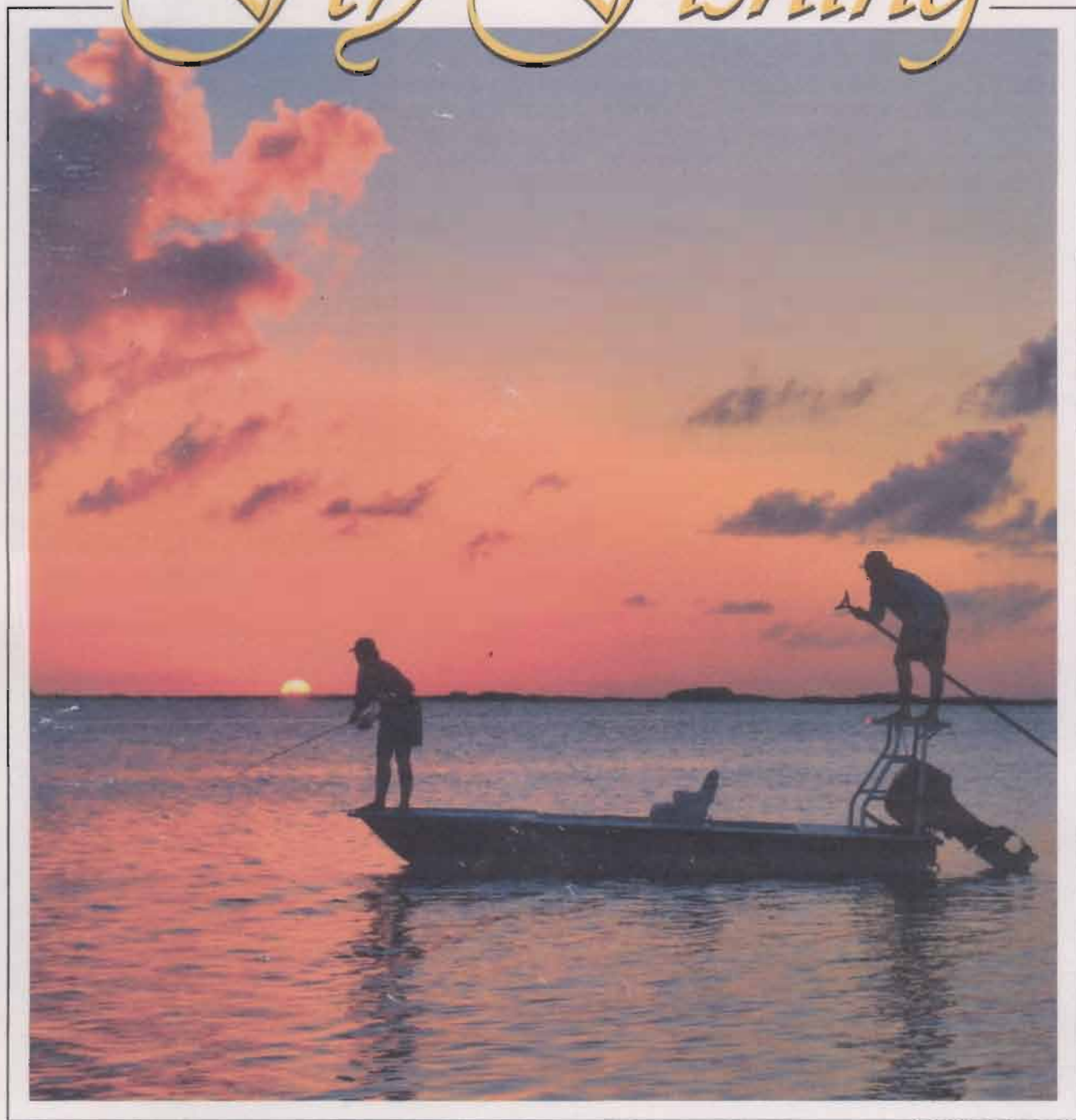


SOUTHWEST

November/December 2007

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Animas River, CO

Train Track Trout

By Mark Lance

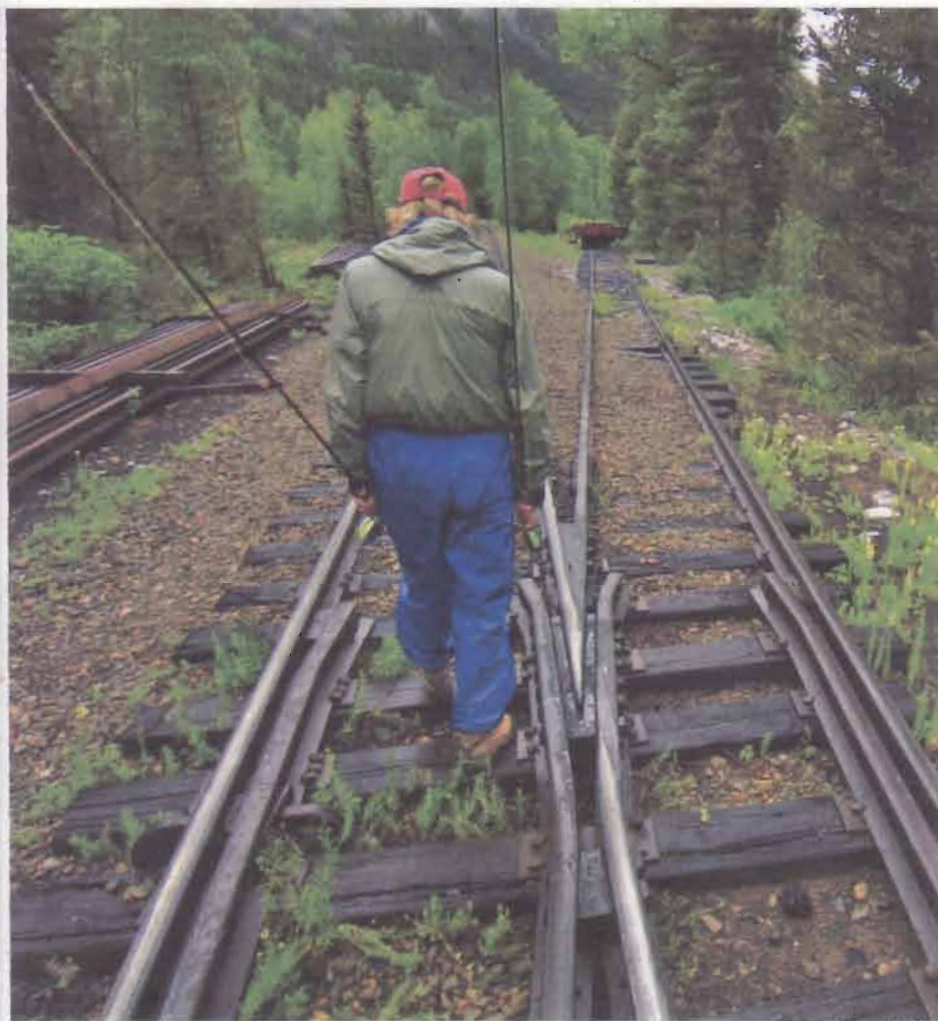
We stowed our bulging backpacks in the baggage car and hoisted ourselves on board the historic Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad (D&SNGRR), opting for the open-air car rather than the Victorian luxury of an enclosed parlor coach. Raspy bursts

ship between this railroad and Colorado's mining districts. The narrow-gauge line between Durango and the Silverton mines was completed in 1882, a feat of spectacular engineering. The railway, constructed to transport silver and gold ore, supplies, and passengers, traversed some of Colorado's most rugged mountain terrain. The more nimble dimensions of the narrow tracks allowed the train to pass through this tortuous landscape. During the heyday of Silverton's Yankee Girl, Guston, and Sunnyside mines, millions of dollars' worth of precious ore was transported over this route.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Silverton embodied Colorado's raucous and colorful mining empire. Eventually, however, silver prices crashed, the mines began to play out, and the first automobiles arrived in the valley. The future of the train became as uncertain as finding the next mother lode. The D&SNGRR line managed to scrape by through the 1930s and '40s by transporting tourists. Then came a turning point. Hollywood discovered Durango and its spectacular narrow-gauge railway setting. The historic train starred in many films through the '50s and '60s, including *Around the World in Eighty Days* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. When the

train gained National Historic Landmark status, more of the gargantuan locomotives and wooden coaches were called out of retirement and painstakingly restored for service in the growing tourist industry.

Even in 1882, the route was recognized as a scenic gem. Today, it is hailed as one of the top train journeys in the world, and of special note to adventurous anglers is the fact that the tracks parallel the Animas River for 45 spectacular miles, providing entry to otherwise



ALL PHOTOS BY MARK LANCE

Anglers can follow the narrow gauge tracks to find good water—provided they keep their eyes and ears open (above). Vacationers on their way to Silverton offer waves of encouragement to an angler in Animas Canyon (top right). A fat Animas Canyon brook trout (bottom right)

of the engine's steam whistle pierced the cool mountain air. The conductor and crew readied the train for its daily journey. Durango—home to art galleries, eclectic eateries, and buzzing microbreweries, and the perfect host to southwest Colorado anglers—had reached the peak of its summer tourist frenzy. We were eager for temporary escape, eager to chase trout deep into Colorado's San Juan Mountains.

You don't need to be a train buff or have a particular penchant for history to appreciate the entwined relation-





inaccessible wilderness fly water.

The Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad offers an interesting twist to a fly-fishing adventure. Daily during spring, summer, and fall, the historic train carries tourists through the scenic San Juan Range and some of Colorado's wildest mountain landscapes on its round trip between Durango and Silverton. Though most passengers travel to Silverton and back the same day, anglers can

make special arrangements to hop off the train deep in the inner Animas Canyon. The only way to reach these remote waters is by train or by foot.

Yes, they really do yell "all aboard!" And with the traditional "highball" wave of his hat, the conductor signals to the engineer to leave the station. We chugged and rattled along the tracks with great anticipation, as travelers of yesteryear must likewise have done. However, we had different treasure in mind: solitude and the silvery flash of trout taking hand-tied flies.

Animas Canyon

The two scheduled jumpoff points on the way to Silverton are the Needleton and Elk Park stops. Needleton, at milepost 484, provides access to remote dry-fly fishing for small to midsize trout. From Needleton, Forest Service Trail 675 follows the east side of the river downstream along miles of fishable water. The tracks themselves provide easier trekking upstream. Through much of the canyon, the river runs fast and powerful, so wade carefully in this remote setting.



Though the Animas is fun to fish with dry flies, some of the larger fish are more easily duped with subsurface lures. A hopper/dropper setup is a productive compromise. Many standard patterns and their variations are effective alongside local favorites found in area fly shops. Fly anglers are notoriously manic to invent the next killer pattern, but here is a hot tip: dig through your fly box for a classic. The Coachman-style flies and the myriad soft-hackle patterns, for example, go in and out of favor from decade to decade, but the Animas and its tributaries are great places to try them. Float them, twitch them, drown them, and swing them. These imitations were made for action and freestone trout love to eat them.

This stretch of river offers rainbows, browns, brookies, and cutthroat trout from 8 to 14 inches long—considerably smaller than the trout lurking in the Animas nearer Durango. Silverton's mining district upstream has certainly impaired the river's aquatic life, and though aquatic invertebrates are not prolific here, they are more plentiful in this section than farther upstream closer to Silverton. Nearer Durango, the river is far richer. Ongoing clean-up efforts are reducing heavy metals in the river and fishing conditions in the canyon are improving. United States Geological Survey (USGS) studies show concentrations of many metals and other pollutants declining steadily through the length of the canyon, aided by clean water from many tributaries between Elk Park and Durango.

From the Needleton stop, you can fish through the day and then catch the return train to Durango in the late afternoon. Or, you can camp overnight along Needle Creek, land spunky little trout on a light rod, then hop on a train out the next afternoon. Or, for a major adventure, Needleton can serve as a jumpoff point for an epic multi-day backpacking trip into the Needle Mountains, home to some of Colorado's most awe-inspiring peaks and high-elevation lakes. The amazing 14,000-foot spires guard a handful of remote spots seldom visited by anglers. Productive waters of Upper Vallecito Creek are even within reach for the hearty and prepared backpacker.

The second scheduled train stop is Elk Park at milepost 490, a favorite with hikers heading for the Colorado Trail and the Continental Divide Trail in the northern tier of the Weminuche Wilderness. The river slows through this wilderness area, and offers a mix of long, deep runs, bends, and braided riffles. River access is easy upstream and down.

Trout seem less numerous than in the lower canyon, but on our train journey last year, we enjoyed the occasional surprise in the form of a large fish. And don't overlook the tributaries between Needleton and Elk Park.

We fished the river at a relaxing pace and enjoyed our wilderness getaway. A pouring rain drenched us the last day on the river—not one of those refreshing late-afternoon summer showers, but instead a “raining cats and dogs” variety. Experience told us to hunker down for the night. Gear and wet waders filled the vestibule of our small tent, but we enjoyed listening to thunder echoing off canyon walls and watching the flash of lightning dancing off the peaks.

If you decide to make this special trip, plan your adventure for sometime between late June (after runoff) and October. Mountain weather can rapidly change from sunny and warm to cold and rainy. In June and in autumn, be prepared for the possibility of sleet or snow.

The D&SNGRR suggests booking reservations up to six weeks in advance of your trip in peak season. Not every train leaving Durango stops at Needleton and Elk Park, so when making reservations, be sure to explain where you want to hop off. The reservation clerks will tell you which train to board to reach your destination, and the conductor will let you know when the train is approaching your stop in the middle of nowhere.

By now you may be asking,

“How do I stop the train to get back to Durango?”

Well, this is the fun part. When you hear the train coming, stand in the clearing on the east side of the tracks and wave both hands horizontally back and forth across your knees. It works every time.

Headwaters

Silverton, at mile marker 496.7, marks the beginning of the next leg of the Animas fly-fishing adventure. This picturesque tourist town, streets lined with Victorian-style buildings and houses, recalls the town's history. Times were never easy here, but the locals today are still a hearty bunch and wouldn't trade this rugged mountain lifestyle for anything.

Bill Redwood, proprietor of Redwood Llamas, greeted us at his home a few blocks from the train depot with a huge smile and a bigger handshake. A two-day-old beard, flowing shirttail, canvas shorts, and well-worn river sandals matched his laid-back demeanor perfectly. Bill seemed like a guy enjoying a long vacation, but I knew better. Raising

RW Western Coachman

By Paul Prentiss



- Hook:** Dry fly, 1X or 2X heavy, sizes 8–16
- Thread:** 3/0 Monocord
- Abdomen:** Red UTC wire
- Thorax:** Peacock herl reinforced with metallic-green rainbow thread, with Diamond Braid over the back
- Hackle:** Partridge or grizzly hackle
- Head:** Metal bead (optional)
- Wing:** Sparkle yarn over Diamond Braid or micro Krystal Flash

and maintaining a large llama herd; keeping packs, tack, and camping gear in perfect working condition; and running a first-rate outfitting business is a big task. Bill just makes it all look easy.

Introductions to Braveheart and Arico, our four-footed hiking companions for the next few days, went well. We were not familiar with llamas so Bill put us through a valuable training course designed to teach us about the animals, how to handle and communicate with them (and vice versa), how to pack them for safe travel, and how to care for them at the end of the day. After repacking our gear into saddlebags and carefully weighing them all to achieve perfect balance, we loaded the llamas into the trailer and drove out of town a short distance up Cunningham Gulch to the trailhead. Our ultimate destination was the headwater of the Animas River at Highland Mary Lakes. Bill and his partner, Mark Pommier, hiked along with us for a few miles as they trained young llamas, showing us many useful pointers. After a quick lunch, we were on our own with Braveheart and Arico for a few days of trekking and fly fishing.

Though not outgoing or particularly affectionate to newcomers, llamas are great hiking partners and backcountry companions. They work hard and handle easily, and their padded feet make them quite surefooted on the trail or off. Environmentally friendly, they browse for food and are low maintenance in the backcountry. If a llama gets angry and spits at you, you probably deserve it. But in general, they tend to be easygoing and happy to follow you. The best part

is that they can carry some 75 pounds of gear.

At 12,000 feet in the northernmost corner of the Weminuche Wilderness, Highland Mary Lakes dot the tundra. The high alpine air is thin. Breathing requires a bit more effort here. Surrounding peaks make a stunning

backdrop, but anglers are easily distracted by the call of trout—and we saw hundreds of perfect rings rippling outward from riseforms. The lakes were alive with feeding, 6- to 10-inch brook trout. We staked out the llamas and rushed to the water's edge for a closer look. Tiny midges and their shucks littered the surface, but the trout were not choosy, and a selection of ubiquitous flies—Parachute Adams, Griffith's Gnat, Elk Hair Caddis, foam ants, and beetle patterns—did the job.

The population of brook trout here is so dense that I venture to say that frying up one or two for breakfast would most likely



The lakes and streams of southern Colorado's Weminuche Wilderness offer exceptional scenery and a unique fly fishing experience—llamas make the adventure far easier.



Animas River tributaries boast native cutthroat trout. Their beauty and eagerness to take well-placed dry flies far outweigh their diminutive size (above). The crew readies a gargantuan coal-fired steam locomotive for the daily journey to Silverton (below).

help the fishery rather than diminish it. Not so, however, with the cutthroat, as they are far less common. The cuts seemed more interested in small nymphs retrieved with slow twitches. We released the fish gently.

Meanwhile, the brook trout feeding frenzy waxed and waned through the days and evenings, leaving plenty of time for hiking, reading, napping, and daydreaming. Our llamas were quite content to munch grass and willows all day, looking up once in a while to see how we were doing and making that little humming sound they voice when content. They, too, seemed to grow a bit lazy living the good life at Highland Mary Lakes. After three days of fishing and exploring, we reluctantly packed the gear on the llamas and headed down the valley to meet Bill for our shuttle back to Silverton. Along the way, he pointed out a couple of small streams, upstream from the devastating leaching from the old mines, where cutthroat now abound. We made a mental note to check out those creeks on a future trip.

Adventure Abounds

The "Gold Medal" designated water of the Animas River is a fine focal point for a southwest Colorado fly-fishing getaway. The Animas—fishable year-round except during the spring runoff of late May/early June—is one of the last large undammed rivers in the state. As such, it is subject to the vagaries of Mother Nature, notably occasional heavy rains or winter storms.

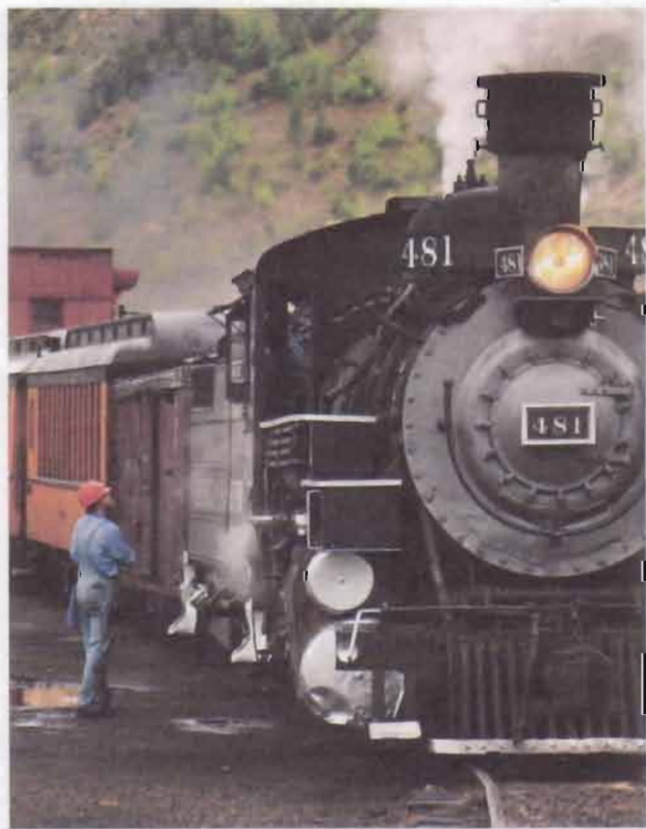
"The Animas is an amazing fishery," says Brian

Lapsay, proprietor of The Caddis Company fly shop and guide service in Durango. He adds, "But this is a diverse area and there are many tributaries, nearby rivers, and alpine lakes that are often overlooked."

Lapsay is a member of the United States Fly Fishing Team and earned a spot to compete in the World Championships held in 2007 in Finland. He prepares meticulously for these events by studying rivers and lakes, the weather, aquatic insects, and the habits of trout. He ties hundreds of innovative fly patterns and practices the most productive fishing techniques even in his sleep. What a wonderful training ground he has, and he is quick to share what he knows about the area.

During a recent visit, when he offered a little advice about tributaries to the Animas, I was "all ears."

Hermosa Creek and the East Fork Hermosa together create a beautiful small-stream fishery north of town, acces-



sible by dirt road and by foot. These waters, in the beautiful Hermosa Park area, offer small browns, rainbows, brook trout, and Colorado River cutthroat. The Colorado Division of Wildlife has designated Hermosa Creek and its tributaries as "Outstanding Waters" in an effort to protect water quality and in-stream flows of this ecologically significant watershed as well as to provide added protection for the native cutthroat fishery. Only flies and lures are allowed. All cutthroat trout must be returned to the water immediately.

Lapsay advises anglers not to overlook the high-country lakes in the area. Andrews, Molas, and Little Molas lakes, for example, sit above 10,000 feet in elevation, yet are easy to reach from Colorado Highway 550 near Molas Pass. A prettier sight would be hard to imagine: rugged, regal, snow-capped peaks reflected in the pristine waters of these alpine lakes. Fly anglers can escape the crowds here. In addition, the opportunity to catch rainbows and cutthroats makes a nice day trip from Durango.

Electra Lake, actually a reservoir, is less wild but no less beautiful. The lower elevation and greater biomass in this impoundment equate to faster growth rates and larger trout—rainbow, cutthroat, and brook trout. Bring scud and damselfly nymph patterns and Woolly Buggers, and have \$8 for the entrance fee.

Joe Delling, a long-time guide for Duranglers and proprietor of Rio Azul Lodge in Chile, shares Lapsay's enthusiasm about the area's diverse fishing opportunities. Delling says that the lower end of Cascade Creek, near its confluence with the Animas, is productive and seldom crowded. Perhaps the name of the route, Purgatory Trail, discourages hikers. Alternatively, you can make special arrangements with the train conductor to be dropped off at the bridge near the confluence.

For easy-access fishing or for a pleasant family day trip, Delling recommends Lime Creek. A short drive north of Durango Mountain Resort, turn right off Highway 550 and follow Lime Creek road until you reach the stream. Or you can continue on the highway a few miles farther to the upper creek near the base of Coal Bank Pass. This old dirt road once served as the stage route to Silverton. Wet wading in a pair of shorts and sandals will make you feel like a kid again, as will the numerous and opportunistic browns, rainbows, and brookies.

If you plan to fish southwest Colorado, consider putting a little twist on the adventure. Board the train, hire a llama, or explore the nooks and crannies of the many secluded mountain streams off the beaten path. And, if you run across Brian Lapsay or Joe Delling in the fly shops or on the water, introduce yourself and humbly ask, "What are they taking?" ➔

Mark Lance is the Rocky Mountains field editor of Southwest Fly Fishing magazine. A freelance writer and photographer, he lives in Centennial, Colorado.

ANIMAS RIVER NOTEBOOK



When: June–mid-October.

Where: Durango to Silverton in southwest CO.

Headquarters: Durango and Silverton. Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad, (970) 247-2733, www.durangotrains.com. **Information:** Durango Tourism Office, (800) 463-8726, www.durango.org; Silverton Chamber of Commerce, (800) 752-4494, www.silvertoncolorado.com.

Appropriate gear: 1- to 5-wt. rods, floating and sinking lines, waders, shorts, wading sandals.

Useful fly patterns: Elk Hair Caddis, Adams, Parachute Adams, Royal Wulff, Stimulator, hopper patterns, ant patterns, RW Western Coachman, Pheasant Tail Nymph, Copper John, RS2, Woolly Bugger.

Necessary accessories: Polarized sunglasses, sunscreen, rain gear, fleece jacket, daypack, water bottle.

Nonresident license: \$8/1 day, \$20/5 days, \$55/annual. Purchase online at <http://wildlife.state.co.us/Fishing>.

Fly shops/guides: Animas Valley Anglers, (970) 259-0484, www.gotttrout.com; Duranglers, (888) 347-4346, www.duranglers.com; The Caddis Company, (970) 382-9978, www.caddiscompany.com; Redwood Llamas, (970) 560-2926, 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.