

# Taos, New Mexico

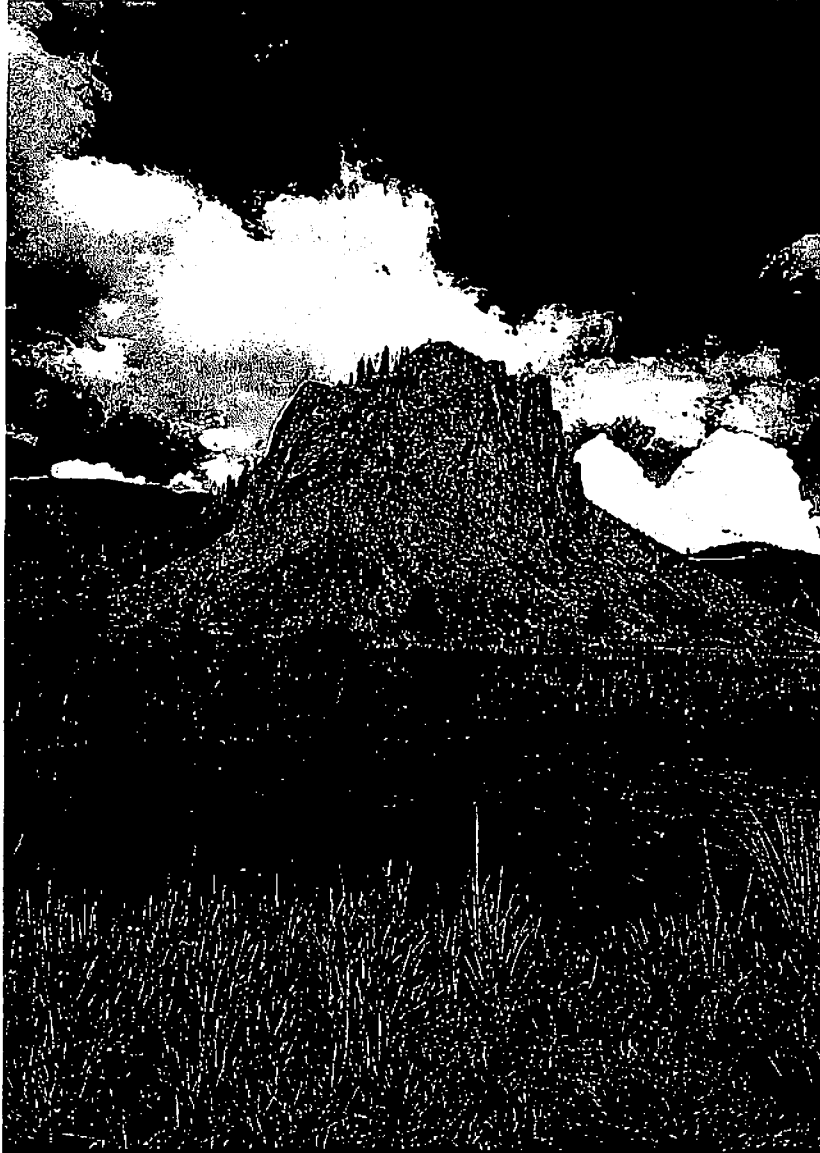
## Angling and Art Meet in the High Desert

By Steve Larese

**N**estled 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.



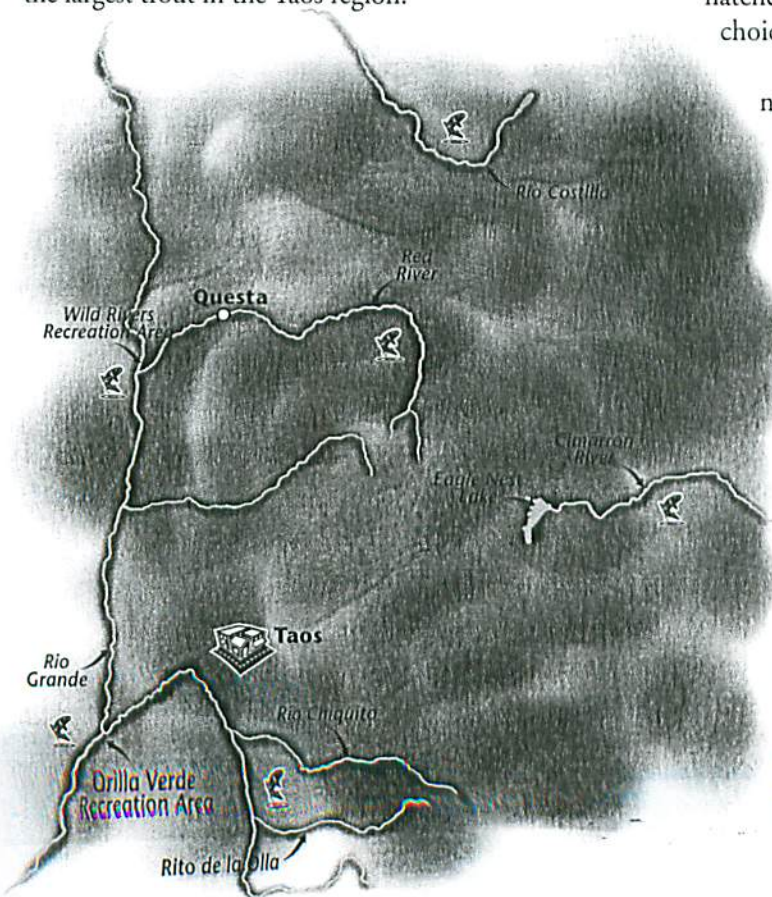
*The Río Grande in the Orilla Verde Recreation Area offers some of the best fishing near Taos. The river is stocked with rainbow trout, but wild browns are the river's real prizes, and some of them reach impressive proportions.*

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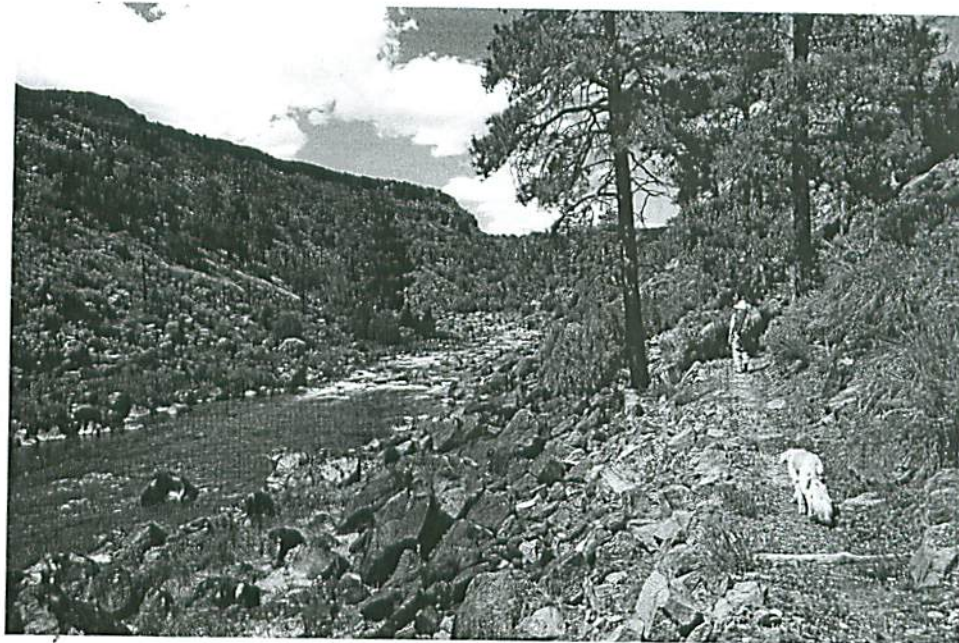
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Wild Rivers Scenic Area, where the Red River flows into the Río Grande, is now part of the Río Grande del Norte National Monument. (above). The Río Grande Gorge, west of Taos, reaches depths of 800 feet, squeezing the river through volcanic basalt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



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## Red River

The Red River gathers in the shadow of Wheeler Peak, New Mexico's highest point at 13,161 feet. From there, it winds 20 miles to the confluence with the Río Grande at La Junta. Along the way, it passes through the charming town of Red River, known for its ski area, outdoor recreation, and Texas-style barbeque and saloons.

Because the Red River is spring fed and maintains a winter temperature in the mid-40s, this section fishes well year-round. Heading southeast through town, Main Street turns into State Route 578. Follow it and you'll encounter several beaver ponds along Goose Creek that hold feisty brookies. This still water is fun to fish with small dry flies and is a great place to take beginners or the kids. The river through town is well fished, but the convenience of casting a few steps from your lodge door makes it worthwhile. Fly anglers have to compete with bait fishers, but a well-placed nymph can drop the jaws of your spin-cast competition, especially in the morning when the sun first hits the water.

From town, Red River follows State Route 38 west, passing several campgrounds that allow good access to quieter stretches before it crosses under State Route 522 just south of Questa. Short State Route 515 takes you to the Red River Fish Hatchery, and the river between the hatchery and SR 522 is great fishing with good access.

West from the hatchery, the Red River flows 3 miles to the Río Grande in the Wild Rivers Recreation Area. Trails between the hatchery and the Wild Rivers Recreational Area's Zimmerman Visitor Center allow access, but it involves some long, rocky hiking and bushwhacking. The quality of the fishing, though, is worth it.

## Cimarron River

The Cimarron is a gorgeous river that flows east from Eagle Nest Lake, 31 miles northeast of Taos—but on the far side of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains—along US Highway 64, the lower half of the Enchanted Circle Scenic Byway. Give yourself about an hour to navigate

this beautiful but slow-going, windy road. Much of this prized river is private, but the 8-mile Cimarron Canyon State Park contains some of the best public trout fishing in all of New Mexico. Beginning about 1 mile past the tailwaters of Eagle Nest Dam, the Cimarron pools and ripples through Cimarron Canyon State Park and finally flows into the Canadian River at Springer, roughly 50 miles to the southeast.

You'll see the park office at the Tolby Campground Day Use Area, a popular spot that has river access but receives heavy pressure. Continue east for about 3 miles until you



*The Cimarron is a ripple-filled river with good cover for trout, including pools and undercut banks.*

reach mile marker 292. Near here, the Cimarron passes underneath US Highway 64 via two large culverts, right at a bend in the road. Soon, on your right (south), you'll see a turnout and a sign for the Colin Neblett Wildlife Area. The 1.6 mile stretch of water between Colin Neblett and Horseshoe Mine Day Use Area is Special Trout Water (limit of one 16-inch trout per day). East of here, other day-use areas provide access to the water, though there can be more bait-fishing traffic. The Clear Creek Trailhead and Maverick Trailhead at the park's eastern end are designated parking areas for anglers. The Palisades Picnic Area is worth a stop just



*Matching the hatch during the winter months can be productive on the Rito de la Olla and other spring-fed creeks, especially in the deeper beaver ponds where larger fish overwinter (above). The Adobe Bar in the historic Taos Inn is called the "Living Room of Taos," and is a popular spot for locals and visitors alike to enjoy food, drink, and live local music (right).*

to take in the towering basalt columns that make up the canyon here. Stop by Dos Amigos Anglers in Eagle Nest for tips and to check conditions.

### Río Chiquito & Rito de la Olla

The Río Chiquito and Rito de la Olla are parallel streams south of Taos that travel east to west from their 10,000-foot headwaters in the Carson National Forest. Both streams are narrow with stone beds and average roughly 10 feet across. Deadwood and boulder cover are excellent places to play and surprisingly large fish can be caught in these pooled areas if you're stealthy. Thick brush can snatch flies, but it also provides good cover from these spooky fish. Bow and side casts are good techniques for these streams.

Forest Road 437 parallels the

Río Chiquito and Forest Road 438 parallels Rito de la Olla, offering good access to these low-pressure streams. The forest roads travel east from SR 518, where the streams merge with the Río Grande del Rancho (also called the

Little Río Grande), which travels south and eventually merges with the Río Pueblo de Taos and finally the Río Grande.

To reach the streams from Taos, from the SR 68/SR 518 intersection, travel south on SR 518 for 2.1 miles to reach FR 437 and the Río Chiquito, or travel 6.9 miles for FR 438 and the Rito de la Olla. FR 437 parallels the Río Chiquito for about 12 miles to a camping and meadow area, where Río Grande cutthroat dart from pool to pool. FR 438 only follows the Rito de la Olla about 4 miles, but parking and hiking back farther will lead you to some pristine water.

### Wimer's Baetis Emerger

*By Jeff Wimer*

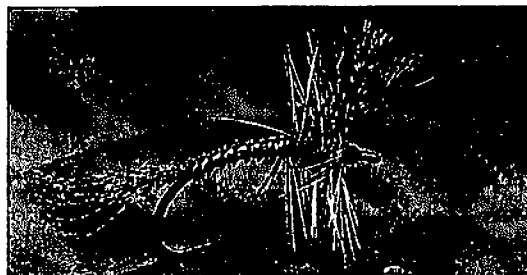


PHOTO BY SOUTHWEST FLY FISHING

- Hook:** Partridge 15BN, size 18
- Tail:** Lemon wood duck
- Body:** Gray-dyed goose biot
- Wing:** Crystal Antron and lemon wood duck
- Thorax:** Tan UV Ice Dub
- Hackle:** Dun

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](http://www.taos.org).

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

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

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

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

**New brewery buzz:** Taos Mesa Brewing, (575) 758-1900, [www.taosmesabrewing.com](http://www.taosmesabrewing.com).

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

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

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