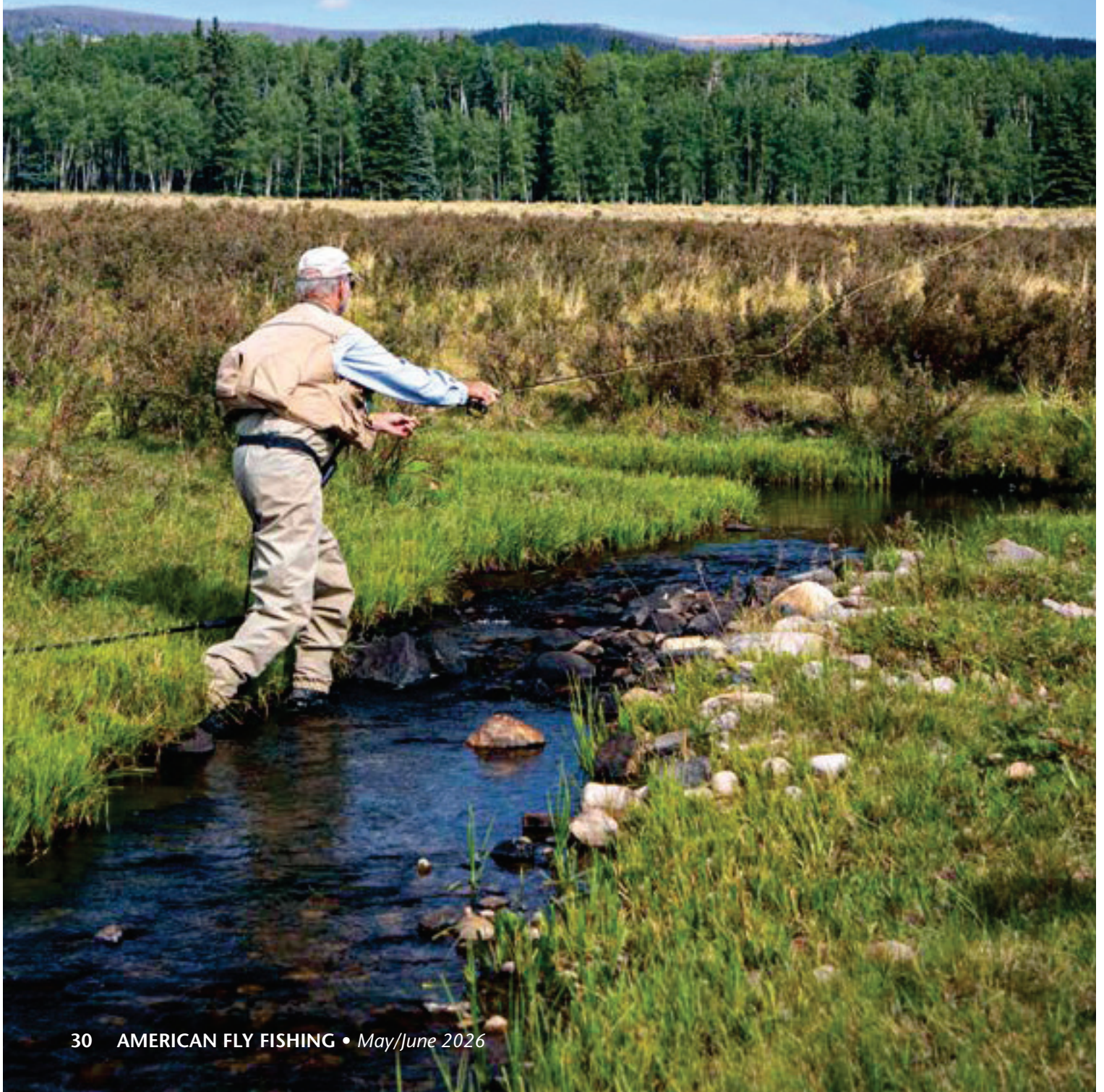


Upper La Jara Creek Drainage, CO

A Quest into the Unknown

By Chris Duerksen

Photos by Jody Bol





On Jim Creek, a tiger trout completed the slam for the author. Tiger trout are hatchery-produced brook trout/brown trout hybrids.

I was nearing the end of my annual fishing trip to southern Colorado, where I'd been staying in my mobile fish camp in Del Norte at the fine Woods and River RV Park. Before heading home, I wanted to fish three little-known creeks that fed La Jara Reservoir, a high-country impoundment tucked into a picturesque mountain valley. Rumors suggested that Upper La Jara, Torsido, and Jim Creeks were loaded with eager, colorful brookies, and a few cutthroats—plus a bonus of lots of solitude. In years past, I had fished La Jara Creek below the dam, and had done some reconnoitering above the reservoir, but those waters remained enticing mysteries.

I departed at 7:30 a.m. to undertake the two-hour drive to the lake and creeks, the last 20-mile stretch of which was on a scenic but bone-jarring gravel road (Forest Road 240/259) that clearly hadn't seen a grader blade since I'd navigated this route the previous September. As I rocked and rolled up the grade at the breakneck speed of 10 miles per hour, my mind wandered back to that previous exasperating trip to the area when I had roamed around for several hours trying to find Torsido Creek—without success.

On that day, I arrived to find La Jara Reservoir mirror-smooth and reflecting the surrounding trees and foothills cloaked in striking fall colors. I had studied topographical maps of the area as well as satellite images of the landscape to pinpoint likely fishing stretches on all three streams.

All systems appeared to be a go, but then came a heavy dose of adventure: I continued north on FR 259 that flanked the lake toward the headwaters of La Jara Creek to scout for the best jumping-off point to fish Torsido above its confluence with La Jara. But the lake was very low, and the resulting expansive meadow above the upper shoreline

Jim Creek cutthroats flourish in deeper bend pools, providing fast action for the stealthy anglers.

hid any sight of either stream until I was a mile or so above the lake. There I caught a glimpse of narrow La Jara Creek where it twisted and turned, just a stone's throw from the road. But I was flummoxed because I couldn't see Torsido Creek anywhere, and just another mile farther, I found that La Jara Creek fizzled out completely above a barbed wire fence. So, I turned around and drove back down toward the reservoir, and finally about a half mile above the lake decided to explore the meadow. I parked by the side of the road near a low ridge to the east. My suspected Torsido flowed into La Jara Creek somewhere on the other side of that ridge out in the expansive meadow. But it was hard to gauge from the maps I had because the reservoir was so low, exposing a lot of ground that was usually underwater.

I suited up in my lightweight chest waders, rigged a rod, and headed west, skirting the end of the ridge and walking into the meadow in search of the elusive creek. In a few minutes, I crossed La Jara Creek. This was going to be tough, I thought, upon spying the tiny stream flanked by tall grass that would make casting challenging. Moreover, most of the shoreline appeared to have been the scene of a cow dance party, stomped into mush by the big bovines now contentedly grazing off in the distance. Did I mention the long strands of aquatic vegetation that promised to snag any fly beneath the surface? The good news was that the flow was strong and the water cold, plus it was a beautiful sunny day—perfect for an easy ramble in the meadow.

Or so it seemed.

After wandering about in the meadow for two hours, I concluded that Torsido might be a figment of my imagination, dried up and blown away in the epic drought gripping the region. And to add insult to injury, I came

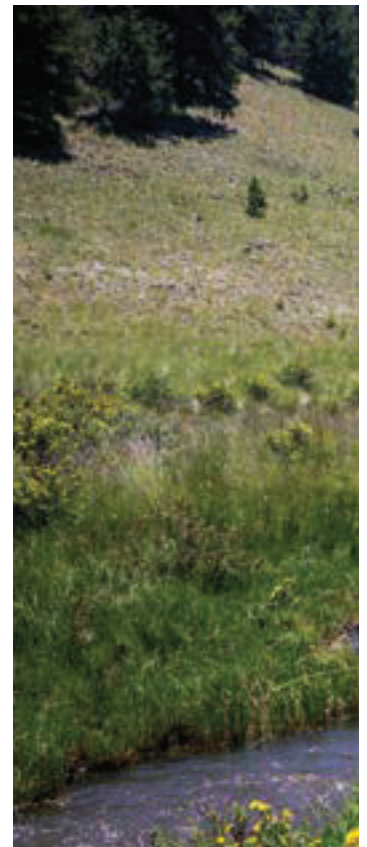
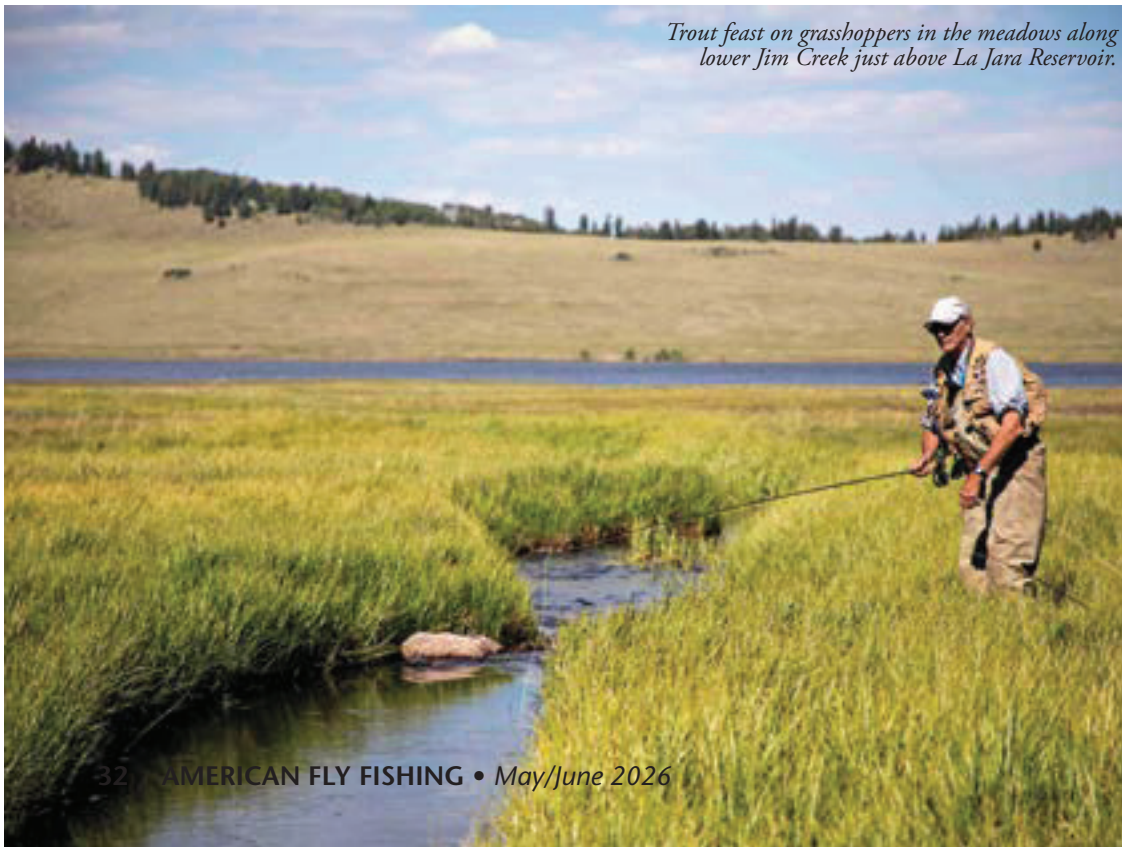
face-to-face with a truculent bull guarding his harem. Fortunately, I escaped, but then floundered into a mucky bog that was recently underwater before I could reach the hills to the west. After laboriously extricating myself, I had to perform a high-wire act to surmount two nasty barbed wire fences before reaching dry ground.

Finally, after all that roaming, I dejectedly circled back toward La Jara Creek where I was parked, skirting the boggy terrain. A half hour later I was sitting on a rock at the edge of the ridge, undertaking an attitude adjustment over lunch. Soon feeling the effects of my RC Cola elixir, I was ready to tackle the La Jara's narrow confines.

I approached the stream cautiously and immediately spied a trout rising upstream. Casting was tricky, courtesy of the tall grass and reeds along the shoreline. But if I got too close, I risked spooking the fish as well as having to deal with the mushy soup the cattle stomping had created. Against all odds, I made a decent cast, and the fish inhaled a size 18 Royal Trude. To my surprise, it was a small tiger trout, a sterile, hatchery-produced brook trout/brown trout hybrid. Tiger trout were stocked in the reservoir, so I figured they must have been moving up the creeks in search of food.

Fishing my way upstream, I caught several more small tigers, missed a large fish in a big bend pool, then spooked several more. The going was tough. I'd been trying to work my way up and cast while standing back from the shoreline, but then decided to defy convention and wade right up the middle of the creek, which had a fairly firm bottom. I also dispensed with the caddisfly larva dropper that hadn't produced anything except a lot of slimy moss to clean off after most casts. Those two moves made a big difference. By then, the sun had warmed the creek, and

Trout feast on grasshoppers in the meadows along lower Jim Creek just above La Jara Reservoir.



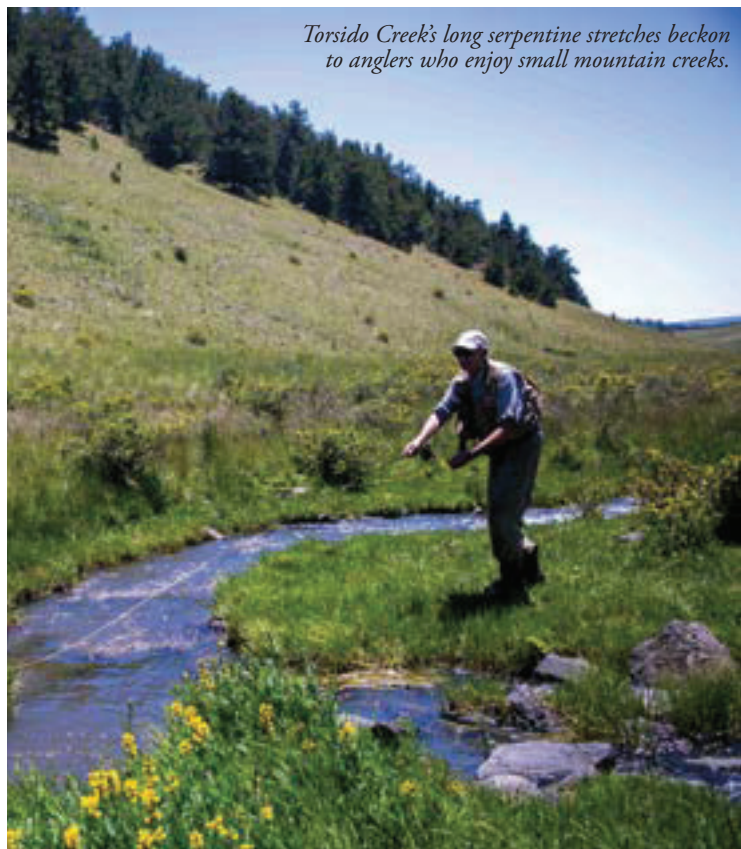
trout were rising steadily as I worked upstream. I had a ball casting for rising tigers and started catching brilliantly colored brook trout as well.

Then I got a wake-up call. Below a big bend in the creek, a large blue dragonfly zoomed upstream, zigzagging just above the water. Suddenly, a big trout rocketed into the air, barely missing snagging the insect. How it could have seen that speeding dragonfly while underwater,

let alone react quickly enough to almost snatch it was beyond me. I waited a few minutes to let the pool settle, then cast my dry slightly above where the fish was hiding along the shoreline. The brute immediately assailed the fly. I set the hook, and the fish exploded in the air, then headed upstream. My rod bent double as I put pressure on to stop the run, and soon I slipped my net under a heavy 14-inch tiger trout.



Native Rio Grande cutthroats are again thriving in Jim Creek, a testament to the hard work of Trout Unlimited and its conservation partners.



Torsido Creek's long serpentine stretches beckon to anglers who enjoy small mountain creeks.

I continued around the next bend, rapt by another splashy rise when I was startled by a deep rumble. I hadn't noticed the massive black storm clouds gathering to the south. The rising tempest signaled time to depart, but not before I made one last cast. And I'm glad I did. An even larger tiger pounced on the Trude, put up a spirited battle, and finally came to the net. I released the fish and headed quickly back toward my vehicle.

Later, in camp and with cell service available, I used my phone to thoroughly study maps of the drainage and figured out where Torsido Creek was hiding. I spied a narrow gap in the middle of the mile-long ridge that sliced through the meadow. I had thought Torsido would meet La Jara Creek below and on the other side of the ridge in the big meadow where I had wandered for about two hours. Instead, I discovered that Torsido cut through the ridge in the gap and joined La Jara near the road. But it was all but invisible if you didn't know where to look because the creek is so narrow and obscured in the tall grass.

I tucked away that intel for a return trip in 2023.



A colorful, sassy brookie kicks off a fun day on Torsido Creek.



Long casts in tight quarters are often the ticket on Jim Creek.

The Real Torsido Creek and Rare Cutthroats

A stretch of bone-rattling washboard road jolted me back to the driving task at hand as I crested a rise and saw sprawling La Jara Reservoir. I veered to the right at the big welcome sign and headed north on FR 259 toward a big surprise. The previous winter, Colorado's years-long drought had finally ended, and now I was amazed to see the results—the stretch of La Jara Creek where I had tussled with the big tiger trout the previous autumn was

completely submerged within the reservoir and was now home to flotillas of ducks. Only about a quarter mile of the stream above the reservoir still flowed below its confluence with Torsido Creek.

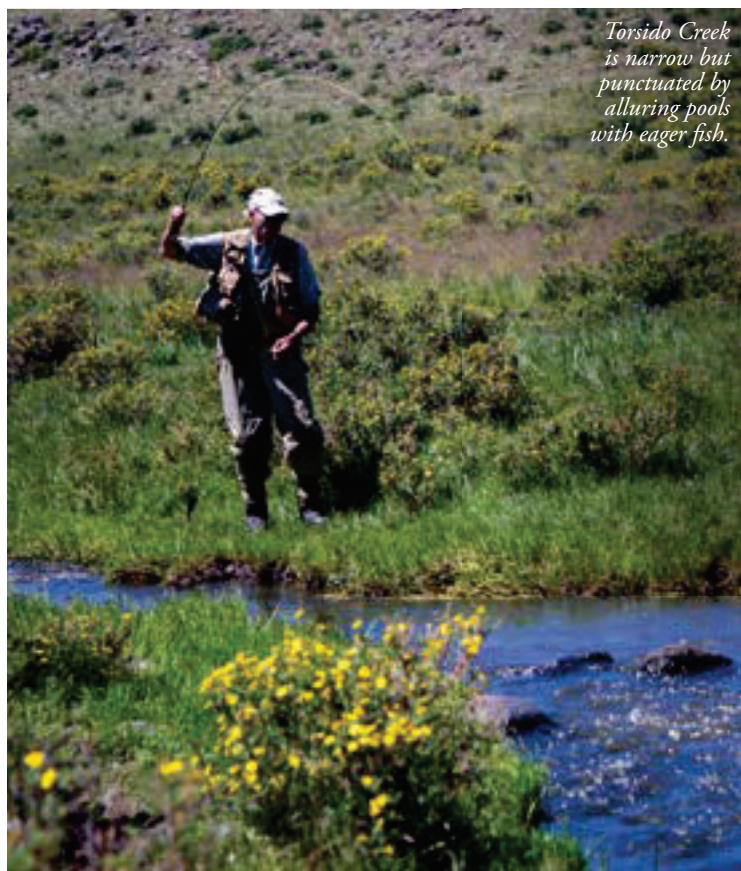
Not to worry, I decided. I intended to make it to the headwaters of Torsido Creek, which I had determined would be accessible with a high-clearance four-wheel-drive vehicle. That usually meant fewer boot prints—aka solitude—as well as hungry fish. Shortly, I came to a barbed

wire fence and a gravel road that swung left, becoming a two-track dirt road that soon crossed over La Jara Creek. A short distance farther, the road split and FR 252 angled to the northwest then up a steep, rocky stretch over the ridge into a broad valley. From there the road wound another mile or so and then surmounted another ridge. When I got to the top, I was relieved to see Torsido Creek in the valley below.

Descending into the valley, I found ample water in the diminutive creek and a faint jeep trail paralleling the stream. I drove southward, downstream, until I spied a long serpentine stretch that looked promising. Parking on a low hill overlooking the creek, I donned waders and walked downhill, crossing a little feeder stream, and skirting past a dense stand of trees. After about half a mile, I discovered alluring deep bend pools. The small creek was running a bit turbid from recent rains, so I opted for a reliable pink/red San Juan Worm dropped below a size

turned out to be a tiger trout like those I had caught on La Jara Creek the year before. Over the next three hours I caught several dozen 10- to 12-inch brookies and three more tigers with nary a boot mark to be seen.

By now my stomach was starting to growl, and I began thinking about motoring to Jim Creek for some afternoon cutthroat delight. I stopped for lunch just below the hidden confluence of La Jara and Torsido Creeks close to FR 259 that had eluded me last fall. I gobbled down my lunch, but the waters of Torsido beckoned, so I set out across the tall grass that hid the creek. I felt like a latter-day Zebulon Pike, thrilled when I finally came to the narrow channel that seemed but a figment of my imagination until then. I slid quietly into the water and made my way toward a bend in the creek. No sooner did the flies hit the water than a colorful brookie smashed the Trude. Then another. I spent an hour on Torsido, and the eager brookies helped make up for my fruitless wanderings the previous fall.



Torsido Creek is narrow but punctuated by alluring pools with eager fish.

16 Chubby Chernobyl, a reasonable facsimile for the grasshoppers that were beginning to stir in the tall grass.

I carefully worked into position and cast into the head of the first bend pool. Right on cue the Chubby was pulled under as it swept around the curve along the bank. Soon, a fat, colorful, 12-inch brookie came to hand. The next cast brought another nice brook trout, as did the third cast. When the action slowed, I sauntered up to the next pool and on the first cast, a trout smashed the dry fly. This one

On to Jim Creek

Next it was time to explore Jim Creek and see about those rumors of wild native Rio Grande cutthroats. I drove south back along FR 259 to its junction with FR 248 where I turned right, heading below and around the dam. I continued on FR 248 past its junction with FR 240, skirting the south side of the reservoir. The gravel road soon deteriorated into a bone-jarring track suitable only for high-clearance four-wheel-drives.

In the meadow where Jim Creek is supposed to be, I spied nothing but tall grass. Fortunately, this time I had better maps and satellite images, so I was not fooled. I stopped at a gate that limited vehicle access and set out across the meadow on foot. Sure enough, in a few minutes I stumbled on little Jim Creek and the handiwork of Trout Unlimited (TU). Almost a decade ago, Kevin Terry, energetic regional staffer for TU, had told me he found Jim Creek in a sad state, absolutely trashed by a century of overgrazing.

The creek's native cutts were on the verge of extinction; the stream had been overtaken by brook trout that a 2016 survey found were 40 times more plentiful than the cutthroats. With a coalition of conservation partners, including the state land board, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, the local TU San Luis Valley Chapter, and a nonprofit called Running Rivers, TU undertook a four-step process to protect, restore, reconnect, and sustain the cutthroat fishery. The project started in 2014 with 5 miles of fencing to protect the creek by keeping the cattle grazing on state land out of the riparian habitat. Next came work to restore damaged habitat by narrowing the channel and adding rock drop structures to create and enhance pool habitat. This work was followed by installing bottomless culverts on Jim Creek and an unnamed tributary, thereby reconnecting cutthroat and insect populations.

Now the effort is in its fourth phase—sustaining the creek by removing brook trout through electrofishing and



A surprise rainbow trout completed the Torsido Creek slam for the author.

an innovative brook trout challenge overseen by the local TU chapter. Members were encouraged to harvest a daily limit of 14 brook trout, especially in beaver ponds where electrofishing was difficult. In 2020, more than 300 brook trout were removed, and by 2021, 80 percent of the fish in the rehabilitated areas were Rio Grande cutthroats.

Intent on seeing the visceral results of all that work, I crouched low in the grass and lofted a cast into one of the newly created pools. A feisty cutthroat blasted the Chubby Chernobyl, mistaking it for one of the juicy grasshoppers buzzing everywhere. I moved up to the next pool and the scene repeated, but then things went dead. Kevin Terry had told me that the cutthroats in the lower of the three fenced sections had been the slowest to come back. The water flowed sluggishly in that stretch and there was no physical barrier to keep brook and tiger trout from migrating from the reservoir and competing with the natives.

So, I hustled back to my SUV and headed toward the two upper fenced sections, which meant going only about five miles per hour on the rocky road. Thirty nerve-jangling minutes later, I came to the second of the bottomless culverts at the top of the third fenced section. I stepped out of my vehicle and peered over the side of the big culvert and immediately spooked a half dozen fish. Cutts? Brookies? I walked the short distance to the fence at the top of the third section where I spied a beautiful clear pool with fish finning

in the current. From my knees, I dropped the small Chubby Chernobyl 10 feet above them. One immediately rushed forward, nailed the fake hopper, and the battle was on. But my smile turned to a frown when I saw it was a brookie.

I looked downstream beyond the fence that marked the upper end of the third section and wondered about some sinuous stretches of water. I wriggled under the lower barbless strand of fence and walked about 10 minutes downstream until I came to a big bend in the creek where a series of the TU-built rock riffles had created an alluring pool. I crept carefully within casting distance and knelt before unfurling a cast toward the head of the pool. Instantly, the small Chubby Chernobyl disappeared in a big swirl, a victim of a hungry cutthroat. The fish cavorted around the pool before coming to the net. This was more like it. But with all the ruckus the fish created, I suspected the pool's remaining denizens were spooked. Nine fish later—seven cutthroats and two brookies—my fears proved unfounded.

I continued upstream to the next alluring run and the scene repeated. Hungry cutthroats couldn't get enough of the faux hopper, with a colorful fat brookie and a small tiger trout thrown in for good measure—a Jim Creek slam. By then a few dark clouds were moving up from the south and thunder was rumbling in the distance. I headed back to my SUV to begin the long drive back to camp. But as I started to stow my gear, I saw a dimple in a pool upstream



in the meadow above the bottomless culvert. I couldn't resist. I soon fooled another nice cutthroat, and before long I'd fished my way out of the meadow and up to the edge of the forest that enveloped the creek. There I found a shaded pool guarded by overhanging branches—perfect water for a big trout. My first cast alighted daintily but amid the branches; surprisingly, I was able to ease it out of the thicket without getting snagged.

From my knees, I executed a sidearm cast that managed to avoid the limbs and land above the target stretch. The Chubby glided downstream then spun around in the pool before being sucked under by an aggressive fish. Water erupted in a froth and before long, a gorgeous 14-inch cutthroat slid into my net. It was almost 4 p.m. then, and a couple of hours back to my mobile fish camp in Del Norte, so I tipped my hat to the cutthroats, and the good folk at TU. They have made an important difference in the world. ■■■

Itinerant fly angler Chris Duerksen, who divides his time between Colorado and Florida, is a regular contributor to American Fly Fishing magazine, often working with Colorado photographer Jody Bol.

When: Spring to late fall.

Where: South-central CO.

Access: Walk-and-wade fishing.

Headquarters: Del Norte, Alamosa, and Antonito offer lodging and services. The Woods and River RV Campground in Del Norte, (719) 657-4530, is the closest full-service RV/tent campground; Cañon Bonito RV Park, (719) 376-2274, www.canonbonitorv.com, near Antonito has full-service RV/tent sites along the Conejos River. Dispersed primitive camping allowed around Antonito Reservoir on state and federal lands.

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

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

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

Nonresident license: \$19.01/1 day, \$36.26/5 days; \$120.25/annual, plus \$10 habitat stamp.

Fly shops/guides: Antonito: Conejos River Anglers, (719) 376-5660, www.conejosriveranglers.com. Salida: Ark Anglers Arkansas River Fly Shop, (719) 539-3474, www.arkanglers.com. South Fork: Wolf Creek Anglers Fly Shop, (719) 873-1414, www.wolfcreekanglers.com. Jackalope Anglers/Del Norte Outdoors, (719) 657-1654, www.jackalopeanglers.com.

Books: *Conejos County Colorado Fishing & Floating Guide Book* by Jim Mcracken; *The Geology, Ecology, and Human History of the San Luis Valley* edited by Jared Beeton, Charles Nicholas Saenz, and Benjamin James Waddell; *Pathfinder: John Fremont and the Course of American Empire* by Tom Chaffin.

Upper La Jara Creek Drainage NOTEBOOK

