast midstream run with just enough depth to hide a fish. The dry is unceremoniously pulled under by a solid take on the nymph. A shimmering fish erupts from the water into a big cartwheel before jetting toward the snag-filled undercut bank. I inch him away



During summer, the meadows around Lost Creek are carpeted by beautiful wildflowers like these mariposa lilies.



PHOTO BY JODY BOL

As temperatures warm in late summer, grasshoppers provide hearty meals for Lost Creek and South Fork trout.



PHOTO BY JODY BOL

Colorful, feisty brown trout dominate the South Fork South Platte River in South Park, but in the fall keep an eye out for 20-inch-plus specimens migrating up from Antero Reservoir to spawn.



PHOTO BY MARK LANCE

Spectacular scenery and solitude are bonuses for anglers pursuing the eager trout in the wide-open spaces of the South Fork South Platte River in South Park.

from the danger, and a muscular 15-inch cuttbow comes reluctantly to the net. Now we're cooking! With renewed enthusiasm, I continue upstream with steady action for browns. By 1:30, I've caught about 20 fish, so I decide to kick back and have a good lunch while basking in the sun like a lizard.

After chow, the first stretch around the bend looks very similar to the one that produced the cuttbow, featuring a fast midstream current plus enough depth to obscure the bottom and hold fish. I cast straight upstream

in the flow, keeping a close eye on the bushy white Trude as it tumbles down the creek. Then it's gone, and I set the hook. I can tell immediately from the strong and frantic runs that it's not a brown. Soon another 15-inch cuttbow is easing into my net, a twin of the first.

I continue working upstream, and the browns get a little bigger the farther I go—several push 13 inches. I don't catch any more cuttbows, but I also see nary a boot mark. And just as I'm thinking the big browns from Antero probably don't get up this far, I spook a 20-inch

monster that was finning in the shallows. I cast frantically in front of him, but he studiously ignores my offering and disappears upstream.

It's 4:30 now, and I round a bend to see some horses and cows staring at me somewhat incredulously, as if they don't see many humans up here. I must decide whether to trek farther up and fish another mile of alluring serpentine water that shows up on Google Maps. It's been a good day—over two dozen fish—and the wind has picked up, so I decide to head home to my cabin near Salida and enjoy the mountain views, along with some fruit of the vine, from the front porch.

The Likeable Lilliputians of Lost Creek

Encouraged by my respectable outing on the lower South Fork, I continue my quest for fish and solitude in South Park, and set my sights on the 119,790-acre Lost Creek Wilderness, named for a small stream that flows for miles in a wide valley, then mysteriously disappears into a jumble of rocks and boulders, only to reappear miles downstream as Goose Creek. This is not your typical Colorado high-mountain wilderness with jagged peaks covered with snow well into summer. Instead, the gentler landscape, most of it below the timberline, is marked with random domes and pinnacles. There was never much mining or logging here, again in contrast to many other wilderness areas—just mostly grazing.

Fortunately, before it disappears, Lost Creek seems to offer the prospect of over 5 miles of fishing in a picture-perfect setting. I figure it's high time to explore the creek. My online sleuthing turns up very little about fishing the creek, although a couple of posts do mention eager brook trout. That tips the scales in favor of some additional on-the-water piscatorial research.

Coming from the south on Highway 285, I turn east onto County Road 56 just north of the minuscule town of Jefferson, and drive about 20 miles to the Lost Park trailhead at the U.S. Forest Service Lost Park Campground. The first few miles of CR 56 are surprisingly rough, followed by a spine-jangling, teeth-clattering ride over a washboarded gravel road featuring occasional muddy ruts and deep potholes. It's passable for an average sedan, but hold on tight to the steering wheel and take it easy. Driving the scenic 20 miles takes about an hour. It's a Friday, so I'm expecting to see a few people, but my jaw drops when I see a dozen vehicles in the day-use parking lot at the

campground gate. I consider turning tail and fleeing, but what the heck: I've already spent two and a half hours getting here from Denver. I soon discover, to my great relief, that the others are all day hikers and backpackers. I won't see an angler or a boot mark anywhere on the creek.

PHOTO BY JODY BOL



With Weston Pass on the Continental Divide in the background, the author throws long casts for brook trout feeding in clear runs along the banks of the upper South Fork South Platte.

I quickly don my gear, and by 10:30 a.m. I'm tramping around the campground, which is fast filling up with weekenders, as I head to the Lost Park trailhead. In a few minutes I come to the wilderness boundary and sign in. Soon I pass a series of amiable youngsters (aka anyone younger than 40), most lugging backpacks over 60 pounds; my old knees quake at the prospect. Below the confluence of the South and North Forks of Lost Creek, the stream widens a bit, running clear and inviting. Half a mile later, the creek enters a short, forested



The author fishes a prime beaver pond on the South Fork South Platte along Weston Pass Road. Photo by Jody Bol

canyon stretch with gorgeous plunge pools. I resist the urge to wet a line despite seeing nice fish scatter when I peer into the depths from rock ledges above.

The excellent trail continues in the shade until, at about the 1-mile mark, it breaks into a broad meadow. Here I have two choices. If I want to take a shortcut and begin fishing sooner, I can don my waders and veer off-trail to the left (east) and cross a boggy meadow to the creek. There, a game trail continues on the north side of the creek and extends more than a mile downstream. I decide to stay on the main trail for another mile or so downstream, where I cut down the modest slope and make my way through a wet meadow to the creek on the north side of the valley. The effort proves worthwhile when I get my first close-up of the water. The creek is running clear, beautiful, and a little high from recent rains. The landscape is carpeted with colorful wildflowers, including mariposa lilies, one of my favorites.

I start working a series of serpentine bends, again using my trusty Royal Coachman Trude, this time with a red Two Bit Hooker as a dropper. I loft a perfect first cast into an alluring run, fully expecting a strike. No dice. A dozen casts later I am still sans strike and beginning to mumble to myself. I decide to check the streambed rocks for clues, something I should have done before casting, and discover big dark-olive mayfly nymphs. I replace the Two Bit Hooker with a size 16 Tung Teaser Nymph that is a good facsimile of the insects under the rocks. Bingo! On the very first cast I hook and land a feisty, bright-colored, little brook trout. From then on the action is nonstop.

By 1:30 I have caught and released dozens of plump 6- to 10-inch brookies and missed a couple of leviathans that pushed 12 inches. The larger fish are often in the shallows, sunning themselves, and rocket out from the bank, leaving a wake in their pursuit of the fly. Both the dry and the nymph produce, but the dry is the clear choice of the heftier brookies. The fish are eager but also spooky in the clear water, often calling for long casts from a kneeling position. After lunch I can't resist spending another hour exploring more attractive pools upstream, all loaded with fish.

At 3 p.m. I decide it is time to head back to the trailhead. It's been a great first taste of Lost Creek. For the next trip I am already trying to decide whether to fish the shadowy, deep canyon plunge pools, where I saw some trout earlier, or head farther downstream for several miles to sample the meandering stretch that shows up on Google Maps—pristine, unspoiled water rumored to be the home of bigger fish.

The Beaver Ponds of Weston Pass

With my home water, the Arkansas River, and many stretches of the South Platte high and muddied courtesy of summer thunderstorms, I decide to resume what some might call a quixotic quest for solitude and fish in South Park, exploring some beaver ponds over 2 miles high above the valley near Weston Pass.

The Weston Pass access road (State Route 22) turns west off Highway 285 about 10 miles south of Fairplay. Then I travel about 14 miles over a good gravel road to a trailhead at Rich Creek, a tributary of the South Fork, where the good fishing reportedly begins. I cruise past the Rich Creek trailhead, and finally, about a mile or so up the road, the valley broadens and I start to see beaver ponds along the South Fork. As I near the Weston Park Campground, I spy a couple of huge, picture-perfect beaver ponds. However, I continue upstream to reconnoiter. As I bump up the road, which is rough in spots but passable for most vehicles, I see a few campers here and there dispersed along the river, but no one is fishing.

About 1.5 miles north of the Weston Park Campground I finally can't resist the siren call of another beautiful beaver pond, this one replete with a big beaver lodge and a few dimples on the calm water.

I don chest waders and take along my wading staff, and soon I'm glad I did. While most of the ponds have surprisingly firm bottoms that allow wading along the edges, they are too deep in spots for hip waders. Also, the shorelines are boggy, and that's when a wading staff is a big help.

I scramble up the gnarly escarpment, bristling with branches of every sort at every angle, so I can cast into deeper water close to the dam. But I get nothing there, a scene that will be repeated throughout the day. After several fruitless casts with a tandem nymph rig, I spy some risers in the shallows toward the top end of the pond at the river inlet. Switching to a rod rigged with a dry/dropper setup, I gingerly work my way through a marshy bog, my wading staff keeping me on an even keel as I head toward the feeding fish. I take a careful step into the pond and promptly spook a couple of decent-looking fish that had been sunning in 6 inches of water under shoreline brush. That turns out to be the pattern for the day—finding most fish in shallower water away from the dam, especially where there is some current. A slow, stealthy approach is essential. I catch only a few in deeper water, including the depths around the beaver lodges that are normally honey holes. My hunch is that the fish are sunning themselves, seeking some warmth as well as the chow the moving water provides.

I let the pond rest for a minute, then proceed gingerly toward some fish that are feeding in a crystal-clear run below the inlet. I cast upstream above them and let the dry float their way. With no hesitation, one smacks it. The colorful little trout puts up a good tussle, cavorting around the shallows. Despite all the rumpus, his buddy doesn't seem to mind and nails the nymph on my next cast. For the next half hour, I fool a dozen or more lively 6- to 10-inch brookies in the pond inlet. When the action subsides, I walk up the shallow river above and probe a likely-looking spot where a foam line swirls along an undercut bank. Immediately a chunky brookie rises and nails the Trude. He's a harbinger of things to come. For 30 minutes I have a ball catching one feisty brook trout after another. In the clear water, I'm thrilled to see them jet out of hiding spots to gulp down the fly. These fish average larger than those in the ponds, with several pushing 12 inches.

Eventually I turn and begin wading back across the upper part of the pond toward my SUV. Fortunately, no one is there to see me sink knee-deep into a mire that looked like a firm sandbar. I begin

to lurch forward in a full-frontal fall, saving myself from a complete dousing at the last second by plunging my arms forward through a foot of water into the mud. Without the wading staff to help with the extrication, I might have become a permanent fixture in the pond.

Dripping pond water, I hobble back to my vehicle and proceed downstream to the next picturesque pond, where the action continues unabated in the shallow stretches near the inlet. Finally my growling stomach signals it's time for lunch.

As I munch on a double-decker sandwich, I reflect on the history of the Weston Pass road, which became known as the "Road to Riches." Named after one Algernon Weston, a Kansas farmer who settled in the area and did some mining and ranching before becoming a judge and a state senator, the toll road was carved out of this rugged terrain in the early 1860s, following an old Ute trail, to reach the gold and silver mines over the

PHOTO BY JODY BOL



Brook and brown trout dominate the South Fork South Platte, but the stream also holds some surprisingly large cutthroat.

mountains in Leadville. After the Colorado silver rush in Leadville in the early 1870s, it reputedly became the busiest road in all of Colorado, with 225 teams conquering Weston Pass on one day in September 1879. And I think I'm adventuresome coming up here in my four-wheel-drive SUV.

After lunch I sample a few more ponds and the river stretches connecting them, all loaded with eager brookies. Then I decide to call it a day. But as I drive by a couple of fetching beaver ponds that I had bypassed on the drive up, I hit the brakes and whip a quick U-turn. It's still early, the sun is still shining, and didn't I see some dimples in those ponds? I pull off to the side of the road just below the lower pond and start to work my way up. It pays off. On my second cast I fool the biggest brookie of the day, a bruiser over 12 inches. The fun continues as

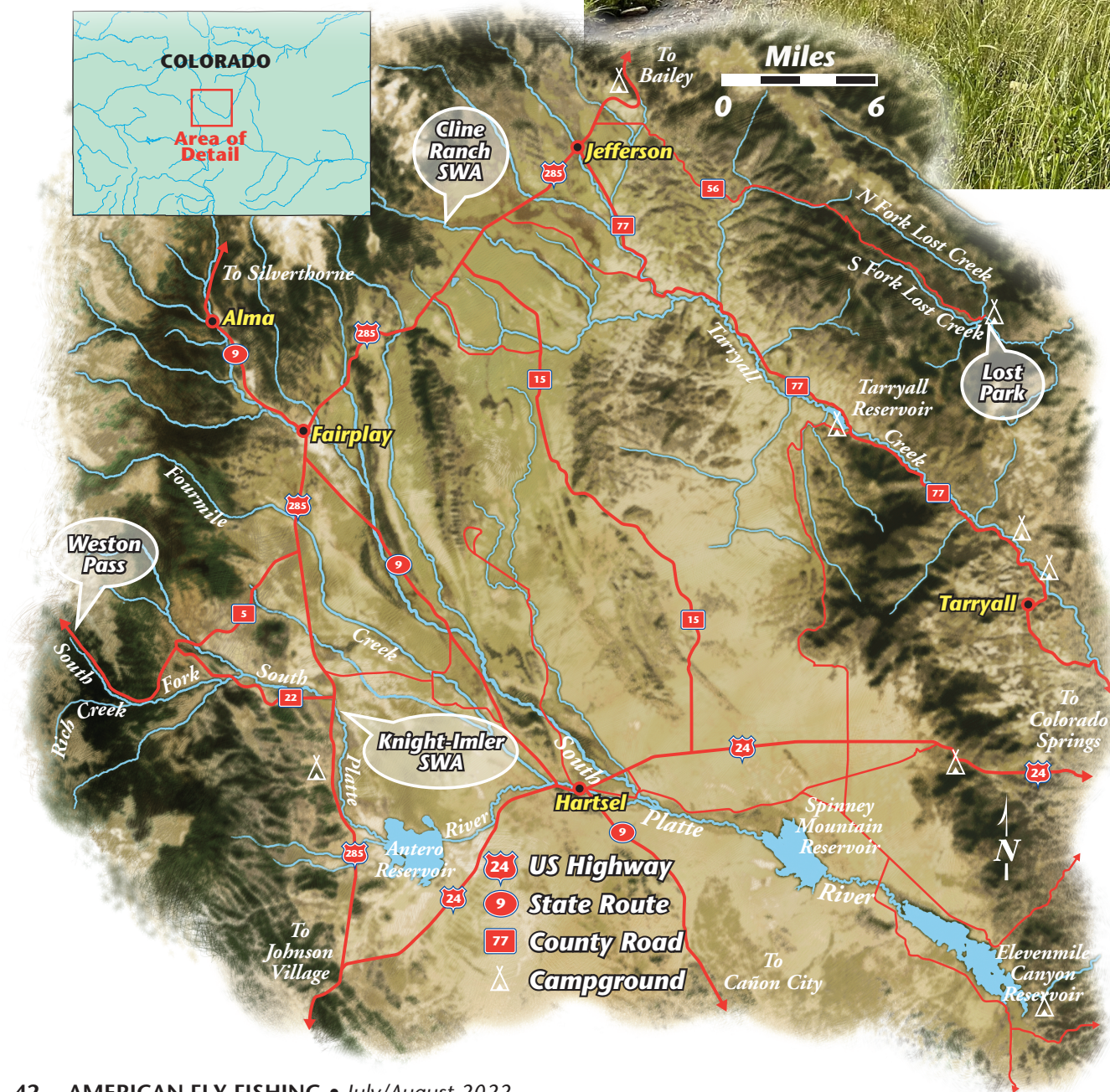
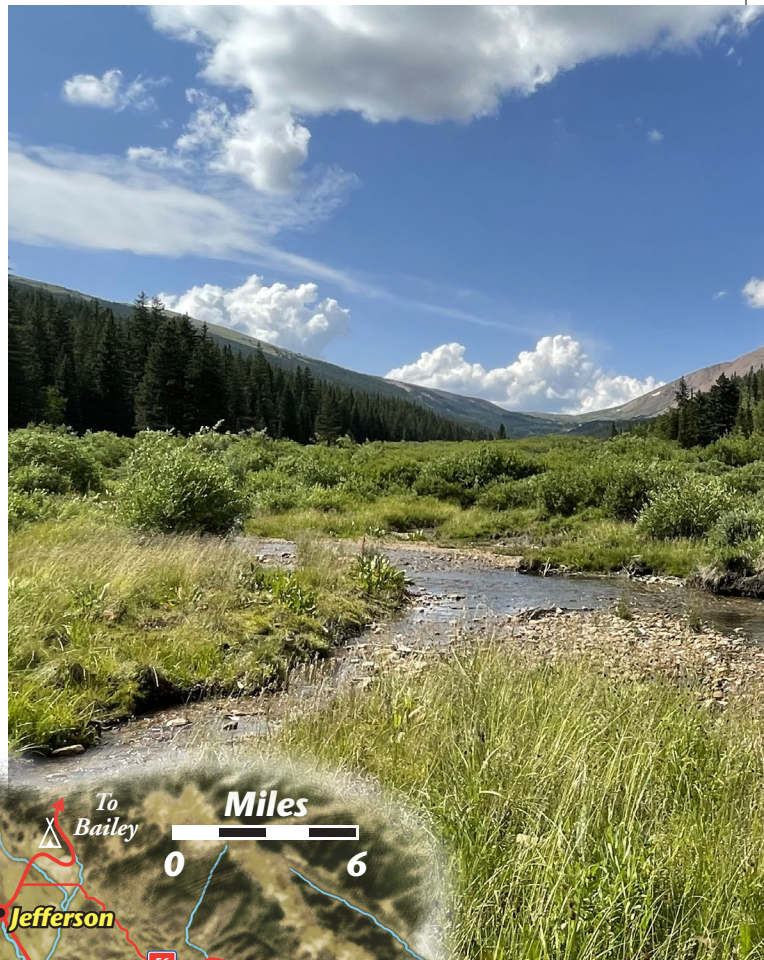




PHOTO BY JODY BOL

The South Fork South Platte below Weston Pass

I work my way upstream, then come to a short stretch of river between two ponds with a likely-looking run along the bank below a plunge pool. A beautiful cutthroat slashes out from under the bank and inhales my nymph, confirming my instinct that there had to be fish in the river as well as the ponds.

Smiling, I continue fishing my way upstream and come to another plunge pool that is so deep I can't see the bottom. I kneel and carefully cast to the side of the current in an eddy, and immediately the dry is yanked under as something hammers the nymph. My rod bends double, and after considerable ruckus I bring to my net a cutthroat that measures almost 14 inches. So much for the fable that it's nothing but small brookies up here.

The big cutthroat is a capstone for a delightful day, so I bushwhack my way downstream to my vehicle, celebrate the day with a beer, then navigate back to the highway. I know I'll be back, especially after I get home and discover after a little more sleuthing on Google Earth that there are even more beaver bonds up the road a few miles from where I started, and some intriguing river stretches.

Finding good fishing and solitude isn't mission impossible in South Park after all. 🐟

Colorado-based writer Chris Duerksen is a regular contributor to American Fly Fishing magazine. Jody Bol is an outdoors enthusiast who seeks to convey the beauty and awe of nature through her photography.

South Park NOTEBOOK



PHOTO BY JOHN SHEWBY

When: March–November; May–October is peak season.

Where: South-central CO, in South Park near Fairplay.

Access: Walk-and-wade fishing with hike-in access through public land.

Headquarters: Fairplay. **Information:** South Park Chamber of Commerce, (719) 836-3410, www.southparkchamber.com; Fairplay, (719) 836-2622, www.fairplayco.us.

Appropriate gear: 3- to 4-wt. rods, floating line, 9-ft. leaders, 5X–6X tippets.

Necessary accessories: Waders/wading boots (wet wading possible in summer), wading staff, polarized sunglasses, insect repellent, sun-protective clothing.

Useful fly patterns: Royal Coachman Trude, Madam X, Wilcox, Two Bit Hooker, Tung Teaser, green cad-disfly larva patterns.

Nonresident license: \$17.35/1 day, \$32.95/5 days, \$100.57/annual.

Fly shops/guides: *Fairplay:* Tarryall Outfitters, (719) 838-4004, www.tarryalloutfitters.com. *Buena Vista:* Ark Anglers, (719) 395-1796, www.arkanglers.com. *Pine:* Native Fly Shop, (303) 838-3474, www.nativeflyshop.com. *Lake George:* Tumbling Trout, (720) 363-2092, www.tumblingtrout.com.

Books/maps: *Bayou Salado: The Story of South Park* by Virginia McConnell Simmons; *Lesser Known Fly Fishing Venues in South Park, Colorado* by Michele White; *Fly Fishing Guide to the South Platte River* by Pat Dorsey. *Colorado Atlas & Gazetteer* by DeLorme.