

“**D**avid, on your right about 15 feet out,” murmured Mary Gayle. I glanced in that direction in time to see a 22-inch rainbow trout come drifting in over the waving grass that covered the bottom of the San Juan River. His light green back and silvery sides were in marked contrast with the dark green vegetation below him.

Slowly he glided toward my set of flies, seemingly more curious than hungry. I had a #14 dark-green leech about 16 inches in front of a #24 Cream Larva, a fly so tiny it was almost impossible to see in the water. Up the line about a foot in front of the leech was a little #4 sinker to get the whole set down into the water column. Sixteen inches in front of that was a white cork strike indicator.

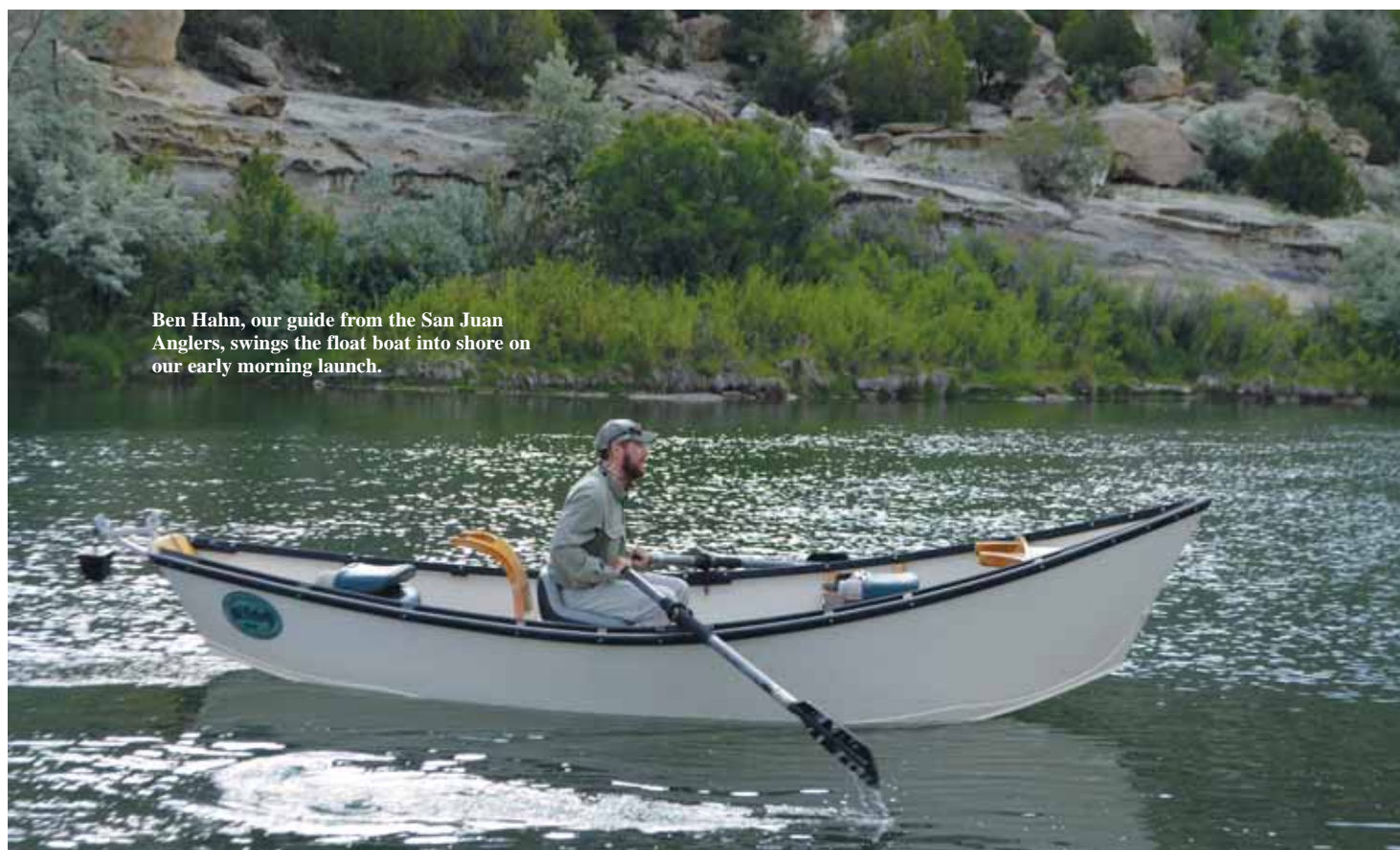
As the big trout approached the tiny bugs, he swung his head just a little and



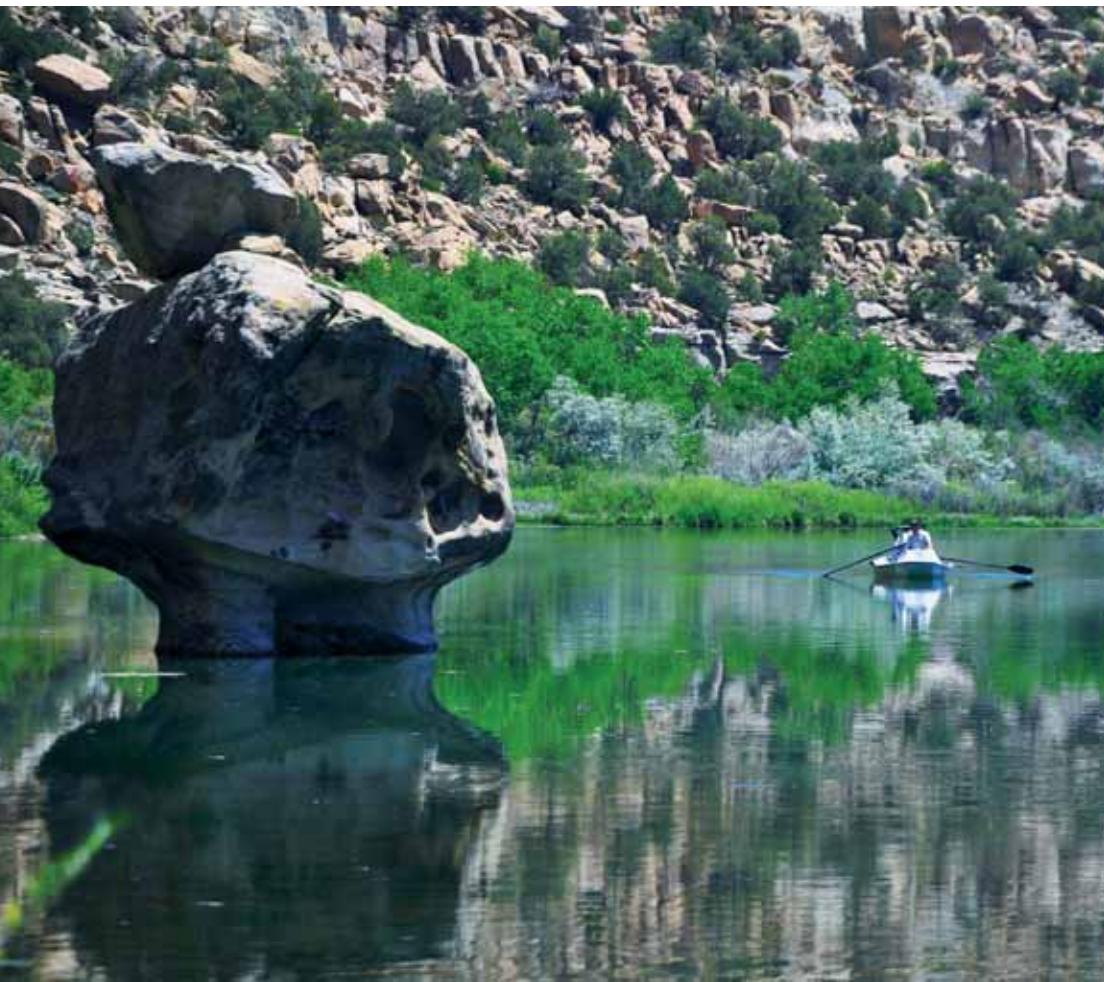
The wonderfully clear water of the protected section of San Juan River plays host to huge rainbow and brown trout.

Midging the San Juan

Story and Photos by David and Mary Gayle Sartwell



Ben Hahn, our guide from the San Juan Anglers, swings the float boat into shore on our early morning launch.



The famous E.T. Rock provides the backdrop to one of the best pools on the river.

his whole body curved in response. He opened his maw and sucked in the trailing midge. I lifted the tip of my rod with authority and was rewarded with a surge of surprised energy.

The big fish slashed away toward the far bank, shaking his head as he did so. As much as he tried, he couldn't dislodge the tiny barbless hook that was stuck deep in his jaw.

"Remember," cautioned Ben Hahn, our guide, "you only have a 7x tippet so let him play out."

I kept the 5wt. Redington fly rod raised above my head and let the fibers within do their job in tiring the fish. Every time the big rainbow let loose a surge of power, the tip of the rod bent to diffuse the

energy coming from below. But this beautiful fish was not easily dissuaded. He made powerful run after powerful run, stripping off yards of line in the process. Every time he jumped, the rays of the sun reflected off the pink stripe running down his side. Soon the magic wand did its job and the tired fish came to the net.

Ben wet his hands, reached over the side of the drift boat and, with practiced ease, twisted the barbless hook out of the jaw of the magnificent fish. The trout rested there a moment and then with a flick of his muscled tail, dove into the weeds and disappeared. Smiles all around and then the drift continued.

The San Juan River is one of the best trout streams in America. Located in

New Mexico about 50 miles south east of Durango, Colorado, this fishery is made possible by the huge, 400-foot-high, three-quarter-mile long Navajo Dam. Completed in 1962, it was designed as a Navajo irrigation project that brings water to 11,000 acres of land on the reservation. Without this life-giving liquid, the area would be a dry desert.

The water is released from the bottom of the dam, creating a tailwater fishery. Because the water does come from the bottom of the dam, the temperature remains constantly in the mid-40s throughout the year. The bedrock of the stream includes sedimentary strata composed of inter-bedded sandstone, siltstone, mudstone and shale. Before the dam was built, the river was in constant flux and usually full of the red silt that comes from the sandstone. Now the run is clear, cold and at a constant level.

The water is released anywhere from about 350 to 500 cubic feet per second all year long, which means the shorelines are well-defined, the pools do not get scoured out and the weed growth on the bottom is rich and full. As a result, the insect populations here are prodigious. The river is constantly filled with tiny midges and nymphs almost too small to see with the naked eye.

A 3.5-mile section below the dam has been designated by New Mexico as a "quality fishing water," which means it is catch-and-release only. Fishermen must use barbless hooks. Because it is such a treasure, New Mexico tries hard to manage it correctly.

There are three basic ways to fish the San Juan. Wading by yourself, hiring a guide to wade with you or running the river in a float boat with a guide. The lovely part of this stream is that you can wade almost every part of it. There are deep runs and glides, but you can work around them. There are a number of good access lots. On the weekends it can be a bit crowded around the parking areas, but if you are

willing to walk some distance, there are big fish in glides and pools you do not have to share with anyone.

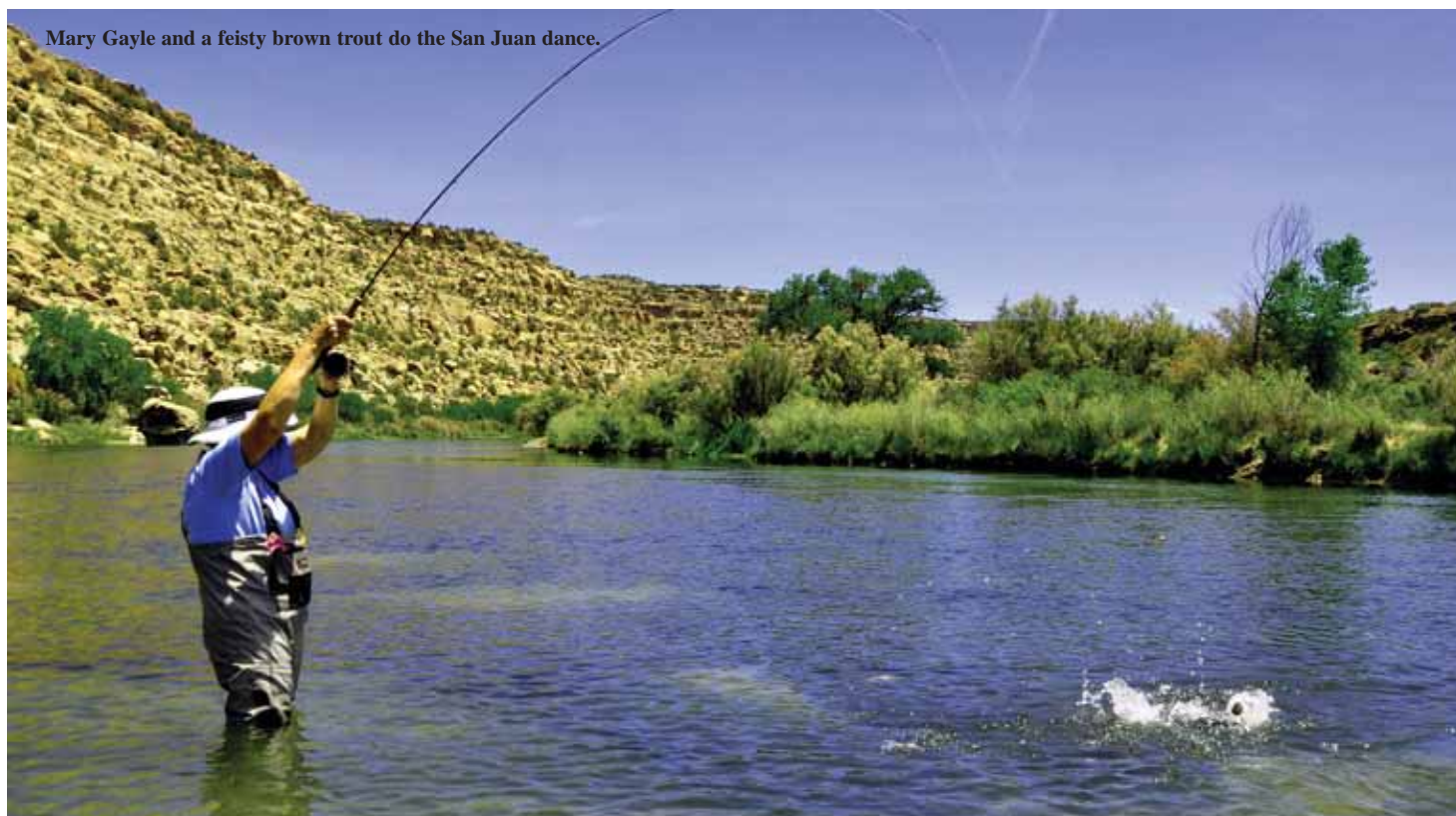
If you have never fished here before, I would strongly recommend that you hire a guide for at least one day. They will show you what flies to use in what combinations and can teach you the water. No matter how experienced you are, every stream is different. The insect life can be very specific to a stream. We chose the San Juan Anglers out of Durango and were extremely happy with our choice, but there are many other quality outfits in the area. A big tip: Tell your guide you would like to leave at daylight. There are quite a few operations that float this river, but very few that leave that early. You will have the river to yourself at dawn.

The San Juan is stocked with sterilized rainbows because the biologists are afraid of whirling disease, a malady that affects the trout's cartilage.. These fish grow to more than 24 inches and 20-inch fish are quite common. They stopped stocking brown trout in 1994, but these fish are less susceptible to whirling, so they are left to reproduce on their own. And the river is full of them.

We started our float at 7 a.m. at the



Time after time, big trout like this beauty would sip in one of these tiny #20-24 imitations.



Mary Gayle and a feisty brown trout do the San Juan dance.



Fishermen work the open, accessible and quiet pools of the San Juan River as it gently flows through the valley.

Texas Pool just downstream of the dam and ended up at 5 p.m. below the Navajo community some eight miles downstream. Every pool had fish. Each was an adventure unto itself. Tiny #24 artificials like the Big Mac, Ju-Ju, WD-40, and the Chocolate Bling midge are just a few of the many droppers we tried over the course of the day. We fished them in tandem behind a dark green leech, the Span Juan worm (made out of a single spandex thread), a bead-headed Prince and others. Remembering that foam is home, we drifted our flies into the little foam lines along the edge of the holes and were constantly rewarded with strike after strike.

In the Three Island run, we dropped anchor and worked a long pool that hung along the eastern edge of the stream. The sun was rising, covering the valley

floor with a wonderfully warm set of rays that cast shoreline shadows out into the glide. Mary Gayle made a terrific cast and floated a #24 Chocolate Bling midge with one wrap of UV to give it a little sparkle right through the foam line of the gentle current. From under the bank came a long dark shadow, moving quickly in a purposeful direct line.

We could see him turn and come up under the trailing midge. The line halted for a heartbeat and Mary Gayle set the hook. When she did so the water boiled white as the big brown trout rocketed into the air. He landed back on the surface with a water-splashing splat, then dove toward the bottom and immediately streaked for the far shore. The reel handle was a blur as the line stripped off the spool.

For the next several minutes Mary

Gayle skillfully worked the 20-inch fish. With such light tippets, horsing this beautiful creature was not an option. Rod tip up, light pressure on the reel, letting him have his head when he demanded it, Mary let the equipment do the work. This fish just would not quit. He got down on the bottom and leaned into the line with surprising strength. He never left the big pool, but he used almost all of it. In the end he could not beat the constant pressure from Mary Gayle's rod. Reluctantly he came to the net. Ben gently twisted the tiny hook from his jaw and released this gallant warrior back to the dark water.

"What a difference in power between the rainbows and the browns," noted Mary Gayle. "The rainbows give quite an aerial display and have slashing runs, but the browns are just so much more



The spillway at the Navajo Dam. Notice the bottom release that keeps the water at a constant temperature, creating an amazing tailwater fishery.

powerful. They have a deeper energy that makes them a better, more determined fighter.”

“I think it is because they are born here,” ventured Ben, as he rowed us into the current that took us downstream. “These native fish seem to have more stamina, more heart. Not that catching these big rainbows is easy, but you are right, the browns are different.”

In the E.T. Rock pool, named for the huge boulder that looks like the extra-terrestrial of movie fame, we eased along the western edge of the run, casting to the far bank and letting our flies run in the foam edge. About halfway down the glide I looked straight down into the water and saw a submarine. This brown trout was at least 30 inches long and seemed to be about as wide.

“Don’t put the oar in the water,” I whispered to Ben. “Just look over the side.” “I have never seen a fish that big in this river,” came the hushed response. “Let’s slide on by, move over to the edge, work our way back above him and give him a try.”

Ben leaned on the oars, moved us upstream and then over and above where the big fish was last seen. Over the next half hour we tried every combination we could think of to get this fish to take. He simply was not interested. But they are in here that big.

Over the last two hours of the day we fished below the “quality” section. Here it is legal to use almost every fishing method and you can keep the fish taken. Although there were less large fish in this part of the river, it was certainly worth fishing. We caught several strong fighting browns up to 19 inches, using a .32-ounce red/grey barbless jig with a cork strike indicator.

By the end of the day we had landed at least 40 fish, many exceeding 20 inches and all of them in good shape. Our guide had worked hard to get us in the right place to fish each pool and was constantly advising us to change flies and depths to meet the changing conditions of the day. What a wonderful day on the water with an exceptionally talented guide.

Although there are campgrounds along the San Juan River, we stayed in Durango, taking advantage of the restaurants and entertainment in the city. We rode the train, we fished the tiny Hermosa Creek for cutthroats and brookies and we dined very well. The United Campground of Durango was one of the best facilities we have ever frequented. The showers were hot, the restrooms were clean, the campsite level and the wifi actually worked!

Dr. David and Mary Gayle Sartwell are an award-winning writing and photography team who have published thousands of articles in both newspapers and magazines. They are outdoor people specializing in adventure travel. Both love travel, bridge, good food and wine, fly fishing and outdoor adventure of any kind.

Durango

Durango is a small, family-friendly, upscale tourist destination full of artist galleries, excellent restaurants and a wide variety of evening entertainment. Whitewater rafting, steam train rides to Silverton, backcountry fishing for cutthroat and brookies, mountain bike and hiking trails are everywhere. It is a terrific place to visit and its home for The San Juan Angler guide service (www.thesanjuanangler.com) and The United Campground of Durango (www.unitedcampground-durango.com).

Catch a ride on the on the Durango and Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad (www.DurangoTrain.com) up to the old mining town of Silverton. In continuous operation since 1882, these steam locomotives take tourists almost 3,000 feet in elevation through very narrow canyons cut by the roaring Animas River on a track bed hewn out of rock ledges.

The upper Animas River boasts Class IV and V rapids in a 20-mile adventure only for the experienced and athletic white-water rafter. The lower river offers great Class III water and can be a fun family adventure. In the summer, it is a good trout fishery.

There are many great eateries in town that will fit anyone’s pocketbook. For more upscale dining, try the Cyprus Cafe where “the Mediterranean meets the mountains.” The Colorado Braised Lamb Shank was delicious! The Season’s Rotisserie and Grill is another epicurean delight.