

The Roaring Fork is a big brawling river best fished from a boat, but wading access is available in a few areas.



TERRIE YAMAGISHI PHOTO

THE ROARING FORK

Floating an uncrowded, fast-paced, big river where you get one cast per spot

JOHN GIERACH



TERRIE YAMAGISHI PHOTO

THE ROARING FORK RISES at Independence Lake, 12,095 feet up in Colorado's Sawatch Range, and flows roughly northwest for 75 miles until it spills into the Colorado River at the mountain town of Glenwood Springs. It collects a handful of small creeks and two major tributaries—the Frying Pan and Crystal rivers—and it has a steep gradient for most of its length, so it does, in fact, roar. It also flows through what author and river runner Jeff Rennie has called “the most beautiful watershed in the state.”

And it holds trout: rainbows, browns, a few cutthroats, some brook trout in its higher reaches, as well as its share of mountain whitefish.

My friend A.K. Best and I had fished the Roaring Fork a time or two over the years, and for several seasons we'd been telling ourselves that we should give the river a proper and serious try. But, like many

Colorado fly-fishing types, we have this thing for the nearby Frying Pan with its big trout and technical fishing, so we'd managed to write the Roaring Fork off under the heading “So Many Rivers, So Little Time.”

And, if the truth was known, we were a little intimidated by the Fork. For one thing, it's a big, brawling stream—a major tributary of the Colorado, but also a damned impressive river in its own right. It is fast and filled with slick, cannonball-size boulders, so it can be tricky to wade even with cleats and a staff. The quick, braided currents can make a dry-fly drift difficult or worse, and it's large enough that much of the water remains out of reach to wading fly casters. Even in the low flows of September, that far bank—the one that's in shade, where all the trout are rising—might as well be in the next county.

And then there are the access problems, which are

many and various. There's a fair amount of well-known (if not always well-marked) public water on the Roaring Fork, but parts of it are a patchwork of private property and private arrangements that are probably best not messed with if you don't already know the river well or have a reliable local source, like a guide.

From McFarlane Creek above the town of Aspen downstream to upper Woody Creek Bridge (a stretch of about 15 miles) the regulations are flies and lures only, catch-and-release. Walt Burkhard of the Colorado Division of Wildlife estimates that roughly half of that is open to the public, with leases and private water scattered throughout.

From the bottom of the catch-and-release area down to the confluence with the Colorado River the rules are flies and lures with a bag limit of two trout

16 inches or longer. Burkhard says this additional 15 miles or so is virtually all controlled by ranchers who, under Colorado's open-range law, do not have to post their land for it to be legally considered private. Some of these landowners will let you on, some of them won't, and as every fisherman knows, this can change from season to season if not from day to day. The word locally is you *can* get on the water, but sometimes it takes a little research.

There are always two sides to these kinds of access complications: It's true that you can't always fish exactly where you want to, but on the other hand, the trout are not spooked, hook-scarred, over-educated, or otherwise hammered into submission.

A.K. and I knew of only a few spots where we could get on the Roaring Fork, including a fine whitefish hole where we would sometimes go to collect the



Fish the Fork's riffles with peacock-bodied nymphs on droppers below dry flies that function as indicators.

JOHN GERBACH PHOTO

fresh main ingredient for a pot of cioppino. We'd fish a #8 Golden Stonefly nymph with a big dark stone on a dropper. Sometimes one of us would accidentally hook a large trout.

First Float

THE FIRST TIME I ever fished the Fork was with Koke Winter. That was early in the season over a decade ago. The water was high, and we drove up the river, stopping here and there, looking for the big dark stoneflies that never quite materialized that year. I remember parking in what looked to me like driveways, hopping some well-maintained barbed wire fences and otherwise getting on water that most of us would assume private, though none of it was actually posted.

But Koke knew the river. In fact, he's famous around here for knowing rivers, but he's also famous for not saying much about what he knows. I assumed he had

permission, and in a pinch I figured I could point to him and say, "He told me it was okay, arrest *him*."

I guess, in retrospect, the whole thing made me a little nervous.

The answer, clearly, was to float the river with someone who knew its ins and outs, and we did that a few days before the Fourth of July weekend with Tim Heng, fishing guide and manager of the Roaring Fork Anglers in Glenwood Springs. We put the Mckenzie riverboat in somewhere around Carbondale and spent the day floating the roughly 15 river miles down to the confluence of the Roaring Fork and Colorado.

And it *was* the answer: the Montana-style, fast-paced, big-river assault where you get one cast per spot, and then your line is in the air as you look downstream for the next place that ought to hold a fish. You're on a wide, navigable river, but for the most part you're fishing a two- or three-foot-wide

GREAT FLIES FOR THE ROARING FORK

strip along one bank or another. By the end of the day your arm is sore, there are the beginnings of blisters on your casting hand, and you've caught a large number of trout, although you can't actually remember how many because it all seemed to happen so fast.

Generally I like to use a float boat as transportation to otherwise inaccessible spots along the river where I can get out and wade. I cast from the boat, of course (how could anyone just sit there with a rod in his hand), but what I really look for are those tantalizing runs where I can get out and fish carefully for half an hour.

We did some of that, but the fact is, much of the Roaring Fork must be fished from the boat or not at all. There are steep canyon walls and tall trees crowding the banks in many spots—no place to beach the boat, and if you did get out you'd be standing in the spot you should be casting to.

Fishing from a moving Mckenzie riverboat isn't exactly contemplative, but it's great fun, especially when you hook a big fish in fast water; the boat goes one way and the trout goes another. At one point I even had a heavy fish yank the rod out of my hand, something I'd heard of but had never actually seen before. I saved the rod, the fish broke off, of course, and A.K. laughed so hard he blew half a dozen casts, which served him right.

Tim chuckled politely but managed to keep his oars in the water.

I also want to say, without getting too mushy about it, that Tim Heng is one of the best boatmen I've ever been out with. It was one of those rare times when something just short of telepathy was going on between the guide and the sports. He seldom had to say, "Good spot coming up on the right," and we never had to ask, "Could you get a little closer here?"

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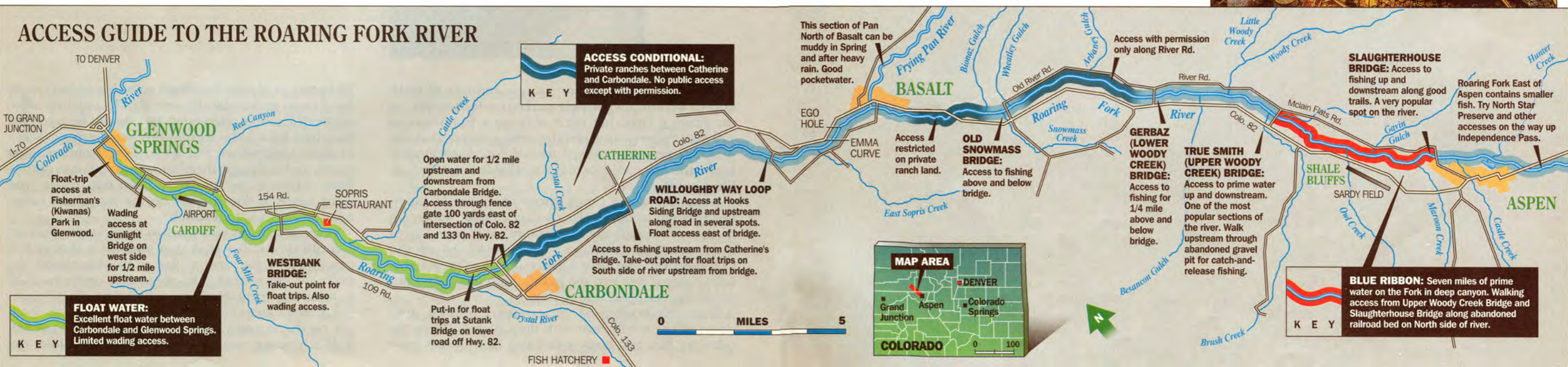
Imitate Green Drake adults (top) with patterns such as the Dette Coffin Fly (center). Golden Stone nymphs (bottom) will fool both trout and whitefish (below).



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DARY VISCONTI'S MAP

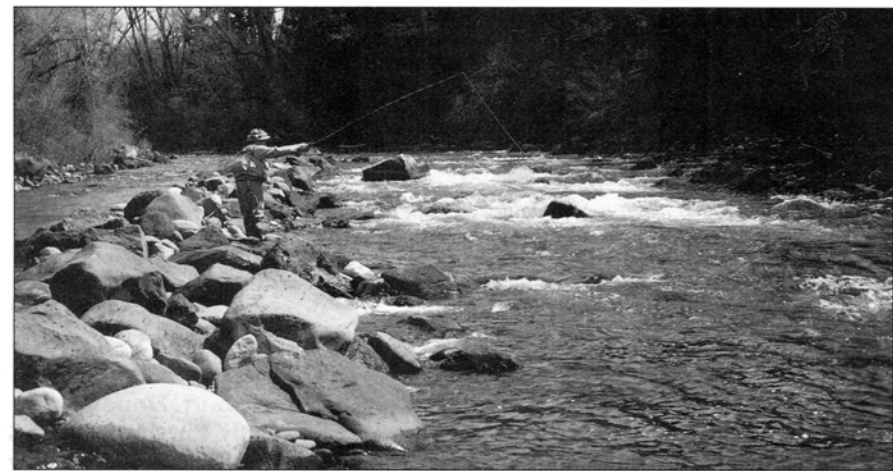
THE ROARING FORK . . .

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It went smoothly; there was little conversation; trout were caught. There were moments when we were functioning as a single unit with two oars, two fly rods, and three heads.

Of course, it wasn't quite like that when I dropped my rod, but nothing is perfect.

The Roaring Fork is a fast freestone river, so much of the fishing has a refreshingly rough Western texture to it.



The Roaring Fork is a fast freestoner with very difficult wading.

In the morning, under a hot, sunny sky, we fished large Coachman Trude dry flies with peacock-bodied nymphs on droppers: attractor-style rigs that worked very well. Usually the trout would hit the nymph, and the white-winged Coachman Trude—acting as a bobber—would sink authoritatively, although a fish would take the dry fly just often enough to keep us on our toes.

The preferred underwater pattern here is the Prince Nymph, but a Zug Bug or even the Peacock and Partridge soft hackle I was using will pass nicely: anything in about a #12 with a peacock-herl body. The Coachman Trude is the dry fly Tim recommends, but he allows that various other buoyant, white-winged patterns also work.

Later in the day the sky went from brilliant blue to a bright, aluminum-colored overcast, and some big Green Drake mayflies began to emerge. This is an enigmatic hatch on the Roaring Fork but one we'd scheduled the float in hopes of catching.

In this part of Colorado, Green Drake is largely synonymous with the Frying Pan River, a stream that's smaller, easier to get around in, and where the hatches are only a little less regular and predictable than on a spring creek. Of course, the stream takes tremendous pressure, and when the Drakes are on it's often difficult to find

a few yards of water to call your own. This naturally makes the fish somewhat skittish, even to the point where they sometimes execute refusal rises to real insects. It's been said that a little of the fun has gone out of it.

But the Green Drake hatch on the Roaring Fork is still largely unspoiled because it's spotty, it moves around a lot, and it can be hard to follow through water that's rough and sometimes posted. On the day in question

Roaring Fork is mainly a caddis river (Elk-hair Caddis in various sizes), but there are some other hatches that are very interesting. There are good Pale Morning Duns and Blue-winged Olives in April, and the big dark stoneflies usually come off around the end of May or early June, although this one is a particularly spooky hatch that usually comes off in discolored water. The slightly more reliable golden stoneflies should be on about the same time.

The Green Drakes are around for two or three weeks toward the end of June or early July. They're best on cloudy days and in the evenings.

The fishing tends to slow down a bit through August and much of September, when the water is warm (although the evenings can be good), and then picks up again in late September or early October with streamer fishing for big spawning browns that can run as late as mid-November.

Somewhat spotty fishing continues in the lower river through the winter, when nymphing and midge fishing to occasional hatches can be productive during the warmest part of the day. If your tastes run to firm-fleshed whitefish, get your coat and hat and try nymph fishing in February.

It's not a bad idea to be able to match most of the hatches with fairly accurate patterns, but don't forget the big attractor dry flies like Royal Wulffs, Coachman Trudes, and Humpys, especially early in the season when the water is high. During the caddis hatches—and occasionally at other times—various active wet-fly techniques can be very effective, including Georges Odier's upstream-swimming caddis method (FLY FISHERMAN, May 1988) with a Rio Grande King or Western Coachman pattern.

So in the afternoon we caught fish on Green Drake patterns. In the few miles where the hatch was actually on we stopped often to cast to rising trout, many of which were working away from the bank in the faster currents. There were never what you'd call fleets of mayflies on the water in any one place, but there were enough to keep the fish looking up.

I'm used to fishing Green Drake hatches in slower rivers where I can see the naturals—and my imitation—half a block away, but on big fast water under flat gray light the long-shank #12 flies looked more like #20 Blue-winged Olives. Rises were sometimes hard to spot as well, and the fish fought hard. Roaring Fork trout are typically strong and in good condition, and the fast water only makes them

the hatch was known to be on, and it came off reasonably well. Still, we saw only two other boats and a handful of wading fishermen in 15 miles. Not bad.

Being normal twentieth-century fly fishers, we switched to Drake patterns after seeing the first bug on the water. We did well with them, and they accounted for some of the biggest trout of the day.


"Big" on the Roaring Fork is as vague a concept as it is on any other river. In one long day we landed a few trout that were under 10 inches, a few more that were hovering around 18, with the rest in between. Our best fish were taken below the confluence with the Frying Pan at the town of Basalt, where the river is larger and the creel limit is two fish 16 inches or over.

Sixteen-inch trout are not uncommon in this water, except, Tim said, when he has clients who want to keep some fish. Then, suddenly, most of them go about 15½.

And the really big trout do turn up on something like a regular basis. Every time I've been in the area people are talking about the current hog from the Roaring Fork. Usually it's a brown, now and then a rainbow.

Hatches on the Fork

IN TERMS OF HATCHES, Tim said, the



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hotter. It was glorious.

When we finally drifted out of the stretch where the Drakes were hatching, Tim told us to keep fishing with the same flies, at least for a while. The hatch had already moved through this lower water, he said, so the trout should have fresh memories of what a Green Drake looks like. They seemed to. With one exception we fished Drake patterns all the way down to the Colorado, and the fish seemed to know exactly what they were supposed to be.

Through one short stretch a nice little hatch of Pale Morning Dun mayflies was coming off. We had time to change flies and get a few casts over the rising fish, but this was one of those places where we could float through but were not allowed to set foot on the bank or the stream bottom. Seventy-five yards of that and we were back to happily banging the banks with the Drakes.

If there's anything wrong with fishing like this it's that you don't see enough of the river. That is, you see a strip of rock and water unrolling along the bank, which is pretty enough, but not nearly all there is. Now and then you'll glance up to see red rock cliffs, gray rocks with rosettes of lichen, groves of cottonwoods, patches of wildflowers, sagebrush-covered hillsides, pastures, a barbed-wire fence, a ranch building, a blue heron, or the occasional cool green grotto with the songs of warblers echoing out of it.

That night in camp I suggested to A.K. that maybe a truly dedicated outdoor journalist should float the river a second time and just watch the scenery, you know, to get a proper feel for the landscape and the wildlife.

"Fine," A.K. said. "You watch; I'll fish." Right. Dumb idea.

We floated into early evening. The river got wider and a little slower in places, and I found myself casting with the rocking motion of the shoulder I fall into when I'm getting tired. We had to have floated through the old whitefish hole, but I didn't recognize it from out on the water.

Then I glanced up and saw a middle-aged guy in white shoes sitting in a lawn chair sipping what looked like a gin and tonic. That meant we were in the city limits of Glenwood Springs. We were still hooking fish, but the float was almost over.

JOHN GIERACH is a fly-fishing author who lives in Longmont, Colorado. His latest book is *Even Brook Trout Get the Blues*, available from Simon and Schuster.

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