

Taos, New Mexico

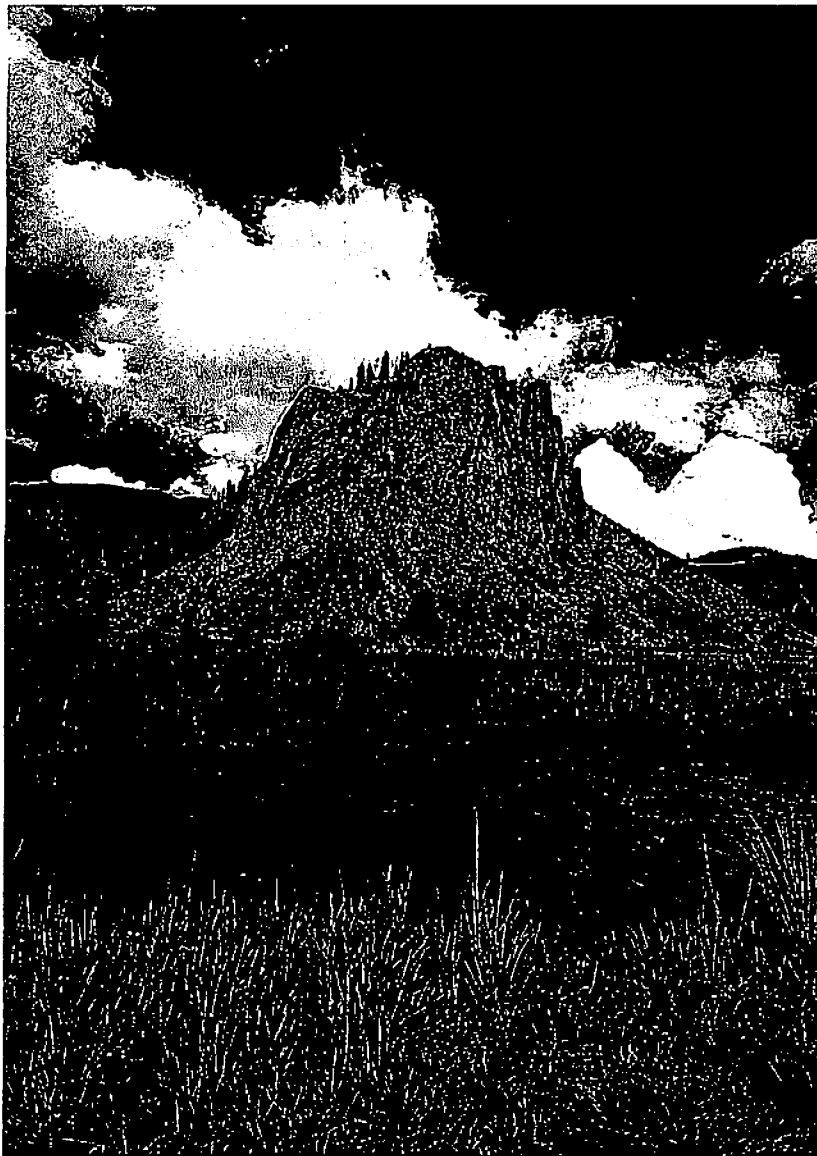
Angling and Art Meet in the High Desert

By Steve Larese

Nestled in the New Mexico high desert and bordered by the Río Grande and the majestic Sangre de Cristo range, the small mountain town of Taos is surrounded by some of the most beautiful and challenging fisheries in the state. Most of them are pure greys born of mountain snowmelt and springs, and what the trout lack in size, they make up for in beauty and intelligence. Brookies, Río Grande cutthroat, as well as browns and rainbows in the 6- to 12-inch range are what you'll generally see, though some anglers specialize in coaxing ferocious northern pike to take their streamers in the Río Grande.

The newest development in the Taos area is the 242,455-acre Río Grande del Norte National Monument, which was established in March of 2013. This designation furthers the protections of some of northern New Mexico's premiere fisheries, from the Orilla Verde campgrounds near Pilar to a huge swath of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land up to the Colorado Border, including the Wild Rivers Recreation Area.

Taos itself is an artistic community characterized by unique architecture, cozy rooms, and great restaurants featuring locally sourced ingredients and plenty of New Mexico chilies. It owes its history to the Native Americans, who have been here for 6,000 years, Spanish farmers



The Río Costilla that flows through the Valle Vidal 45 miles north of Taos is known for its feisty rainbows and cutthroats, not to mention breathtaking scenery.

and traders, Anglo frontiersmen, such as Kit Carson, artists who "discovered" Taos's golden light a century ago, and souls worldwide today who are drawn to its quirky, laid-back atmosphere and communal good nature.

A visit to Taos Pueblo is a must. Made a United Nations World Heritage Site in 1992, it is home to 150 tribal members year-round, living in much the same way their ancestors had for centuries. Taking in the iconic architecture, with piñon smoke wafting in the air like incense, and the quiet gurgling of Red Willow Creek, which runs through the village, there's no better way to experience Taos's dreamlike beauty

and appreciate the First People for which Taos is named.

Beyond the pueblo, Taos is probably best known for its art. The birth of Taos as an art mecca began in 1898, when itinerant artists Bert Phillips and Ernest Blumenschein were rambling their way to Mexico to paint. A broken wagon wheel forced them into town and, after seeing Taos, they gave up all thoughts of Mexico. By 1915, they had easily convinced others to join them and the Taos Society of Artists was created. Art patron Mabel Dodge Luhan followed and hosted writers D.H. Lawrence and Aldous Huxley, photographer Ansel Adams, painter Georgia O'Keeffe, and other world-famous luminaries,

Taos's enduring reputation as a Bohemian retreat. Check out the Blumenschein Home and Museum, Harwood Museum of Art, and the Taos Art Museum to see firsthand some of the local masterpieces that have influenced the American art world.

Taos makes a perfect home base for fishing northern New Mexico—and for nonanglers, offers premier rafting, hiking, skiing, biking, ballooning, and exploring. So, given the breathtaking location of these waters, don't be surprised if your friends and family want to join you.



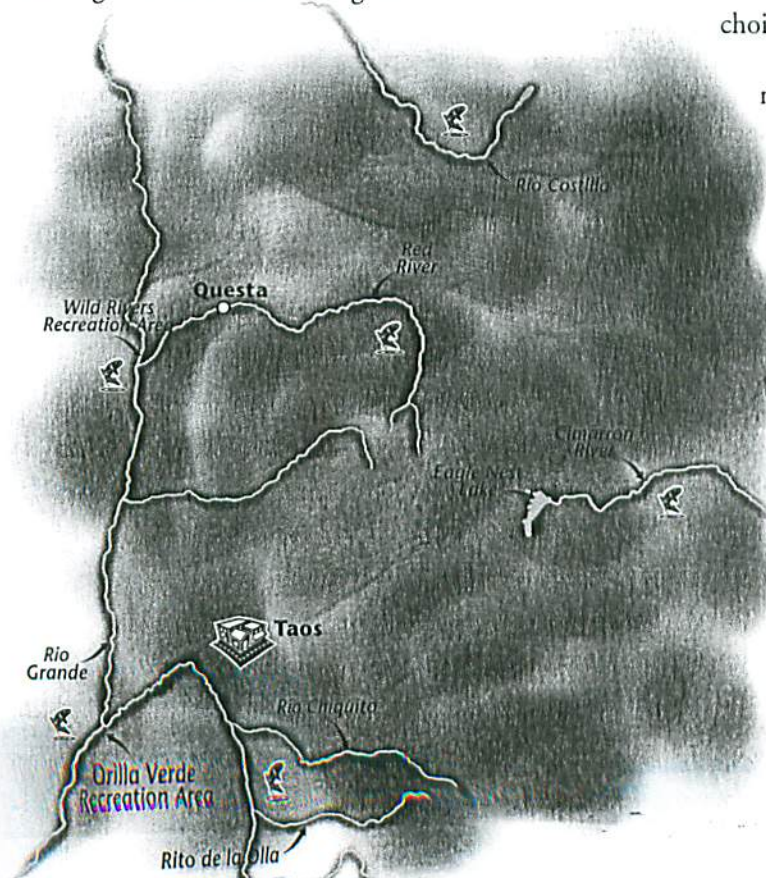
The Río Grande in the Orilla Verde Recreation Area offers some of the best fishing near Taos. The river is stocked with rainbow trout, but wild browns are the river's real prizes, and some of them reach impressive proportions.

Río Grande at Orilla Verde Recreation Area

One of the best and most easily reached Taos fisheries begins at the Orilla Verde Recreational Area, about 16-miles south of town. This BLM area stretches from Pilar to the Taos Junction Bridge. From Taos, take State Route 68 south to Pilar and then follow State Route 570 into the recreational area along the river. There is a day-use fee of \$3 per vehicle. Rainbows are stocked here, but wild browns thrive as well. This is where you'll catch the largest trout in the Taos region.

Throughout the summer, the recreation area is famous for the swarms of caddisflies that travel up and down the river, at times so thick that they fall off the boulders—to eagerly waiting trout—while climbing over one another. Elk Hair Caddis and similar patterns are the dry flies of choice here. Stonefly patterns work well, too, when the caddisflies aren't swarming, and there are large mayfly hatches in the spring and fall. Peacock Nymphs are a good choice for early spring fishing.

A second way to reach this location is to travel north of Taos to US 64 and then head west. You'll cross the impressive Río Grande Gorge Bridge (worth a stop and a photo), travel a mile, and then take your first left on a dirt road called Upper Rim Road/County Road CB115. This route travels south along the western edge of the gorge for about 9 miles and then begins a series of switchbacks down to the Taos Junction Bridge. Along the switchbacks, you'll see several dirt turnoffs and Forest Service signs marking trails that lead to the water. The hiking can be difficult, but the stretch north of the bridge receives very little pressure. The large browns and solitude make the effort worth it. Anywhere along this stretch of the Río Grande, wear ankle-supporting boots and listen and watch for rattlesnakes among the dark basalt boulders. Always carry drinking water and sunscreen and wear a protective hat.



Wild Rivers Recreation Area

Thirty-five miles north of Taos, near Questa, is the majestic Wild Rivers Recreation Area. Here, the

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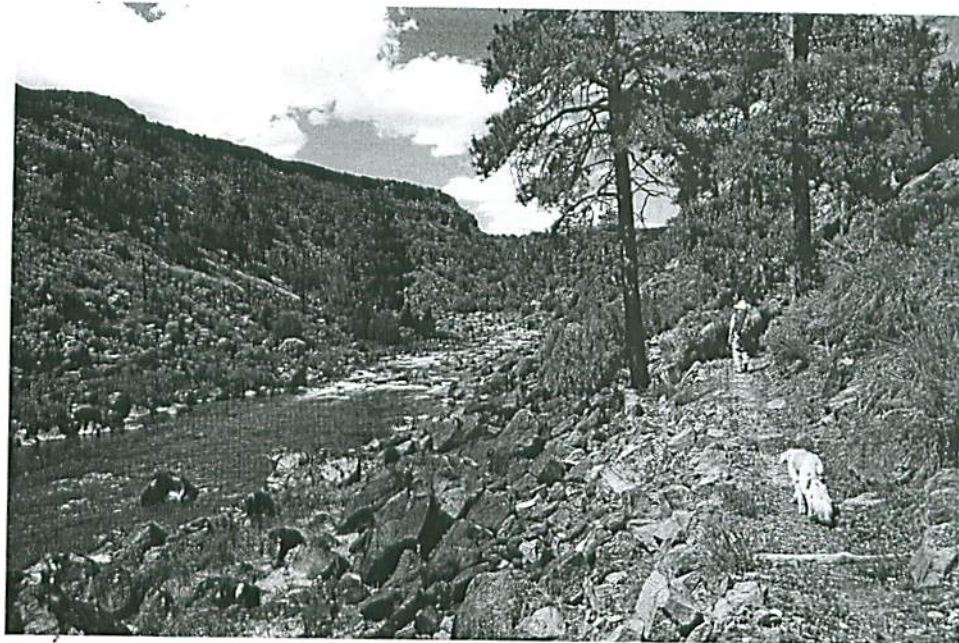


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Wild Rivers Scenic Area, where the Red River flows into the Río Grande, is now part of the Río Grande del Norte National Monument. (above). The Río Grande Gorge, west of Taos, reaches depths of 800 feet, squeezing the river through volcanic basalt (below).

Red River flows into the Río Grande and continues through the Río Grande Canyon, providing great hiking and fantastic but challenging fly fishing.

With an 800-foot drop in elevation over 1.2 miles, La Junta Trail is the most direct route to the confluence. Hiking is difficult, but the panoramic views are worth the effort. Give yourself an hour to get down and an hour and a half to get back up, and carry enough drinking water. At the bottom is a sign pointing to the Red River and its La Junta Campground just 0.4 mile to the left. There's a footbridge here that allows access to the east bank of the Red River and the Río Grande's east bank south of the confluence. La Junta Campground has a chemical toilet, a fire ring, and sheltered picnic table.

At the sign, if you choose to head west to the Río Grande, there's a good trail that runs 2.4 miles north along the river to the Big Arsenic Spring Campground—and a 680-foot climb out of the canyon. Between La Junta and Big Arsenic is Little Arsenic Campground, 0.9 mile from the sign. All three places are well maintained and make great rest stations, or you can spend the night after registering with the Visitor Center (\$5 a night for riverside camping, \$7 "up top").

Bear in mind that there is no potable water down in the canyon, so make sure to carry plenty of drinking water or bring a water filter with emergency iodine tablets just in case. Because this area receives so little pressure, the browns and rainbows instantly pick up on anything amiss but will also snatch anything that looks good. Stealth and nymphs, including San Juan Worms, are your best bet here, but caddisfly dries and Adamses are effective during the summer hatches.



Beavers have created several large ponds near the end of FR 438 on the Rito de la Olla. From the SR 518/FR 438 intersection, you'll cross a small bridge after about 0.4 mile. Soon, you'll see some parking turnouts on your right. These areas are popular with local spin casters and picnickers and can be crowded in summer. Venturing on, the road begins to climb above the water and the bank gets brushy, necessitating a short bushwhack down, which deters most casual anglers and leaves you to cherry pick larger holes you've scouted from your vehicle.

Río Costilla

The Río Costilla cuts through the northwest corner of the Valle Vidal, about 45 miles north of Taos. The Valle Vidal has been called the Little Yellowstone. With its large elk herds, lush meadows, sparkling streams, and surrounding mountains, it's easy to see why. The Valle Vidal is a 100,000-acre section of the Carson National Forest that was traded to the U.S. Forest Service by Pennzoil in 1982.

The Río Costilla flows out of the Costilla Reservoir in nearby Colorado and is the largest river in the area. Its meadow banks are wonderful for long casts. Wide, rippling water with bends, islands, and undercuts holds 14-inch rainbows. Farther back into the Valle Vidal, pure Río Grande cutthroat trout ply the skinnier creeks.

The Río Costilla within the Valle Vidal boundary is catch-and-release, single barbless-hook-only water and is open July 1 to December 31. Because the Río Costilla is reservoir fed, the water levels and temperatures during summer tend to be stable and promote good fishing when other water is running too low and too warm—or, in winter, is frozen.

At about 2 miles from the Forest Service boundary, small Comanche Creek flows into the Río Costilla from the southeast. Deceptively small, this is a fun tributary to fish as well. Gravel FR 1950 follows Comanche Creek for about 4 miles before breaking to the east and farther into the Valle Vidal, but you can hike the banks of Comanche Creek for another few miles for truly remote small-stream fishing.

Continuing on FR 1950 will lead you to the three Shu-ree Ponds, which are stocked with 15-inch rainbows and open to spin casters. The limit is two fish. One pond is designated for children 12 and younger. Despite the pressure, fly rods are fun on the two ponds, especially if you're looking for bigger fish or even dinner. While this is great summer water, fall is a glorious time to explore the Valle Vidal and take in the changing aspens and bugling elk. ➤

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Taos INSIDER



Local intel: Taos Tourism, (877) 587-9007, www.taos.org.

Amazing breakfast: Michael's Kitchen Café & Bakery, (575) 758-4178, www.michaelskitchen.com.

Favorite lunch stops: Graham's Grille, (575) 751-1350, www.grahamstaos.com; Bent Street Café & Deli, (575) 758-5787, www.bentstreetdeli.com.

Great dinners: Doc Martin's Restaurant, (575) 758-1977, www.taosinn.com; El Meze, (575) 751-3337, www.elmeze.com.

Local beer: Eske's Brew Pub & Eatery, (575) 758-1517, www.eskesbrewpub.com; Taos Ale House, (575) 758-5522, www.taosalehouse.com.

New brewery buzz: Taos Mesa Brewing, (575) 758-1900, www.taosmesabrewing.com.

Fly shops: The Solitary Angler, (866) 502-1700, www.thesolitaryangler.com; The Reel Life, (505) 995-8144, www.thereellife.com; Dos Amigos Anglers, (575) 758-4545, www.dosamigosanglers.net.

Local guides: Van Beacham, (866) 502-1700 or 575.758.5653; Land of Enchantment Guides, (505) 629-5688, www.loeflyfishing.com.

Río Costilla private fishing/lodging: MW Bar Ranch (Amalia), (575) 586-2054, www.mwbarranch.com; Costilla Creek Fishing Lodge, (575) 586-2496, www.costillacreek.com; Cottonwood Meadow Ranch, (575) 586-2143, www.cottonwoodmeadowranch.com.

Best books: *Flyfisher's Guide to New Mexico* by Van Beacham; *Fly Fishing in Northern New Mexico* (revised edition) by Craig Martin.