

Clear Creek, CO

A Return to Nirvana

By Chris Duerksen, Photos by Jody Bol

As a teenager and avid young angler on the plains of Kansas decades ago, I subscribed to several outdoor magazines to satisfy my fishing fever. While chasing catfish and bass was my preoccupation, I secretly dreamed of catching wild trout in Colorado. Then I read an article in one of those journals about fishing in Hinsdale County, Colorado; the author called it the loneliest, least-populated county in the continental United States, with only 206 people in 1,123 square miles for a ratio of only 0.18 humans per square mile. Accompanied by a photo of magnificent North Clear Creek Falls, the piece extolled the prospects of hooking eager trout on flies.

After some cajoling, I persuaded my dad to finally take a summer vacation from farmwork, our first-ever such respite. Farming was a full-time job. I did all the research the old-fashioned way, writing for brochures, travel guides, and maps. Dad rented a small travel trailer in August, after harvest, and the entire family of six piled in and took off for the Rocky Mountains. Those were preinterstate times, and the journey took several days, but finally we pulled into Creede, Colorado, the jumping-off point to fish the Rio Grande River and its tributary Clear Creek. As suggested in the article, our first stop was the famous Ramble House, a hardware/sporting goods store, to get flies and advice. Then it was off to a campground not far from the water.

We had a glorious week in the wilds, hiking the Weminuche Wilderness area, sampling the fishing, and enjoying nightly campfires. My best memory is of catching my first trout in the rushing, transparent water of Clear Creek above the falls. That fish fell for a size 12 Royal Coachman, one of a half dozen flies in my prized new fly box.

Today, Hinsdale County, the scene of a gold and silver boom in the late 1800s, has experienced a population “boomlet”—it is now home to 775 people. Second homes and tourism have replaced mining as the growth engine. Indeed, in 2021, Hinsdale County was nosed out of top 10 loneliest counties in the nation by Grant County, Nebraska, which came in at 623 residents. Fortunately, the growth hasn’t spoiled the scenery or fishing. Hinsdale County has one of largest roadless areas in United States, and the Continental Divide crosses the county twice. It has multiple peaks higher than 14,000 feet, and boasts the highest, steepest paved mountain pass in Colorado—Slumgullion Pass, which sits at 11,529 feet, and which was established in the 1880s as a stagecoach route between Creede and Lake City, charging \$16 for the two- to three-day trip, including meals and lodging.

Solitude is still plentiful in Hinsdale County.

After a professional career in Chicago and Washington, D.C., punctuated by occasional trips to the Rockies to chase trout, I finally came to my senses and moved to Colorado. I fished all over southern Colorado for the next few years, including the Rio Grande and many of its tributaries, but hadn’t yet returned to Clear Creek. Then I happened to see a photo of Clear Creek Falls posted online by a friend, and figured it was high time to return. After some internet recon, I settled on three angling targets—North Clear Creek, South Clear Creek, and Clear Creek below the confluence of those two streams hidden in a rugged canyon.

I would soon discover that they are three very different waters.

On an early September day, I was pulling my mobile fish camp behind my SUV toward Creede, elevation 8,800 feet. My first stop was the iconic Ramble House, which now focuses on fly fishing. It felt like a homecoming. I struck up a conversation with the amiable, knowledgeable owners, Cole and Stacia Birdsey, and a guide named Jordan, who armed me with the best flies and tips on fishing Clear Creek. After touring the historic main street of Creede, I headed to Bristol Head Campground, named for a nearby 12,712-foot mountain. The campground, I decided, would be perfectly located, with South Clear Creek coursing through its boundaries.

I pulled off Colorado Highway 149 onto Forest Road 510 and was soon greeted by a locked gate across the campground entrance—the Forest Service had closed most campgrounds in the area at noon on Labor Day. Not a good start.



When you fish the Clear Creek system, make time to visit magnificent Clear Creek Falls.

But after a few choice words, I continued north, up a steep grade on FR 510, for about a mile and found a good camping spot just a long stone’s throw from North Clear Creek a few miles below the big falls. The view of the imposing mesas in the distance was truly breathtaking.

North Clear Creek

After setting up camp at nearly 10,000 feet, I was sucking for air, but still had a few hours of sunlight left so I sauntered down to North Clear Creek. Grasshoppers flew in every direction. Here the creek flows through a wide valley, but has

sufficient gradient to form riffles and rapids along with a few deep pools. I soon found a well-used trail through the brush along the creek, so I walked farther downstream in hopes of finding less-pressured water. I slid into the water below a deep bend pool and turned over some rocks in the stream, revealing lots of wriggling green caddisfly larvae. I tied on a size 16 Chubby Chernobyl to imitate the hoppers and a sparkle caddisfly larva pattern as a dropper. It looked like a can't-miss stretch, but the sun was dipping behind riparian pine trees, creating shade on the already ice-cold water. A dozen casts into the riffle above the pool produced no takes.

Fighting off this initial setback, I rounded the bend and emerged back into the warm sun and a perfect setting. A short rapid plunged into a wildflower-lined pool, creating an enticing stretch of dark-green deep water. I cast to the head of the pool, and a big fish immediately shot out of the water and smacked the Chubby. The fish jetted downstream toward me, then reversed course and shot the other way. The stubborn brute gained the upper hand when it wrapped itself around a snag against a rock just below the rapids. As I hustled upstream, I could see the fish thrashing on the surface, and then all went quiet. It was fun while it lasted. But

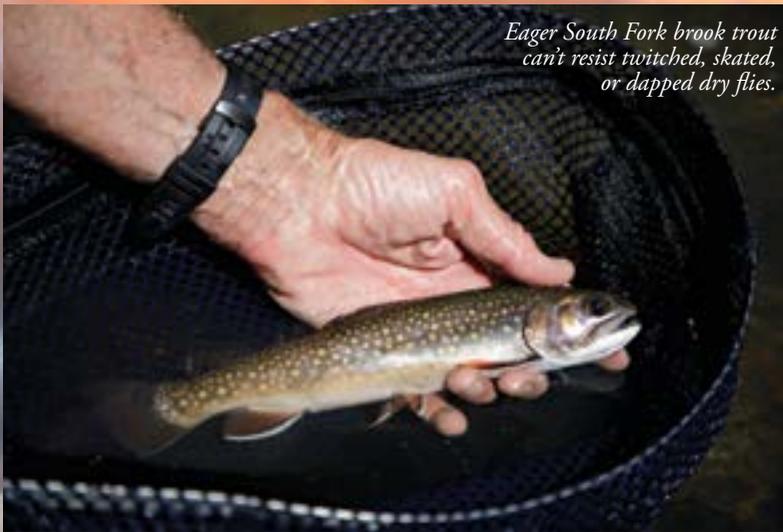
wait; when I reached down to unwind my line from the offending branch that was jammed under the rock, I could feel the trout gyrating on the other end. I managed to extricate line and fish from the tangle and was rewarded with a beautiful 14-inch brown trout. I fished my way upstream for the next hour, until the sun disappeared over the ridge, and landed half a dozen spunky little brook trout. Not a bad start.

Day two of my adventure dawned crisp and sunny. I planned to fish North Clear Creek above the falls, dividing it into two sections—the first downstream of SR 149 before the creek plunges into the chasm, and the second above the highway where the stream winds through a wide valley.

Bristol Head towers over the Clear Creek Valley.



In the meadow reaches above Clear Creek Falls, North Clear Creek harbors muscular browns and bows.



Eager South Fork brook trout can't resist twitched, skated, or dapped dry flies.



I turned right off SR 149 past an ATV staging area and continued east on FR 513 for a short distance. Soon I came to Spring Creek, which flows into North Clear Creek a few hundred yards downstream, and parked at a turnout. The creek was somewhat discolored from the rain but eminently fishable. My 4-weight rod was rigged with a size 16 Royal Stimulator and a pink/red beadhead San Juan Worm. Working my way down the creek, I picked up a pair of foot-long brookies, both from the deepest areas. Soon I came to North Clear Creek, running at about 25 cubic feet per second (cfs) below the confluence, and walked the stream until I came to a deep bend pool that yielded a brookie on the San Juan Worm, and a hookup with a much larger trout—apparently a rainbow—that spit the hook.

Noon was approaching, so I fished my way back up Spring Creek, which gave up several more brookies. After calming my rainbow-jangled nerves and satisfying my growling stomach, I headed back across the highway and drove a mile or so west along FR 513 toward Rito Hondo Reservoir. The valley is almost three-quarters of a mile wide here, and North Clear Creek disappears in the distance. But keep the faith. It's there. Google Maps reveal that the creek snakes its way beneath a ridge on the east side of the valley at the foot of some low hills. Soon, I came to a parking area next to a fence that bounds adjoining private land and a cabin resort. I followed the fence for short distance then cut east to where I knew the creek flowed. As I walked, I stirred up dozens of noisy grasshoppers before finally cresting the

ridge. Below, I was pleased to see the sparkling waters of curvaceous North Clear Creek, a meadow stream here much different from the stretch I had explored in the morning.

I scrambled down the short, steep slope and bushwhacked through dense vegetation along the creek. I emerged to find shallow water threading between deeper pools. To make things even more challenging, the sun was shining brightly, and the wind was kicking up, making casting an adventure. Once again, I paired a Chubby Chernobyl—a reasonable facsimile of the abundant hoppers—with a beadhead sparkle caddisfly larva. The first few shallow reaches were unproductive, but then I found a proverbial honey hole where the creek curved around a wide bend at the foot of the ridge and ran headlong into a jumble of big boulders. As the water careered past the boulders, it scoured a deep pool. But I got overanxious and instead of working the stretch carefully from the bottom up, I made a long cast to the head of the pool fully expecting a good fish.

Three casts later, a bit exasperated, I slowed my approach and started working a deep spot between two rocks right in front of me at the tail end of the run. Something big and glinting gold flashed at the dropper fly. Next cast, same thing. On the third, however, a fish hammered the fly and rushed upstream, almost

But a few casts later, I had another hard strike on the San Juan Worm, and a finned leviathan erupted from the water, shaking its head, before diving deep into the pool. The battle went back and forth for what seemed like an eternity, but finally I drew the fish into my net, which was just barely large enough for an 18-inch wild 'bow, my biggest of the year.

wrapping my leader on a big rock across the pool. After a terrific battle, a muscular 16-inch rainbow slid into the shallows. A few casts later, one of the big browns in the hole between the rocks that had toyed with the dropper made a meal of it. He measured 14 inches. I kept working up the pool and fooled a fat 13-inch rainbow and two more browns.

Imposing Bristol Head frames the productive waters of South Clear Creek.





The of author hikes down to the enchanting main stem.



This cattle boneyard attests to hard winters in the high country.

By 3 p.m., I had duped about two dozen fish, with equal numbers of rainbows and browns. Most took the dropper fly, but the Chubby Chernobyl fooled a 15-inch rainbow that was lurking in a deep, fast run along the opposite shoreline under overhanging willow branches.

South Clear Creek

On day three, I decided to explore little South Clear Creek where it runs through the Bristol Head Campground. In contrast to North Clear Creek, with its twisting bends and deep pools, South Clear Creek is much smaller and more intimate. Even septuagenarian anglers like me can jump across in many spots. The trail to South Clear Creek Falls begins at the east end of Bristol Head Campground, at the turnaround on FR 510.1A, and descends steeply to the stream.

Beginning early, I soon came to a decrepit, half-submerged bridge, waded across the creek, and continued my trek downstream toward the lower of the two falls. Downstream from them, the creek is rimmed by cliffs and impossible to access. So, from there, I fished my way back upstream. The quarters here are much tighter than on North Clear Creek, the banks lined with thickets of willows and other brush, calling for short casts. The action was immediate and furious.

By noon, I had landed more than a dozen lively brook trout, several pushing a foot long. After a quick snack, I continued upstream around a big bend where the creek turns west. Soon, I came to a stretch where the vegetation receded on the north bank making casting a bit easier. The stream was shallower, however, requiring a stealthier approach.

I congratulated myself on my piscatorial perspicacity when a fat 11-inch brookie smashed the Royal Trude on my first cast as soon as the fly hit the water. But my back-patting was premature as fish in the next pool ignored my offering. I switched to the Chubby Chernobyl that had worked so well the previous day, but to no avail...until I twitched the fly to make it resemble a struggling hopper. Instantly, the pool erupted in chaos as two brookies competed for the beefy fly. I released a spunky brookie and then hooked another on the next cast when I again made the hopper pattern sashay alluringly across the current. I was reminded of the celebrated contrarian angling book by Leonard Wright Jr., published in 1972, *Fishing the Dry Fly as a Living Insect*. I had read the book years earlier; confronting the then-accepted wisdom of fishing dry flies with a dead drift, Wright was on to something.

After that scurrying-hopper fun, I enjoyed another hour of steady action for small brookies in deeper runs and tiny



bend pools as I worked upstream. By quitting time mid-afternoon, I had fooled about two dozen brook trout, half of them on dry flies, and half on a San Juan Worm fished as a dropper. As I climbed up the slope back to the campground road, I turned and tipped my hat to South Clear Creek, which had provided an entertaining alternative to North Clear Creek and which had completed my two-stream slam of rainbow, brown, and brook trout.

Main Stem Clear Creek

On the fourth day, I explored the main stem of Clear Creek below the confluence of North and South Clear Creeks, not far downstream from South Clear Creek Falls. I had no idea what I was getting into.

Google Maps show a faint road marked as FR 520 that branches off south of FR 510 just before 510 reaches Bristol Head Campground; FR 520 appears to provide access to Clear Creek Canyon in several spots, so I had high hopes of fishing untrammelled waters. But the decent gravel road soon gave way to a rocky, bumpy two-track that had me shifting into four-wheel drive. Before long, the road split, and I took the fork to the left that ostensibly led to the canyon—and it did.

However, the track ended abruptly at the canyon's edge with the creek flowing a hundred feet or so below a cliff. Not one to give up easily, I noticed a faint trail replete with deer tracks that headed upstream toward South Clear Creek Falls. I decided to try it and could soon hear the thunder of the falls as the trail entered a forested area, and then a clearing. That's when I came to a boneyard. A literal boneyard. A gruesome sight, bleached white remains of a dozen or so cows were scattered on the forest floor, apparently the last

This main stem brown trout eagerly inhaled a hopper pattern.





resting place of a herd that had been caught in a deadly early winter storm some years ago. Was this an omen?

Resolutely, I trudged on, then headed down a steep slope, and was soon rewarded with a magnificent view of the falls. And a few hundred yards below the falls, I could clearly see the confluence of South and North Clear Creeks. The bad news was that I would need ropes and climbing gear to descend the sheer rock face to the water far below. Back to the SUV I went.

The road continued south, branching off from time to time into even rougher and narrower tracks toward the canyon. I explored several, some on foot as I didn't want to tempt fate and risk a breakdown in these mountains, many miles from any tow truck. Each path that had looked so promising on Google Maps ended high above the creek that roared ominously in the chasm below. After two hours of fruitless peregrinations, I finally steered my SUV up and over a low hill and started to descend toward a paved road that turned out to be SR 149—somehow I had missed the access to the canyon that a couple of my angling friends promised existed.

So with my tail between my legs, I turned around and started back up the hill, then noticed a faint turnoff that I had overlooked. I gave it a try. This narrow two-track dirt road soon ended in a small parking area with a faint trail that continued to the east, to the creek I hoped.

Sure enough, as I crested a low rise, I could see Clear Creek flowing in a beautiful meadow stretch that emerged from the canyon a mile or so upstream. I hustled back to the SUV, gobbled a quick lunch, donned my waders, and took off down the steep trail, which was slow going because of loose rock. But soon I was standing on the banks of Clear Creek. With the combined waters of both branches, the main stem was robust, flowing at perhaps 30 cfs. That clear water was cold at 52 degrees, courtesy of the miles-long shadowy canyon. Caddisfly larvae were plentiful under the streambed stones, and hoppers were flitting about in the grass, so I used the combo Chubby Chernobyl/sparkle caddisfly dropper that had been so reliable the past few days.

A deep slow run below a series of rapids produced a nice rainbow that gulped down the dropper. Then a shallow riffle yielded two brown trout. I had expected just the opposite—rainbows in the fast water and browns in the quieter pools. But apparently the browns were getting ready to spawn and had moved to the shallow gravel beds, and the rainbows were setting up to feed on eggs below.

The action was steady as I moved up farther in the meadow. Casting was easy and the fish cooperative, mostly browns with an occasional rainbow, but I also duped a husky cuttbow to finish a Clear Creek grand slam. The action slowed as the meadow narrowed near the mouth of the canyon and the sun began to slide behind the rim far above,

Royal Stimulator



Hook: Daiichi 1270, sizes 12–16

Thread: Fire Orange, size 6/0 UNI-Thread

Tail: Natural yearling elk hair

Rib: Fine gold wire

Body: Peacock herl and red UNI-Floss

Body hackle: Brown

Front hackle: Grizzly

Wing: Light elk or light deer hair

Thorax: Burnt orange Angora goat dubbing or similar

Overwing: White calf tail

throwing deep shadows over fishy-looking pools. Under the watchful eye of a water ouzel (American dipper), I managed one more decent brown at the head of a deep pool, but the cold water and shade appeared to put an end to the feasting.

I looked upstream to where the creek executed a big bend and disappeared between the tight canyon walls. I was tempted to explore farther, but the sun was now fading fast, and the breeze was getting chilly, so I turned about and started the hike back to the SUV. I resisted further temptation at the tail end of the meadow where the path started up the slope and back to the trailhead—here, the creek swirled enticingly through several deep green pools before plunging into another shadowy canyon stretch.

As I hiked back up the steep trail from the meadow, I thought of my youthful exuberance wading and casting along Clear Creek some six decades ago. Now almost 60 years later, I had returned and notched a very satisfying grand slam. It also occurred to me I hadn't seen another angler on any of the three creeks these past few days. I smiled at the prospect of exploring that deep, dark canyon.

Next year, I thought. ➡➡

Chris Duerksen, who splits his time between Colorado and Florida, is a regular contributor to American Fly Fishing magazine. Jody Bol is an outdoor enthusiast who seeks to convey the beauty and awe of nature through her photography.



What fly angler could resist making the descent to such enticing water, in this case, on the main stem of Clear Creek.

Clear Creek NOTEBOOK



When: Early spring to late fall.

Where: Southwest CO.

Access: Public park-and-wade access on USFS roads off SR 149.

Headquarters: The town of Creede, Colorado, and surrounding area offer a variety of lodging and services. U.S. Forest Service campgrounds in the immediate vicinity of upper Clear Creek and its tributaries include North Clear Creek, South Clear Creek Falls, and Bristol Head Campgrounds. These campgrounds have toilet facilities and water, but no electric hookups or other services. The Antlers, (719) 658-2423, www.antlerslodge.com, near Creede offers cabins, a lodge, full hookup RV sites, and a popular restaurant.

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

Useful fly patterns: Chubby Chernobyl, Stubby Chubby Chernobyl, Royal Stimulator, Royal Coachman Trude, BH Sparkle Caddis Larva, Dirk's Delight CDC Green Hotwire BH Caddis Larva, Pheasant Tail Nymph, Hare's Ear Nymph, red/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: \$19.97/1 day, plus /\$7.82 each additional day; \$38.19/5 days; \$117.14/annual, plus \$12.15 habitat stamp.

Fly shops/guides: Creede: Ramble House, (719) 658-2482, www.creedeflyfishing.com. South Fork: Wolf Creek Anglers Fly Shop, (719) 873-1414, www.wolfcreekanglers.com. Jackalope Anglers Guide Service, (719) 657-1654, www.jackalopeanglers.com.

Books: *A Quick History of Creede Colorado Boomtown* by Leland Feitz; *Fly Fishing Southern Colorado: An Angler's Guide* by Craig Martin, Tom Knopick, and John Flick.