



Photo: Dan Williams

Northern New Mexico's Rio Grande Gorge historically has been one of the state's best -- and most challenging -- trout fisheries.

# The lure of the Gorge

## Renowned stretch of the Rio Grande an angler's delight

By Karl Moffatt

New Mexico's Rio Grande Gorge and its tumbling river is an intimidating and stingy place for many anglers. Its reputation for skunking even seasoned anglers often prompts some to pass it up for easier fare elsewhere.

But those who've managed to overcome this maddening river's mysterious ways say the fishing can reach mystical proportions. And perhaps no one knows that better than long-time friends, fishermen and fellow Taos writers Taylor Streit and John Nichols.

Nichols was one of those guys who could be found fishing the river in cheap sneakers and jeans with the cuffs rolled up back in the 1970's. Rods were made of fiberglass then, leaders from "cat-gut" and reels were by Martin.

In those days, Nichols bounced along rutted roads on the rim of Gorge in a low-slung, four-door Impala, looking for new ways down to the river. He carried no net, used crude, nameless flies and lunched on bologna sandwiches washed down with warm Coke.

Nichols fished the late afternoons and loved hopping from one slippery boulder to another to fish the foaming pools. He loaded his line with a duo of wet flies, "skittered" them across the surface on a short leader and regularly "cleaned up."

Streit, in the meantime, had opened a fly shop in Taos and was building a name for himself as one of the Rio Grande's best fishing guides.

Ironically, both men learned to fish the Rio

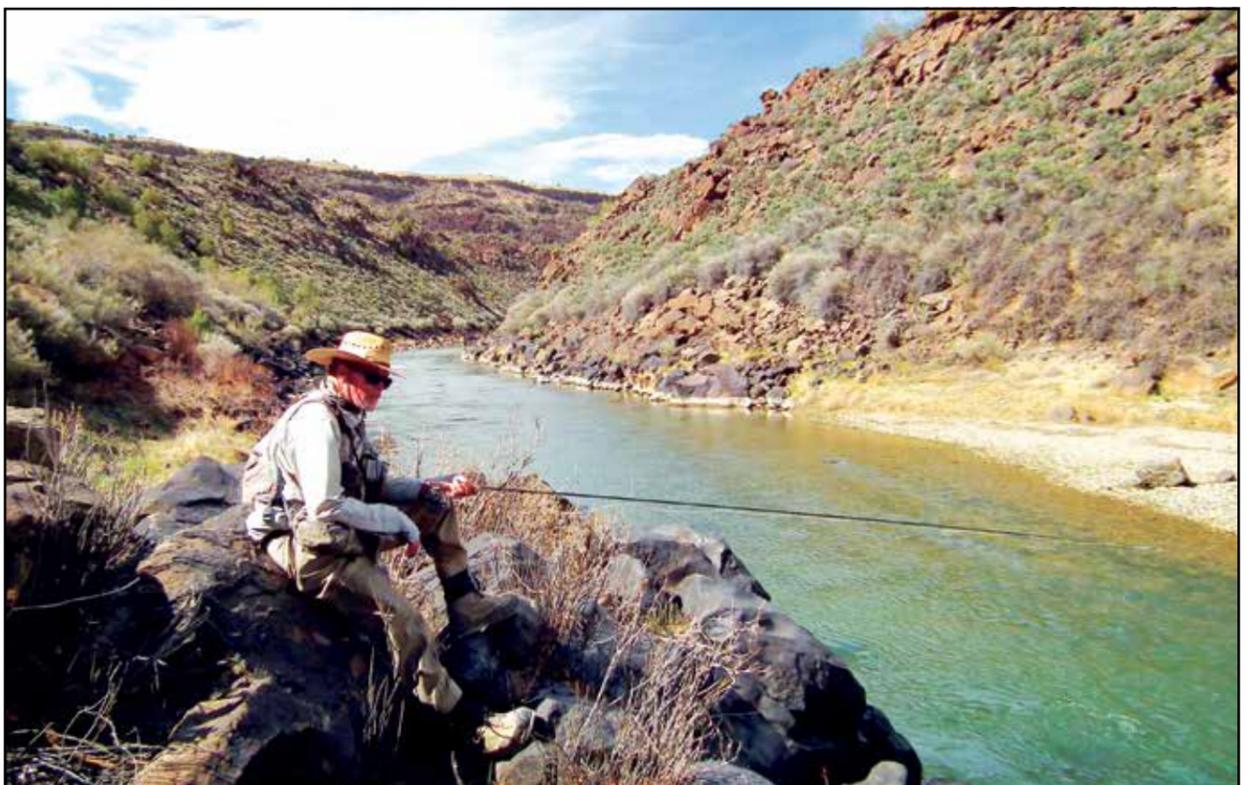


Photo: Karl Moffatt

**Angler, author and fishing guide Taylor Streit ponders a stretch of the Rio Grande before casting for trout in a section of the Rio Grande Gorge above Pilar.**

Grande from legendary local angler, Charley Reynolds, but they rarely had occasion to do it together. That's because Streit spent his days guiding clients while Nichols was home in bed after writing all night. They became longtime friends after meeting at Streit's fly shop, where they often compared notes and exchanged tales.

These days Nichols, 73, doesn't fish his beloved river much. A chronic inner ear problem makes it difficult to keep his balance on the river's tricky terrain. Despite that, Streit, 67, took him out during last year's caddis hatch to a gentle stretch of the river near Manby Hot Springs.

They got into a few trout that day and Nichols says he hopes to do it again this year.

More recently, the two were able to get together down on the Rio Grande near Pilar, where

they were asked what the secret was to fishing the big river.

"Buy our books," they said with a chuckle.

Streit's guidebook "Fly Fish New Mexico," and his instructional manual "Instinctive Fly Fishing" are essential reading for any angler. But it's his book "Man vs Fish" where one can read about a rare day of day of fishing the Rio Grande with Nichols, the man Streit says knows more about the river than even him.

To many, Nichols, 73, is best known for his trilogy of fictional northern New Mexico-based novels, the "Milagro Beanfield War," "The Magic Journey" and "The Nirvana Blues." Others might know Nichols from his trilogy of memoirs, "If Mountains Die," "The Last Beautiful Days of Autumn" and "On the Mesa."

In those books one can gain some insight into



Nichols' world and also learn a lot of what it takes to fish the mercurial Rio Grande.

Nichols notes in "Last Beautiful Days of Autumn" that entering the Gorge "is like walking into both a physical and spiritual meat grinder" where "there is no end to the fabled calamities of this mighty river." And with his trademark humor and irony, Nichols proceeds to recount all of the things that can and will go wrong while fishing in the Rio Grande gorge. Busted rods, missing reels, spills and the ever-present fear of an encounter with a rattlesnake.

"You know, I never did meet one during all those years," he says.

While much has changed in recent years on the Rio Grande, even more has remained the same, Nichols says.

"It's still a rugged, remote, challenging river where half the battle is getting there," he says. "That's what I loved about it, the work involved and the triumph of surviving it."

Nichols' "skittering" technique involves the use of a short leader from which two or even three wet flies are dangling. The rig is then twitched across the top and just under the surface of the water to entice trout to strike.

Nichols says the technique works best in the roiling waters among the boulder fields of the river. One of his favorite spots is the run between Little and Big Arsenic Springs campgrounds in the Wild Rivers Recreation Area near Cerro.

The keys to successfully fishing the Rio Grande are to be alert and prepared, he says. Always let someone know where you're going and carry matches, a poncho, sweater and windbreaker, polarized sunglasses and water. Other than that, pack as lightly as possible and leave the waders behind, Nichols suggests. "Just watch your step; the basalt rock down there is very slippery when wet," he warns. "Try not to fall in."

Nichols says the fishing is actually pretty easy



Photo: Karl Moffatt

**Between them, author John Nichols, left, and fishing guide Taylor Streit have spent more hours fishing the Rio Grande Gorge than almost anyone.**

once you get down steep canyon trails. If the sun is off the water, it can be really good. Streit agrees that the Rio Grande fishes best in the shade and that an angler can do better in the more remote areas of the gorge. By simply hiking a couple miles up the canyon from either the Taos Junction Bridge north of Pilar or the John Dunn Bridge at Arroyo Hondo, an angler can find unspoiled water and great fishing.

"There are still places on this river where the trout have never been caught," says Streit. "And we're still finding new ways to get to them." The Rio Grande Gorge and its stunning scenery are protected from most commercial development under its designation by President Barack Obama last year as a national monument. And the long-neglected campgrounds and day-use areas along the river at the Orilla Verde Recreation Area near Pilar have received much-needed facelifts.

The popular nine-mile stretch of river between the Taos Junction Bridge at Pilar and County Line takeout downstream was stocked with about 30,000 catchable-size rainbow trout last year, says Eric Frey, Sportfish Program manager for the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish.

The upper stretches of the river between the Wild Rivers Recreation Area and John Dunn Bridge have been stocked in recent years with native cutthroat trout, Frey said. Those stockings have produced a population that is now reaching the 14- to 16-inch range and with time could rival some of the bigger brown trout in the river.

An unintended benefit of stocking cutthroats into the Rio Grande is that they can breed with the wild rainbows to produce "cutbows," very colorful, hard-fighting and drought-tolerant fish, Frey said.

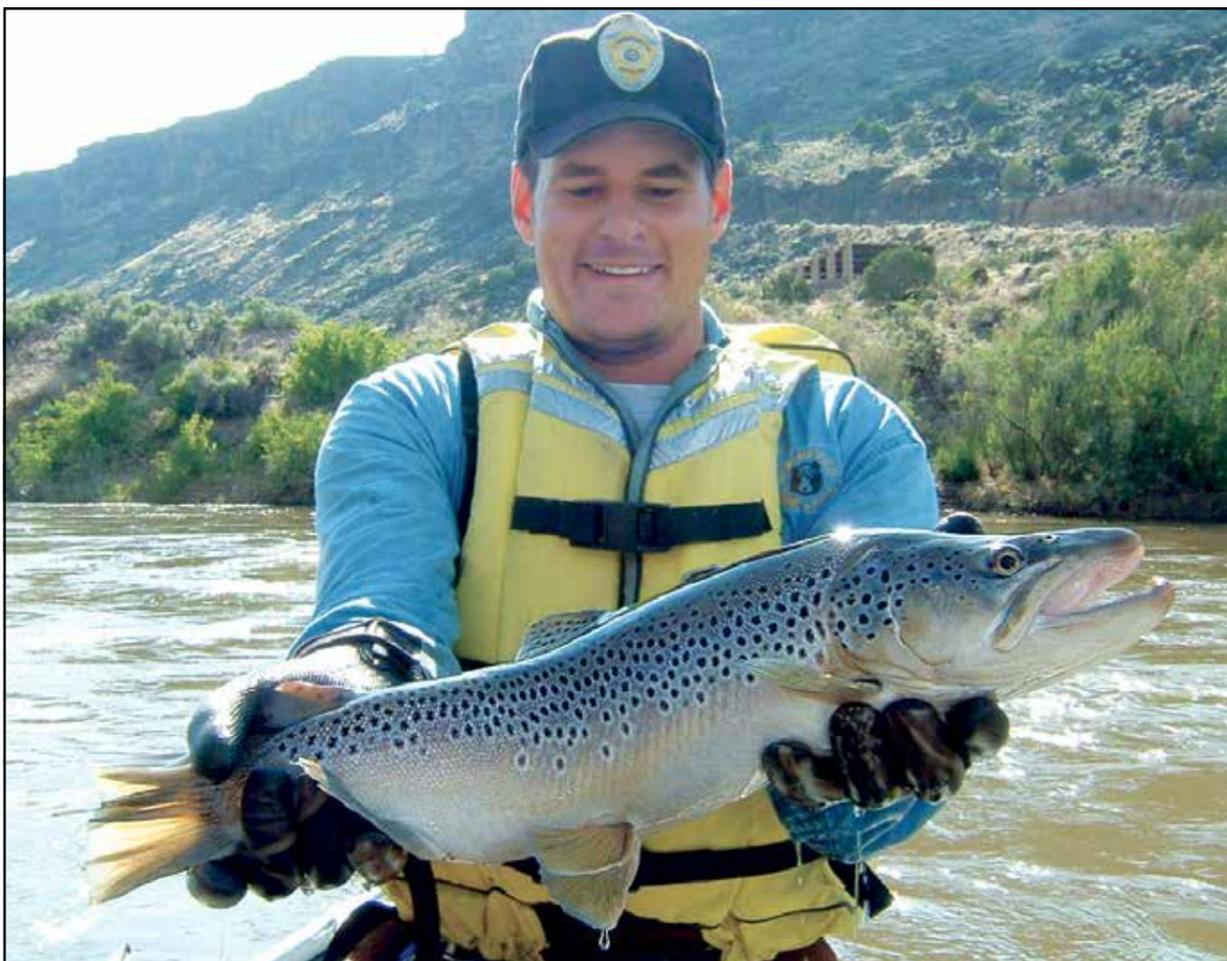
The Rio Grande is holding a lot of fish these days, Frey says.

The most recent electro-shocking survey on the river in 2008 revealed healthy numbers of trout in the 8-mile stretch of river between La Junta and the John Dunn Bridge, he said. The survey revealed about 1,400 trout per mile with twice as many browns as rainbows and some monsters in the 25-inch range.

The survey recorded catching almost three times as many fish per mile in the remote 16-mile stretch between the John Dunn and Taos Junction bridges, Frey said. Along the way, shocking crews also turned up impressive numbers of large northern pike, predators that have made their way downstream from Colorado over the years.

Streit says the long-running drought actually has improved fishing on the river. There's less spring runoff carrying silt and sediment into the river, so it's running clearer more often, which allows for extra fishing days.

"I've never seen it fish any better than it is right now," Streit says.



Department of Game and Fish file photo

**Eric Frey, sport fish program manager for the Department of Game and Fish, shows off one of the big brown trout that turned up during one of the agency's surveys of the Rio Grande Gorge.**

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