

La Garita Creek and Carnero Creek, CO

On The Trail of Rio Grande Cutthroats

By Chris Duerksen



JODY BOB PHOTOS

As I bounce down the rough single-track road searching for an open section to fish on a remote Colorado creek, Jimmy Buffett's "Volcano" song is running through my head:

Now I don't know

I don't know

I don't know where I'm a gonna go

When the volcano blow

Just 28 million years ago, one of the largest known volcanic eruptions in Earth's history took place near here between the towns of La Garita and Creede just over the Continental Divide in southwestern Colorado, most of it in Mineral County to the west. It was a supervolcanic event that dwarfed the more recent eruption of Washington state's Mount Saint Helens and even the giant volcano that created the massive Yellowstone Caldera. The remnant La Garita Caldera covers more than 1,300 square miles.

In May of 2021, I was searching online for small streams to explore not too far from my home base in Salida, Colorado. I especially wanted to catch native

Rio Grande cutthroat trout. Serendipitously, I stumbled on a U.S. Forest Service document that listed creeks in southern Colorado and New Mexico that harbored these beautiful, rare trout. All the waters mentioned were small and remote. Two I had never heard of—La Garita and Carnero Creeks—even though they are just a 90-minute drive south from my cabin. To further pique my interest, my intensive internet searching turned up very little fishing information on Carnero Creek and none for La Garita Creek.

So, I eagerly scouted both streams that month and caught a few fish, but the water was too high, running at more than 50 cubic feet per second (cfs)—20 cfs is ideal for both. I plotted a return in June, but early monsoon rains nixed that plan.

Finally, La Garita Creek

In late August, with the water levels falling rapidly, I load up my fishing gear and make an early morning departure southbound on US Route 285, then west on CR G, which soon becomes a good gravel road. I pass through

the hamlet of La Garita, and 0.6 mile west of La Garita Trading Post, I find my left turn onto Saguache CR 38A, which leads 3.3 miles southwesterly to a right turn onto CR E39, a rougher but still passable gravel road that heads west, paralleling La Garita Creek and winding for 4 scenic

miles past ranches and second homes until reaching public lands. That's when the fun and bumps begin.

I shift into four-wheel drive, ready to rock and roll. The two-track road starts out tame enough, but then alternates between fairly smooth dirt sections and rocky, teeth-rattling stretches. Don't try it without a high-clearance four-wheel-drive vehicle with AT-rated four-ply tires. Trust me on this. Also, avoid it after a good rain because it intersects and crosses several deep washes. Aside from that, it's a piece of cake.

I seek a section of the creek I can actually get to: about 80 percent of the creek flows through nearly impenetrable riparian vegetation, making fly fishing virtually impossible. After about 2 miles, I come to a sign announcing that I'm entering the Little La Garita Creek State Trust Land Wildlife Management Area (WMA) that is open to public use. I'm a little confused by the "Little La Garita Creek" moniker, but soon realize that the road continues to follow La Garita Creek upstream from where its "Little" tributary arrives from the north. Finally, a way up the road from the sign, I come to a wet meadow dotted with wild iris where I can actually see the creek. Bingo!

I discover that meadows such as this are good signs because brush can't grow so densely in the moisture the irises love. Noting the spot, I keep four-wheeling up the road, which becomes increasingly worse and overgrown. To dodge low-hanging tree branches, twice I must veer

*Opposite:
Bright-colored
San Juan Worms
lure brown trout
after summer
thunderstorms
stain the water.*

*Left: To avoid
spooking trout,
expect to spend
plenty of time
kneeling when
you fish these
small streams.*

*Below:
Sight-fishing
for brawny
brown trout on
La Garita Creek
beaver ponds
is a blast.*



off the rugged, narrow road and follow tracks through adjacent meadows, then navigate back to the road. After a few miles, I enter a ponderosa pine forest where the terrain is more open, and find more fishable water. About 5 miles from the start of the public land, I arrive at a creek ford, but the water is too deep and swift for safe crossing. But the clear water looks beautiful, and at ideal flows for fishing.

water alongside a flight of mayfly spinners dipping and dancing above the surface. Regardless, I opt for a size 16 Chubby Chernobyl—it will imitate the small hoppers in the meadows, and my aging eyes can readily see it on the water. I dangle a green size 18 beadhead Sparkle Caddis Larva below the buoyant dry fly.

In the first promising pool above a beaver pond, I quickly net two spunky browns that attack the flies without



Close quarters on La Garita Creek call for short casts into deep bend pools.



Wild raspberries along La Garita Creek provide a tasty snack.



La Garita Creek's beaver ponds are full of brown trout. Try a hopper/caddis larva dry/dropper rig.

I retreat a mile or so back downstream to an open stretch and don chest waders, eager to wade the cold water with the air temperatures closing in on 90 degrees—and it's only 9 a.m. First, I turn over a few submerged stones to see what the trout might be dining on and find the rocks loaded with cased caddisfly larvae and dark mayfly nymphs. A few caddisflies are flitting about over the

hesitation, one on the dry and the other on the caddisfly. I work upstream a few feet and spy a beautiful pool at a bend in the creek—it looks like the lair of a big trout. I cast above the pool and watch as the Chubby bounces jauntily down the riffle. Suddenly a big trout, maybe 15 inches, appears out of nowhere and intercepts the fly, but in my eagerness, I hook-set too soon, and yank the fly away from

the fish. Luckily, the fly hook doesn't sting him, so I get a second try. Again the fly floats down into the bend pool and again the trout rises boldly. Whoosh! I sweep the rod back and set the hook and feel the trout's weight—and just as quickly execute my patented long-distance release.

I contemplate committing hara-kiri, but decide to try again, beyond all hope. Alas, although the fly floats over the same spot, the big fellow is in no mood to repeat his mistake. But just a few feet below, against the bank, another sizable trout, this one around 14 inches, nails the dropper, but I miss the hook-set again. Fortunately, my ego is salvaged on the very next drift through the pool when a 12-incher nails the dry fly in the tailout, and then in the run just upstream, I catch and release three brownies in quick succession. The remainder of the morning plays out the same way, with nonstop action. In every bend pool or quiet stretch off the main current or behind a boulder, I can count on several strikes and catching at least a couple of fish. It becomes ridiculously easy, making up for all those times in previous years when the finny buggers have outwitted me.

The action is fast from the get-go and continues all day. I soon conclude these fish haven't seen many faux flies lately. Indeed, I don't see another vehicle, another person, or even a boot print.

The fishing really gets interesting when I come to a pair of big beaver ponds. I work the deep current in the middle of the first and lure two feisty brownies from the depths. Then I see a substantial rise form just below the next beaver dam. I sneak into position on my knees, then pinpoint my cast between two bushes that frame the current seam. The dry fly floats about 5 feet below the shrubs and my jaw drops when it disappears in a tremendous swirl. But the fish missed the fly. I try again, and again there is a huge swirl and another refusal. Clearly, the biggest fish of the day has been toying with me.

Then all goes quiet. I fish my way farther upstream, doing a high-wire act to mount the biggest of the beaver dams and cast into the current flowing down the middle of the pond above. The dry is abruptly jerked under and when I set the hook, my rod bends perilously. The trout heads toward shoreline shrubs, but I manage to steer it away from the snags. Eventually another handsome brown comes to the net.

I continue working upstream to the head of the pond where a small, brushy sandbar cleaves the stream, creating current seams on both sides. I wade out carefully to probe a fast run between the sandbar and far shoreline, keeping my balance in the soft bottom with my trusty wading staff. I sidearm a backhand cast upstream and immediately a mini-geyser erupts around the fly. This battler finally comes to the net for a quick photo and release, another 13-inch-plus brown. Three more fish succumb to the siren call of my flies in that run, then several more on the other side of the sandbar.

Stubby Chubby Chernobyl



Hook: Umpqua XT050 BN5X Stubby T hook, sizes 12–18

Thread: Veevus, size 10/0

Tail: Gold Krystal Flash

Body: Tan Ice Dub and tan foam

Legs: Brown/gold fleck micro rubber legs

Wing: White poly yarn

By lunchtime, I've caught and released several dozen fish in less than three hours and lost probably that many more. It's been one of those terrifically fun mornings as I remember from my childhood days in Kansas, catching countless bluegills in a local farm pond.

After lunch, I vow to slow down and enjoy the scenery and wildflowers on the way back downstream to fish the stretch running through the Little La Garita Creek WMA several miles below where I chased trout this morning on Forest Service lands. The bluffs, buttes, and ridges are spectacular under a bluebird Colorado sky.

A mile or so into the WMA, I come to an open place I scouted back in May. I catch several small browns in the first two pools, then reach a beautiful waterfall cascading from a blown-out beaver pond. I score a pair of trout at the foot of the waterfall, then move up into the wider flow above. The fast action continues, as I catch and release five hard-fighting 11- to 13-inch browns.

Above the wider stretch, the creek wraps through a long S-curve, and each bend yields several plump browns. Above the upper bend, a riffle plunges into a fast, deep run, and more willing brownies come to the net. For the next two hours, it's lights out again, with the trout favoring the caddisfly larva dropper over the dry, although the dry seems to attract more of the bigger fish. The dry is clearly the best in faster runs where the trout dash out quickly to nail the fly. A few of the browns, sleek and healthy, are nearly 14 inches long.

By 5:30 p.m., I'm getting hungry, and as if on cue, the bushes close in as I continue upstream, soon making casting nearly impossible. Still, in the last tiny pool below a midstream boulder, three browns give me a nice bon voyage party. It's been special day on La Garita Creek. All the fish were brown trout—the cutthroats that are supposedly in the creek must be higher up. But that's okay. When I get back home, I immediately contemplate soaking my right elbow in Epsom salts, hoping to ward off a debilitating case of trout elbow that such a prolific angling day can produce. After all, there are glasses of wine to be hoisted in celebration, and Carnero Creek awaits tomorrow. Cutthroats beware.

Walking upstream, I can't help but wonder if I may be treading the same ground that explorer John Fremont's ill-fated fourth expedition in 1848/49 covered in search of a rail route over the Rocky Mountains to California. We know Fremont and his men made it as far as nearby Boot Mountain at the headwaters of La Garita Creek, where a blinding January snowstorm forced the group to turn back south to Taos, New Mexico. Before reaching Taos a month later in February, 10 of the 34-man party died of hypothermia, starvation, and exhaustion, and the body of one was allegedly eaten by his companions. Two others were killed by Ute Indians. And I think I am quite the bold explorer in my SUV. How's that for perspective?



Hellgate Narrows is the gateway to the public stretch of middle Carnero Creek.



JODY BOI PHOTOS

Carnero Creek

After a day of hard-won but abundant brown trout on La Garita Creek, complete with teeth-rattling driving on a rugged four-wheel-drive road, and some advanced-level bushwhacking, I am ready for something a little easier. Today, I have my sights set on Carnero Creek (carnero means ram or sheep in Spanish). This little-known stream is remote, but easier to access than La Garita Creek.

I retrace my route from yesterday, but this time just west of the hamlet of La Garita, I veer right onto CR 41G, a decent gravel road that snakes through several ranches until at about 5.5 miles, the public lands begin beyond a narrows called Hellgate. From here to the confluence with the South Fork upstream, there are several stretches of public water interspersed with private land. Soon I find a turnout above a fine-looking stretch of water and quickly suit up in my chest waders. My 8.5-foot, 4-weight rod is armed with a size 16 Royal Trude—an old reliable—and a size 16 BH Sparkle Caddis Larva.

Fremont's travails are quite a contrast to what I find: an idyllic stream coursing through a bucolic meadow carpeted with wild irises and wild golden peas. But all's not that easy. I'm surprised to find that the creek that had looked so open on satellite views is actually heavily overgrown for a few hundred yards. Undaunted, wherever I spy an opening, I hop down to the water and try to flip my flies into likely looking pools while avoiding the overhanging branches. I attribute my flubbing the first five strikes to the odd casting angles, tight quarters, and the fact that I can see the trout rising to my fly, which prompts me into striking too soon. Thankfully, my ego is soon salvaged when a feisty 13-inch brown shoots out from under a snag and gulps the Trude so greedily that I can't miss.

To my great relief, the brush soon recedes, and I am treated to beautiful open runs through the wildflower-covered meadow. In many places, riparian brush crowds one bank, and it seems each time I come to a good pool, an overhanging branch requires me to make tricky sidearm



You'll need all your tiny-creek tactics to effectively fish little peekaboo pools on overgrown stretches of Carnero Creek.

JODY BOL PHOTO

Sly septuagenarian anglers Paul Hughes (right) and Steve Spangler employ stealth tactics on diminutive Carnero Creek.

Wildflowers like this aptly named monkshood carpet the scenic upper Carnero Creek valley in summertime.



CHRIS DIJCKEN PHOTOS





Pinpoint casting is the order of the day on the narrow waters of upper Carnero Creek.



The upper reaches of Carnero Creek hold rare Rio Grande cutthroat trout.



casts. But wherever there is some depth or slower water, I find several brownies eager to please. I continue upstream, and the fishing really heats up when I come to a series of logjams and small beaver dams that provide deeper pools and quieter runs, safe harbor for the fish.

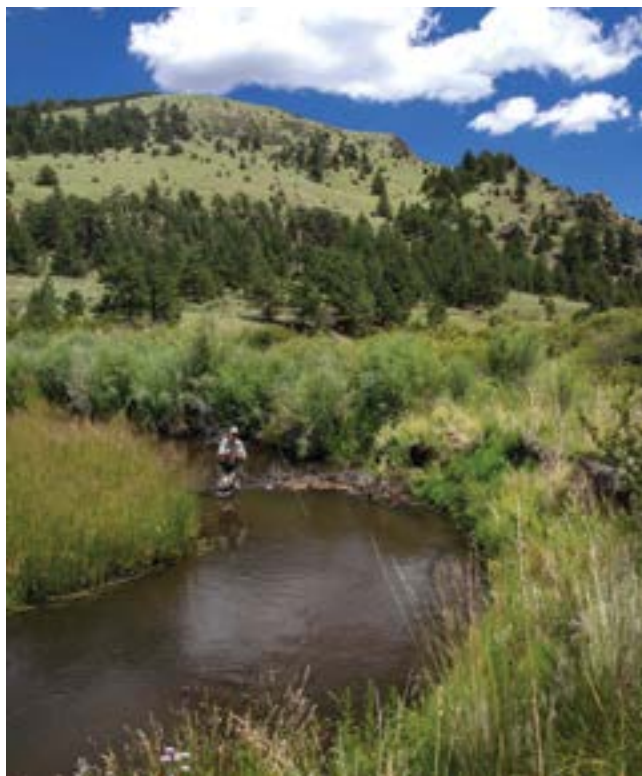
When I finally take a break for a snack and to soak in the rugged scenery surrounding me, I have caught and released more than 20 scrappy browns ranging from 10 to nearly 14 inches. As I lounge just after the noon hour, dark clouds start rolling in, so I figure I better get back on the water. In the first pool, I quickly fool two trout, and as I fight a third, I hear an ominous low rumbling and look up to see an angry black cloud scudding over the big ridge to the west; sure enough, it begins to spit rain. I break out my rain jacket and keep on casting, and the fish keep on biting. But lightning soon drives me to the shelter of my SUV.

I consider calling it a day, but there's still plenty of daylight left, and I can see sun peeking through far up the valley. So, hoping to catch Rio Grande cutts, I head for the remote Carnero Creek headwaters a dozen or so miles up the road. On the way, I cross the North Fork of Carnero Creek, which is barely a trickle; to the south, the valley that contains the creek's south fork sits under a squall of dark clouds. The Middle Fork appears to be the best option, but its lower reaches are heavily overgrown, so I keep on rolling upstream for a scenic drive to Carnero Pass. On the way, the clouds part and rain abates, so I decide to take a break near the Forest Service guard station a few miles below the pass. Here the now-tiny creek runs through a broad meadow. But a few bend pools downstream from the road look inviting and I think they might be deep enough to hold trout.

For about five minutes I walk down toward those creek bends, but then come to a menacing looking barbed-wire fence. So I head upstream from there, and find promising water in small pools. I kneel and split the goal posts, so to speak, dropping flies into the first two pools, but find no takers. The third pool is a little trickier, with a big S-bend. The first bend produces no action, so I sidearm cast to land my flies above the second bend. The dry fly bobs down into the pool, but I lose sight of it. Then I hear a splash and robotically set the hook. To my surprise, I'm into a good fish that severely bends my rod. I catch up with the running fish in the next pool and soon ease it into the net—a surprisingly large Rio Grande cutthroat from such a tiny creek.

So that government report on wild cutthroats I read wasn't fiction! As I slide the rare beauty back into the water, I can't envision a better conclusion to my two days exploring Carnero and La Garita Creeks. ■■■

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.



JODY BOL PHOTOS

Long casts are the ticket for brown trout in slower sections of Carnero Creek.

La Garita/Carnero Creeks NOTEBOOK



When: Early spring to late fall.

Where: South-central CO.

Access: Public park-and-wade access on county/USFS roads west of La Garita.

Headquarters: Del Norte and Saguache offer lodging and services. Poso and Storm King Campgrounds, and Carnero Guard Station rental cabin, are located in the upper Carnero Creek drainage; for information visit www.fs.usda.gov/recarea/riogrande, click on Find an Area under the Recreation Areas tab, then click on La Garita.

Appropriate gear: 3- to 5-wt. rods, floating lines, 9-ft. leaders, 5X tippet.

Useful fly patterns: Chubby Chernobyl, Stubby Chubby Chernobyl, Royal Coachman Trude, yellow Stimulator, parachute mayfly patterns, Comparadun, BH Sparkle Caddis Larva, Dirk's Delight, CDC Green Hotwire BH Caddis Larva, Pheasant Tail Nymph, Hare's Ear Nymph, pink San Juan Worm (for high water/runoff conditions).

Necessary accessories: Waders/wading boots, wading staff, net, hat, polarized sunglasses, sunscreen, insect repellent, water.

Nonresident license: \$19.01/1 day, plus /\$7.50 each additional day; \$36.26/5 days; \$111.03/annual, plus \$11.50 habitat stamp.

Fly shops/guides: Antonito: Conejos River Anglers, (719) 376-5660, www.conejosriveranglers.com. Salida: Ark Anglers Arkansas River Fly Shop, (719) 539-4223, www.arkanglers.com/fly-shop-salida. South Fork: Wolf Creek Anglers Fly Shop, (719) 873-1414, www.wolfcreekanglers.com. Jackalope Anglers Guide Service, (719) 657-1654, www.jackalopeanglers.com.

Books: *The Geology, Ecology, and Human History of the San Luis Valley* edited by Jared Beeton; *Pathfinder: John Fremont and the Course of American Empire* by Tom Chaffin.

PARTING SHOT

American Fly Fishing contributor *Chris Duerksen* finds a sinkhole the hard way in Colorado.

By Judy Bol

