

Tips and Suggestions for Fishing The Rio San Antonio and East Fork Jemez rivers in the Valles Caldera National Preserve

Introduction:

If you are reading this article, then you have either drawn out or reserved a planned fishing trip in the Valles Caldera National Preserve (VCNP) or are contemplating it. This short document will assist you in preparing for your trip or help you decide whether to pursue it.

Background:

Among all of the outdoor sporting events offered by the VCNP, none is more exciting to an angler than the fly fishing on the Rio San Antonio or the East Fork of the Jemez River on the Caldera property. Although both streams are small—rarely wider than 15 feet and sometimes as narrow as 24 inches—they contain large numbers of primarily Brown trout, with a few Rainbows scattered about in the East Fork. Many of the fish are small, often less than eight inches in length. However, occasionally a fourteen or fifteen incher can be taken from some of the deep, cool pools.

Fishing on a small river can provide a unique outing and depending on the skill level of the operator and his or her groundwork, it could provide a world class experience. If you prepare well, are patient, and work closely with your partner(s), you can expect to catch 15, 25, or even 40 or more fish in a single day. What's more, you will surely see elk by the hundreds and perhaps an eagle, turkey or even a bear during your trip.

The Organization:

The VCNP personnel are courteous and competent and the rules are simple and clear. Whether you have been drawn to fish the Rio San Antonio or reserved a spot on the East Fork, you will start your day at the main staging area on the Valle Grande. At the appointed time, which you should verify for your fishing trip, they will gather all of the anglers and their gear for a briefing on the rules.

Typically, you will be restricted to barbless^{*}, single hooks with artificial lures only. The number of fish you are allowed to take varies, so they will announce the number at the briefing. A valid New Mexico fishing license and habitat stamp are both required of every VCNP fisherman and woman and sometimes a NM Game Warden will visit the anglers to verify their credentials.

VCNP drivers will provide transportation between the staging area and the Rio San Antonio. They will provide at least one in your party with a small transceiver to alert you of the pickup time or for you to contact them in case of an emergency.

If you are fishing the East Fork, you will have options for hiking in or driving your own vehicle. The VCNP staff will provide directions.

^{*} Barbed hooks with the barbs fully smashed down are also acceptable.

Privately-owned boots and nets are not allowed to reduce the potential of passing Whirling Disease into the river. Sanitized nets will be loaned to you upon request.

Once on the stream, you and your partners are free to choose how you fish your beat (the section of the stream that has been assigned to you.) Each beat is well marked, but it is a good idea to confirm with the VCNP staff exactly where the markers are located.

The Stream and the Fish:

Both the Rio San Antonio and East Fork within the VCNP meander through grassy



meadows. The grass is high, sometimes up to your knees. There are no trees or other large natural cover to conceal your presence from the fish. Additionally, the water is typically clear, except during a heavy spring runoff or following summer thunderstorms that can create murky conditions.

The river's meandering provides many quality places to land your fly, including deep holes where it bends around a turn into swift riffles as it traverses some declining territory. Because of the elevation of over

Figure 1 The San Antonio River

8000 feet, the river is usually cool to cold, ideal for mountain trout.

All of the trout in both rivers are stream-born. They are wily, cautious, and particular about their food. They can be easily spooked and scattered from a location, but will return a short time later (10-15 minutes), providing that you can settle yourself down and sit quietly.

Preparing for the Fishing Event:

To be most successful, careful preparation is essential. First, be sure that you bring good clothing and boots. Remember, you are up at a high elevation and the weather can change rapidly. High quality, water-proof, Gore-Tex® lined hunting boots work very well. It can be very chilly in the early morning and hot in the afternoon sun—dawn to afternoon temperature swings of 40 to 50 degrees F are not uncommon. Dressing in layers is a must. Keep a rain parka in your backpack in case of a sudden mountain shower. To get a weather report for your fishing day, go to the National Weather Service site and use their “point forecast” service¹. Simply click on the area of the map just to the west of Los Alamos in the upper central part of the state. The approximate location where you will be fishing is 35.976 degrees North latitude and -106.591 degrees West longitude.

The atmosphere is thin in that area and the resulting high levels of ultraviolet (UV) radiation can cause serious sunburns and eye burns. The best defense is to keep the sun off of your body by wearing a good wide-brim hat, a medium or long sleeve shirt, long pants,

and polarized sunglasses with a 100% UV coating. The polarized lenses will help you see into the water by reducing glare. Make sure that you apply a good UVA/UVB sunblock lotion or cream on all exposed skin.

Finally, carry plenty of water, at least a quart or much more, depending on the weather. You will probably want to pack a lunch or snack. Insect repellent and a first aid kit should also be in your pack.

Second, you need good equipment and the skill to use it. Typically a short rod and light line and leader work well (e.g., 7.5' rod with number three line and corresponding leader and tippet). A shorter rod is an advantage in the tight conditions.

Carry extra leaders and tippets in various sizes in case some are lost or you need to adapt to varying fishing conditions. If you have room in your pack you might also carry extra reels with different weight lines. Pack extra tools, such as surgeon's clamps and clippers, because if they fall into the high grass finding them is very challenging.

All of this equipment is commonly available in sporting goods stores or online. If you are in doubt about what equipment to buy, consult with professionals who specialize in fishing sports. Los Pinos Fly Shop and Charlie's Sporting Goods are two in Albuquerque that are well stocked.

If you are not an accomplished fly fisher, you should spend some time reading about the sport and practicing your casting before heading out to the stream. Bates presents a good discussion of the fundamentals of the sport². This book is often found in public libraries.

Being able to place a fly precisely on target is important on the small river. It will also minimize snags resulting from errant casts that miss the river, landing on the grassy banks.

It is good to practice casting in windy conditions. The river is in an open area with winds that are often fickle in direction and velocity. Casting into the wind or perpendicular to it can be tricky and to be most successful you should be reasonably well versed to operate in those conditions.

Third, you should bring a good supply of flies. Because of the size and clarity of the water, dry fly is almost always your best choice. However, some beaded nymphs might be handy in case the fish are lying on the bottom, as is sometimes the case with some of the deeper pools or early on a cool morning.

Schollmeyer's hatching guide and Martin's fly fishing book can guide you on selecting the right flies^{3,4}. Both are available at Charlie's Sporting Goods in Albuquerque. However, it is best to check with the VCNP staff on what is the best fly to use at the time of your visit. If you can do so, call the staff ahead of your trip or contact them via email. Contact information can be found at their web site⁵. If you have time, visit the site on a day when a

fishing trip is ongoing and meet the anglers as they are coming off the water at the staging area[†]. Most of them will be forthcoming about what they used and what worked for them.

You can also get solid advice about the appropriate bugs by consulting with the professionals at specialty sporting goods stores in the Santa Fe and Albuquerque area. In general, the preponderance of insects in the area during the warm months includes grasshoppers, black ants and caddisflies. The ants are harmless, in case you are wondering.

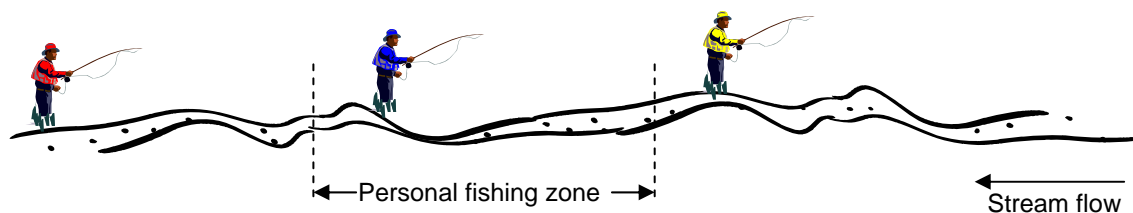
Fishing Strategy and Techniques:

Whether you are fishing the Rio San Antonio or East Fork, you will be assigned a specific section of river to fish. This is your beat. The first thing to do when you get to your beat is to check the bug population. Remember, the fish are going to be eating what is flying about, crawling around, and swimming in the river. You will certainly find black ants because they exist by the millions. And hoppers are there in force during the summer. But there are also other insects. Spend some time exploring the area and selecting the flies that look similar to what is living there.

After you have done your bug survey, you can tie on one of your selections and begin to fish. Before you begin, there is one important guiding principle to bear in mind: *stealth*. These fish are skittish and you have little cover. By maintaining a low profile, walking softly, keeping your voice to a whisper, and moving slowly and deliberately you will minimize disrupting the fish and maximize your chances for success.

Survey your area from afar and before you approach the bank and come to an agreement with your partner(s) about how you are going to fish it. Typically, your group will fish as a team and fishing is done upstream. Usually, the fish are facing into the stream-flow waiting for food and approaching them from the rear provides some advantages to an angler.

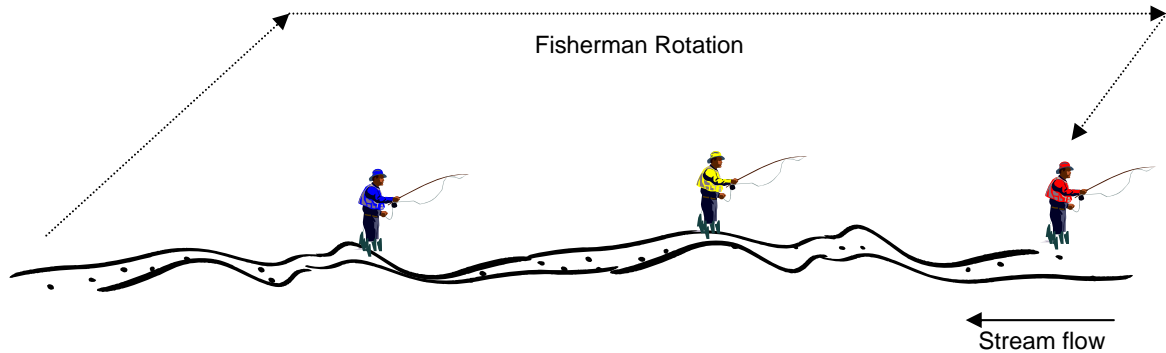
Often each member of a fishing team will claim 75'-100' stretches of the stream to fish, with each stretch being a "personal fishing zone" for each person. These stretches are contiguous. All the partners approach the lower end of their section and begin working



upstream. After each section has been worked, the person in the section farthest downstream moves to a section upstream, ahead of the lead person. This kind of rotation insures that every person has a regular opportunity to fish a fresh section of the stream.

[†] Usually, the fishermen pickup on the Rio San Antonio is around 3pm, but it could be earlier or later depending on the time of year and the weather. There is no van shuttling for the East Fork fishermen.

It is important to remember that each person's fishing zone is both in front and behind him or her. Also, when moving to another position, remember not to walk too close to the bank as it will scare the fish. When changing positions, walk directly away from (perpendicular) the stream for 25' or 30' then turn parallel to it and maintain this separation while walking to the new spot. Then turn perpendicular to the stream and approach the bank with care and stealth.



At the completion of a rotation, a fisherman or woman has an excellent opportunity to entice a fish to strike. As you approach the stream, keep your head low and out of sight of



Figure 3 Stealthily approach the river's edge.



Figure 2 Drop the fly over the river's edge

the fish. Keeping in mind that the top of your hat is higher than your eyes, you should never see the water for if you do, then your hat will be visible to the fish and your presence is announced.

As you draw near the bank, crawl on your hands and knees. When you are close enough so that the end of your rod is just over the bank, flip the fly onto the water. You will not be able to see the action so listen for the take and then set the hook with an upward motion.

After you have caught a fish or two from your crouched position, you can settle into a spot on the bank from which you will cast upstream. It is preferable to have a variety of fishable waters above you—riffles, pools, deep and shallow flows at various depths, so

select your area carefully. It is especially advantageous to work a bow in the river with a deep bank where you can nurse the fly through the turn and into a riffle.



Figure 4 Settling into a selected fishing spot

When you set up on the bank you will likely scare some fish away. Stay calm, quiet and be patient because in a while (perhaps 10-12 minutes) they will begin to return. If you are planning to change flies or untangle your line, this is the time and place to do it.

When you are ready, begin casting upstream. The presentation is extremely important. The fly should lay itself out onto the water at the end of a line roll. Then be sure to tend the line

downstream and mend[‡] it as needed to maintain a natural appearance. When the fish are active and you have presented the right fly, the fish will take it almost immediately after it hits the water. Clearly the fish can see the fly before it hits the water and anticipate where it will land. This kind of casting and placement is very effective.

Another technique is to simply drop the fly onto the water and let out about 20-25 feet of



Figure 5 Hold fish in water until it swims away

line. Then, keeping the fly in the middle of the river, walk along at the same pace as the river, keeping the line and fly in front of you. You will likely get several hits with this method and a good time for it is when you decide to rework a downstream area of your personal fishing zone.

If you view your fellow fishermen and women as teammates and share information, you will all be more successful than working alone or in competition. It is a good idea to rendezvous with

your mates at regular intervals to share intelligence—i.e., the kind of bugs that have been effective, where the strikes have been made, and what presentation is most effective.

[‡] “Mending” adjusts the line so that fly and the line flow at the same speed. Without mending, the line’s flow will change the fly’s direction on the water, disrupting the natural appearance of a free-floating fly. Mending also minimizes slack in the line, thus allowing for quick setting of the hook.

Although it is tempting, it is best not to announce your takes. All that does is frighten the fish.

It is up to you how many fish you want to take (within the limit allowed by the VCNP). Generally, anglers keep the bigger ones. In any case if your day is even marginally fruitful, you will be returning many to the stream.

Many anglers view trout as a treasured resource. Please take great care not to harm the ones you return to the stream. It is best if you can keep them at least partially in the water when you are removing the hook. Never touch them with dry hands and if you are struggling to remove the hook, you may need to give them a break by holding them in the water for a moment (snout into the flow), just to make sure they do not suffer from oxygen depletion.

If they have taken the hook deeply or you cannot remove it without damaging them, simply cut off the line at their mouth and return them to the river. The hook will dissolve in a few days. When returning a trout to the water, hold it lightly in the water—again with the nose into the flow—until it swims off by itself.

Good luck.

¹<http://www.srh.noaa.gov/abq/>

² Bates, J., Fishing, An Encyclopedic Guide to Tackle and Tactics for Fresh and Salt Water, Times Mirror Magazines, Inc., Library of Congress Number 73-80714, E. P. Dutton & Company, New York, 1973.

³ Schollmeyer, J., Hatch Guide for Western Streams, Amato Publications, Portland, OR, 1997.

⁴ Martin, C., Fly Fishing in Northern New Mexico, Revised Edition, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, NM, 2002.

⁵ <http://www.vallescaldera.gov/misc/contact.aspx>