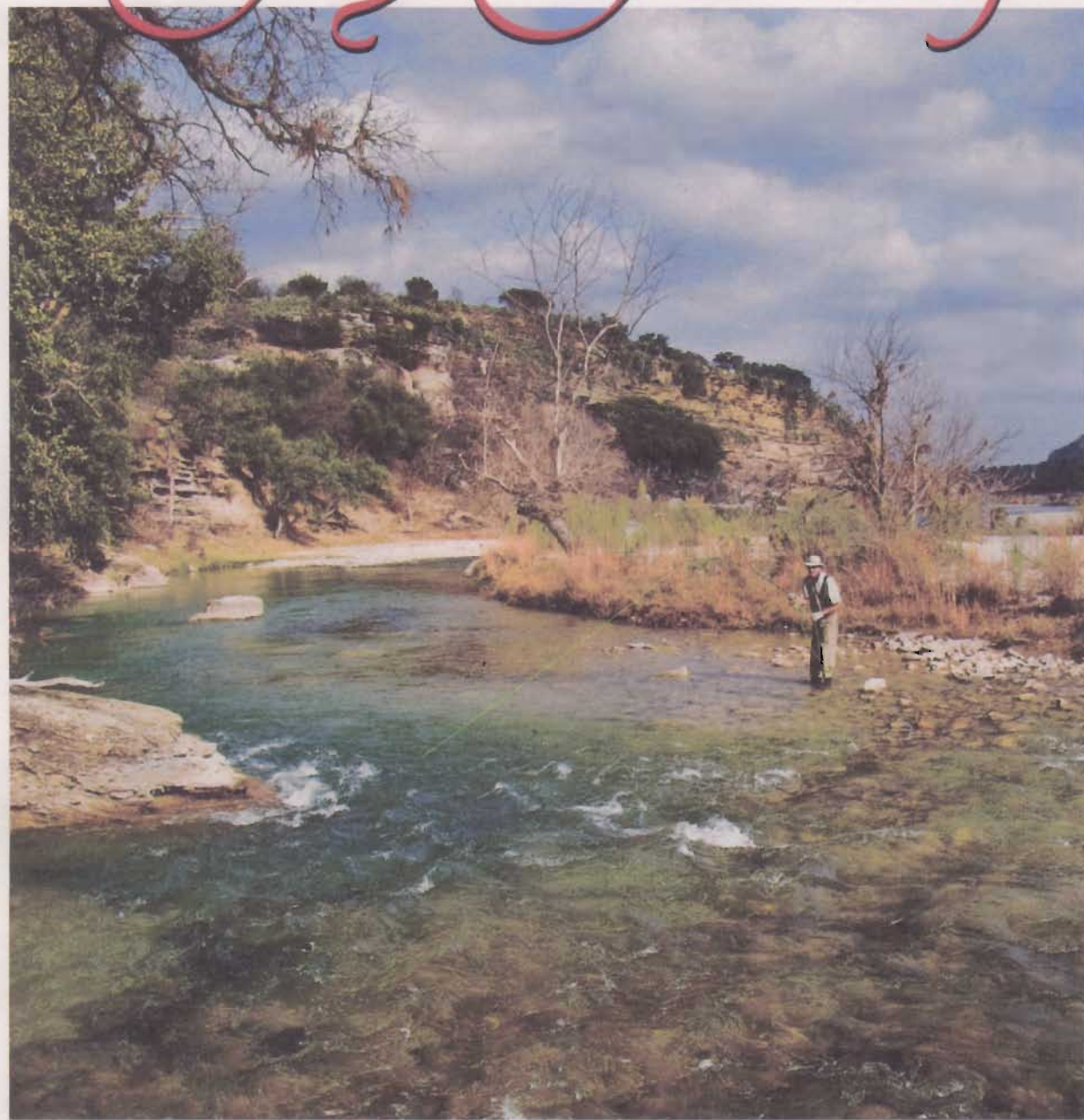


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# San Juan Mountains, CO

## Llama Trekking in the Weminuche Wilderness

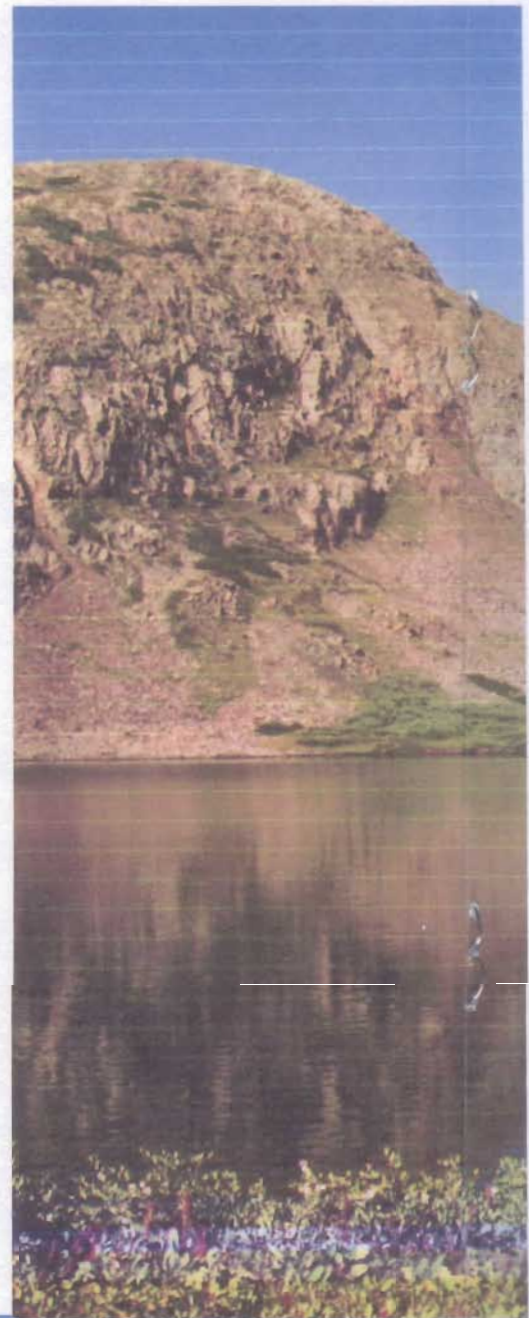
By Mark Lance

**T**he San Juan Mountains dominate the skyline across most of southwest Colorado. These are young mountains in the snail's pace of geologic time. Thirty million years ago, belching volcanic ash and lava built the foundation for the jagged profile and rugged landscape left for us to explore and fish today. The relentless advance and subsequent recession of glaciers slowly gouged broad, U-shaped valleys into the landscape. Persistent erosion by wind and water created dramatic peaks and forbidding canyons. Then, the evolution and migration of fish from the west, through millennia, populated the region with cutthroat trout. And this is where a San Juan Mountains fly fishing adventure begins.

Traveling south along Colorado's Million Dollar Highway, one can only begin to appreciate the youthful ruggedness of these mountains. Otto Mears built this road in the late 1880s as a toll route between mining camps. Today, this famous scenic byway section of Colorado Highway 550 carries a bit of lore. There seems to be more than one plausible story about the origin of the name. Some say the moniker was inspired by the million-dollar cost per mile to build the roadway through these forbidding mountains. Others hypothesize that the name has to do with the riches of precious ores mined and transported from the region along the roadway. And, perhaps a more modern version associates the name to the "million dollar" view around every bend.

Our truck, packed with camping and fly fishing gear, strains against the steep grade as we drive south from Ouray, Colorado. This famous ribbon of highway is little more than a winding sliver of asphalt clinging precariously to mountainsides and canyon walls. So many spectacular views unfold that navigating is a challenge. Despite the absence of guardrails, we crane our necks in awkward shapes to take in the pastel colors of evening's alpenglow saturating the high peaks, while rushing streams far below plant visions of trout firmly in our minds.

Iron-stained mountainsides and rickety weathered structures awkwardly perched alongside heaps of tailings tell the "boom-and-bust" story of mining heritage in this mineral-rich belt. We finally negotiate the hairpin descent from 11,118-foot Red



*The most productive fishing is often right at your feet, as cruising trout search the shoreline for terrestrial insects and other food in shallow, warmer, near-shore water (above). A large cutthroat displays pink gill plates and iconic red slash (left).*



ALL PHOTOS BY MARK LANCE

Mountain Pass, reaching Silverton at nightfall.

Silverton, a national historic landmark, is a quaint little town and one of several prominent settlements that has survived to symbolize Colorado's rough-and-tumble mining era. Silverton, Ouray, Creede, Lake City, and Telluride all share a similar story and importance as the search for gold and silver developed in the San Juan Mountain mineral belt. Industrial-scale, precious-metal mining in the region is uneconomical these days. These historic towns have reinvented themselves as destination tourist attractions, catering to outdoor enthusiasts, antique collectors, and sightseers. Not to mention fly fishers.

Otto Mears left another legacy to the region: the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad. Today, throughout the summer months and into autumn when

the aspens turn gold, the train transports throngs of gawking tourists to Silverton's main-street attractions.

We choose the Villa Dallavale Inn on Silverton's famous Blair Street for our last night in civilization. This quaint, family-run B&B, appointed in Victorian decor, has a rich history. Built by Austrian immigrants in the mining heyday, the building was first a boarding house, later served as the town's grocery and butcher shop, then was rebuilt to its present-day incarnation as a quiet and comfortable B&B. You will not find a better night's sleep or a more nourishing breakfast in Silverton. We take a late stroll down the historic main drag before turning in, peering into interesting storefronts, quaffing a handmade beer in a local saloon turned brew pub, and finding it easy to imagine the days when the likes of Bat Masterson and



*Along the Continental Divide trail, views in every direction are unobstructed (above). The pastel hues of Columbine, Colorado's state flower, dot rocky outcrops throughout the San Juan Mountains (below).*

Wyatt Earp strolled the streets of Silverton.

Rain comes down hard during the night as summer's "monsoon season" arrives. For the next month or two, we can expect late afternoon and evening showers in Colorado's high country. At daybreak, Silverton is lost in a thick fog. After a delicious breakfast and mugs of coffee, we begin to weigh and pack our food and equipment carefully into two sets of llama panniers. The misty shroud finally lifts, revealing a symmetrical reflection of Kendall Mountain in rain puddles along Silverton's main street. We're thrilled to be in striking distance of wild trout.

### Fishing by Llama

Bill Redwood greets us at his home on the edge of town with a huge smile and the handshake of a bear. Redwood has been raising llamas and outfitting adventurers in the San Juan Mountains backcountry for more than 20 years. He has packed both British Broadcasting Company and National Geographic

expeditions into the nearby Weminuche Wilderness with his llamas. He and his llamas also helped build a remote section of the Colorado Trail, a 479-mile path threading its way through the mountains between Denver and Durango.

During Silverton's short summers, Redwood and his partner, Mark Pommier, are busy guiding outdoor enthusiasts into remote San Juan Mountains wilderness settings with their trusty llamas. Redwood's backcountry camps leave a lasting image of fine outdoor living with tents for two, an outdoor dining fly complete with table and chairs, and a gourmet menu of tenderloin, salmon, leg of lamb, fresh vegetables, breads, and in-season fruits. The outfitters can even arrange for a fishing guide if guests want an expert introduction to trout fishing in high lakes and streams.

"On the other end of the spectrum, we also lease llamas to hikers who want to do it themselves,"



says Redwood. "This option gives experienced backcountry travelers more freedom in their itinerary and route."

This is the option my wife, Sharon, and I decided to take, settling for the lightweight, backpacker-style approach, sans backpack.

As it turns out, llamas are well suited for travel in the Colorado mountains. These hard-working critters are native to the high elevations of the Andes, where they are also used as pack animals. Their padded feet afford them traction over rocky terrain, and yet they are far less destructive to fragile forest and tundra trails than horses. Interestingly, these camelids once populated parts of North America, and are thought to have been pushed into Central and South America during the Pleistocene ice age.

Today, thousands of llamas are raised in captivity in North America. They are social, herding creatures, yet quite hardy and independent in the wilderness. Llamas have a fine undercoat, which, in their native South America is often used for handicrafts and garments, while their coarser outer guard hair is woven into rugs, wall hangings, and lead ropes. For the most part, llamas are self-sufficient in the wilderness as they forage for food from willows and grasses. They grow to about 6 feet tall and will happily carry somewhere in the neighborhood of 60-plus pounds, making them low-maintenance alternatives to horses. No, you can't ride them, but if you are relatively fit and enjoy hiking, llamas ease the walking substantially because they can carry most of your gear.

## Tundra Lakes

Bill quickly refreshes our memory of how to pack, handle, and care for the llamas while on the trail. We load two of his experienced animals into the trailer and head up Cunningham Gulch to the trailhead for Highland Mary Lakes. Our plan is a multi-day, round-trip llama trek for trout in the northern reaches of the Weminuche (pronounced Wem-in-ooch) Wilderness deep in the San Juan Mountains. Like old friends, llamas Arico and Braveheart, my wife, Sharon, and I begin our adventure into familiar country, panniers bulging, and a quiver of Scott fly rods strapped down securely.

Across the Weminuche Wilderness, many, many lakes dot the alpine tundra and high cirques tucked in tight to the flanks of massive peaks. Most of the lakes are above timberline, which, at this latitude is near 12,000 feet. Trout are plentiful throughout the Weminuche; brookies, rainbows, and cutthroat inhabit both streams and lakes. Once you have climbed above the valley floor, a treeless tundra landscape, pierced by 13,000- and 14,000-foot peaks, unfolds. The setting is a surreal backdrop for hiking and angling.

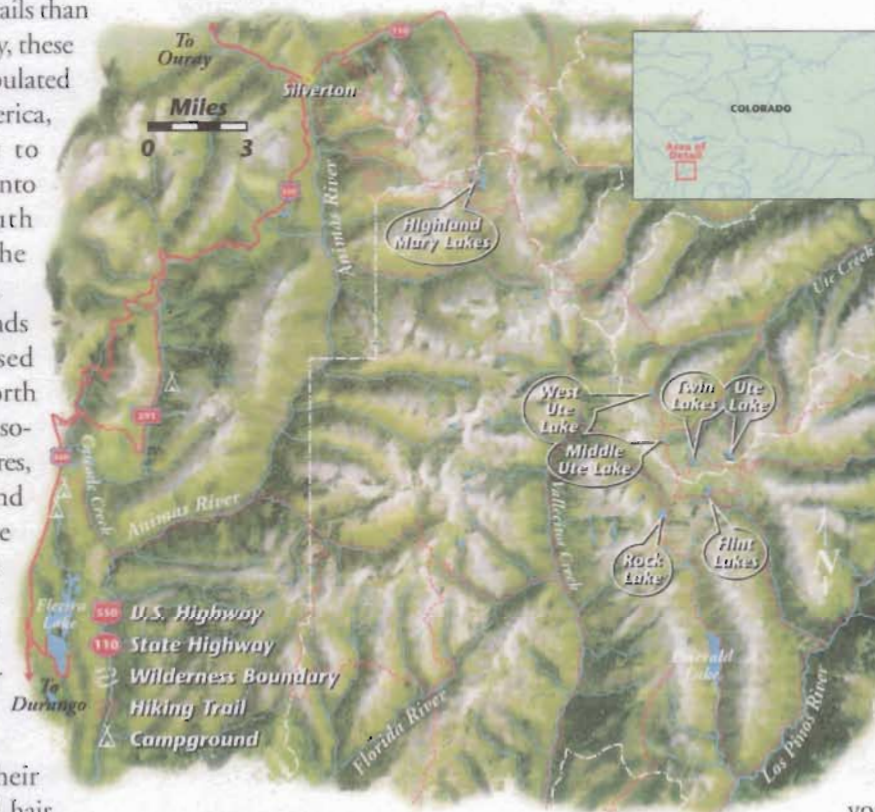
The route to Highland Mary Lakes climbs about 2 miles up a fairly steep, but well-

marked trail. The lakes make an enjoyable fly-fishing venue for two- to four-day llama trips. You can expect wonderful brook trout fishing and spectacular scenery, including excellent chances for watching elk graze on distant hillsides.

From the trail, the sight of rising forms dimpling the otherwise glassy surface of a high-mountain lake can get your adrenaline flowing.

Your angling-oriented left brain tells you to rush down to water's edge, select a fly, and cast away. However, the cool, rarified, alpine air requires a little acclimation time for flatlanders. Rushing anywhere at this elevation is a flawed response, likely to leave you hunkered over and gasping for oxygen instead of casting delicate loops to unsuspecting trout.

At times, the lakes are alive with brook trout feeding with abandon. The occasional "terrestrial rain" litters the surface of high elevation lakes with ants, beetles, and other small land insects sparking a feeding frenzy. Calm evening mayfly or midge hatches can instigate a similar reaction from the fish. Summers are short at this elevation and these trout take advantage of any easy meal. The ubiquitous Adams, a Griffith's Gnat, any variation of the Elk Hair Caddis, a foam beetle, or Gary LaFontaine's favorite mountain lake weapon, the ant pattern, will usually trick a brookie on the feed. Leave the 5- and 6-weight rods at home. You can better appreciate the spunk of a brook trout on a 2- or 3-weight fly rod. What a perfect place





Nature's artistic patterns are prominently displayed in the heavily spotted tail of cutthroat trout.

of the Colorado River cutthroat has been reduced dramatically in more modern times, first by overharvest by miners in the 1800s and settlers who followed. Then, the introduction of nonnative brook trout from the East and brown trout from Europe nearly rang the death knell for the "cutties." In the high-stakes game of finding food and habitat, these nonnative invaders out-competed the cutthroat. Meanwhile, rainbow trout were imported from the Pacific Northwest. They spawn in the spring, as do cutthroats, so they easily cross with the cutthroat and create hybrids, diluting the genetic purity of the native trout. Colorado River cutthroat were in big trouble even 100 years ago, according to Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDW) fish biologist Mike Japhet.

to introduce a young or new angler to the joy of dry-fly fishing. There are no trees to snag your flies and the 6- to 12-inch brookies are often very cooperative. Some days, the fishing is easy; other days, the rhythms and habits of high-elevation trout are quite perplexing.

The setting is idyllic, but you must be prepared for the weather at this high elevation. Mother Nature has no qualms about pelting you with sleet, snow, or rain on any summer day. The weather can change in a heartbeat. Midday temperatures in the 70s may plummet into the 30s at night even in midsummer. Prepare for frequent late-afternoon showers. Lightning is a danger above timberline, so select camp sites wisely. Do not set up camp on ridgelines or hilltops. Also, camp more than 100 feet from streams and lakes to protect fragile alpine riparian zones, and purify all drinking and cooking water. Tread lightly on this fragile landscape and leave no sign that you were there.

### Cutthroat Country

Through a stroke of fortuitous evolutionary timing, just as the ancient version of the llama was being driven from North America by advancing Pleistocene glaciation, ancestral cutthroat were migrating inland from what is now the Columbia River Basin to eventually become isolated in this region of the Rockies. The original expansive range

The CDW has recently taken pure native cutthroats from streams deep in the Weminuche Wilderness to establish brood stock for a program aimed at ensuring the viability of future populations. Hatchery-raised fingerling cutties are released back into high lakes in the Weminuche. Our llama trek became a memorable treasure hunt for these special trout.

### Deep in the Weminuche

Several fishable lakes await adventurous anglers to the southeast of Highland Mary Lakes. Trail 502 joins the Continental Divide Trail (CDT) a short distance from the Cunningham Gulch trailhead. This is an internationally-known trail, still under construction in many stretches, connecting Canada and Mexico more or less along the Continental Divide. The route is quite popular with hikers and mountain climbers. For hardy anglers, it's the path to great fishing. Hiking south along the CDT leads to high-elevation lake-fishing as good as you will find anywhere. And the scenery is incomparable. West Ute, Middle Ute, and Ute lakes all sit near the trail at about 12,000 feet elevation. A more wild or pristine setting to catch trout would be difficult to find. Reaching Middle Ute Lake requires a daunting 12-plus-mile trek on a trail seemingly at the top of the world. Make base

### Heavy Metal Beetle

By Richard Pilatzke



- Hook:** Dai Riki 305, sizes 10-16
- Thread:** Black Danville 6/0
- Back:** 2mm black foam strip with green metallic foil
- Underbody:** Peacock crystal chenille
- Indicator:** 1/8-inch yellow foam indicator strip
- Legs:** Black Krystal Flash

camp at any of the Ute lakes. From here, you are within striking distance of Flint Lake and Rock Lake.

Trout abound!

Seemingly countless hidden lakes are tucked away in the Weminuche's mountain cirques. Some have names and some are simply blue splotches on the map. Trout even inhabit the unnamed lakes that are deep enough to avoid freezing solid in the dead of winter. Fishing these spots is rewarding, as you are unlikely to see another soul and the trout are not pressured. There are a few jewels off the beaten path that hold large cutthroat trout. Though cutts have a reputation for being easily fooled by artificial flies, this not always the case in high-elevation lakes. The larger trout surviving in some of these places are quite persnickety. You will have the best shot at fooling big trout by carefully stalking along the shoreline and watching intently for feeding fish cruising the shallows. Note their swim lanes and patterns, then make your cast delicately, leading a fish far enough ahead to not spook it. Easier said than done. In the absence of visible fish, cast a sinking or sinking-tip line around any visible structure or sudden dropoffs. Retrieve small nymphs slowly. Change the depth of your presentation and your retrieve rate until you discover a combination that draws strikes.

Set aside a week to fish these remote lakes. Plan for a two-day journey into the wilderness, followed by three or four days to fish and explore, then two days to return to the Cunningham Gulch trailhead. A pack or llama trip deep into the Weminuche is best undertaken by experienced backcountry travelers. Rigorous planning is a must. Your equipment list needs top-notch gear to ensure safety and comfort: far better to err on the side of caution, and in the case of food, on the side of excess. Llamas can take the load off your back, but the rest is up to you.

Traveling in the backcountry with llamas and a fly rod, I quickly developed a deep appreciation and affection for these four-legged beasts of burden. They were welcome hiking partners. Their hard work on the trail left me plenty of energy for fishing and exploring. I looked forward to seeing them as I crawled bleary eyed out of the tent each morning. I smiled when they communicated with their soft humming; sometimes, I hummed right back at them. Then it struck me: raking my fingers through their thick, unruly coats, I contemplated a genre of fly patterns spun from their fur. Imagine hiking lazily from lake to lake through Colorado's San Juan Mountains with a fly rod and a lifetime supply of dubbing-on-the-hoof. What a great way to fish. ➤

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Mark Lance, [www.riverlightimages.com](http://www.riverlightimages.com), is the Rocky Mountain field editor for Southwest Fly Fishing.

## SAN JUAN MOUNTAINS NOTEBOOK



**When:** Mid-July–mid-Sept.

**Where:** Weminuche Wilderness, CO.

**Headquarters:** Silverton and Durango. *Information:* Silverton Chamber of Commerce, (800) 752-4494, [www.silvertoncolorado.com](http://www.silvertoncolorado.com); Durango Area Tourism Office, (800) 463-8726, [www.durango.org](http://www.durango.org); Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad, (877) 872-4607, [www.durangotrain.com](http://www.durangotrain.com).

**Appropriate gear:** 2- to 5-wt. rods, floating and sinking or sinking-tip lines.

**Useful fly patterns:** Caddisfly patterns, Griffith's Gnat, Pheasant Tail Nymph, midge larvae patterns, Adams, RS2, Crystal Bugger, hopper and ant patterns, Pilatzke's Heavy Metal Beetle, leech patterns, Woolly Bugger.

**Necessary accessories:** Polarized sunglasses, sunblock, high-quality rain gear, fleece jacket, daypack, water bottle, water purifying pump, map, compass, GPS.

**Nonresident license:** \$8/1 day, \$20/5 days, \$55/annual.

**Fly Shops/outfitters:** *Durango:* Duranglers, (888) 347-4346, [www.duranglers.com](http://www.duranglers.com); The Caddis Company, (970) 382-9978, [www.caddiscompany.com](http://www.caddiscompany.com). *Animas Valley Anglers,* (970) 259-0484, [www.got-trout.com](http://www.got-trout.com); *Redwood Llamas,* (970) 560-2926, [www.redwoodllamas.com](http://www.redwoodllamas.com).

**Books/maps:** *Fly Fishing Southern Colorado: An Angler's Guide* by Craig Martin, Tom Knopick, and John Flick; *Flyfisher's Guide to Colorado* by Marty Bartholomew; *Colorado Atlas & Gazetteer* by DeLorme Mapping; National Geographic Trails Illustrated Topographic Maps, No. 140–Weminuche Wilderness and No. 141–Telluride/Silverton/Ouray/Lake City.