

**Fly Fisher's Quick Reference Guide  
to the  
Gunnison Valley**



By  
John Bocchino



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*By John Bocchino*

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## Our Rivers

### *The Taylor River, Gunnison River, and East River*

#### **Taylor River**

The Taylor River flows from the snow pack high in the Colorado Rockies, from the peaks surrounding Taylor Park. The river drains into Taylor Reservoir at about 9,300 feet. The tailwater below the dam flows down through Taylor Canyon some 20 miles before it joins the East River to form the Gunnison River at Almont.



*Upper Taylor River above Taylor Reservoir*

The Taylor is a medium-sized river which contains deep pools and pocket water, and plenty of riffles and runs. The water releases from Taylor Reservoir provide constant and predictable flows, and consistent hatches throughout the fishing season. The Taylor River contains a very high density of trout, including wild browns, rainbows, and cutthroat. Rainbow trout are also stocked during the fishing season.

The upper section of the Taylor River just below the dam is designated catch-and-release (C&R) water. This is trophy trout water with some fish in the 8 to 12-pound range. These big wild trout enjoy a constant food source which includes a steady diet of Mysis shrimp and midges. The C&R section can be very challenging and requires some technical angling skills. This section of the Taylor River can be fished year round.



*A thick Rainbow Trout from the Taylor River C&R section*

The fishing in Taylor Canyon during fall is very good. You'll find beautiful scenery with golden aspens and a lot less anglers on the river.

The rest of the river is much easier to fish and 20-fish days are not uncommon. There is plenty of public access throughout Taylor Canyon. It can be a difficult river to wade; therefore many anglers use a wading staff for added safety. Chest waders are recommended. A 9-foot 5-weight fly rod is a good all-purpose choice for the Taylor River. A shorter and lighter outfit can be used for dry fly fishing. The peak fishing

***Regulations:** There is nearly 12 miles of public access on the Taylor River throughout Taylor Canyon. The first stretch of public access begins 325 yards below the dam. This is special regulation trophy trout water, which is designated catch-and-release. This Taylor State Wildlife Area (SWA) includes about .4 miles of river. All trout caught here must be released immediately. Fishing is permitted with artificial flies and lures only. The remaining public access on the Taylor River is not restricted and statewide bag and possession limits apply. In general, these include a daily bag limit of four trout per angler with a maximum of eight trout in possession.*

### **Gunnison River**

The Gunnison River begins at Almont, Colorado, where the Taylor River and East River merge to form its headwaters. The river grows in size as it flows down through the Gunnison Valley and into Blue Mesa Reservoir. Blue Mesa is the first of several dams as the Gunnison continues its flow through the Black Canyon and eventually into the Colorado River. Our section of the Gunnison River, the upper Gunnison, is from the headwaters in Almont all the way to Blue Mesa Reservoir.

The upper Gunnison River is impacted by both snow-melt and the controlled releases from Taylor Reservoir. The Gunnison is best fished from a boat in the early season during high water. There are plenty of public access points for wading the river during summer and fall.



*Gunnison River Rainbow Trout*

The Gunnison River contains a very high density of trout, including browns, rainbows, and cutthroat. There are long riffles and runs, and a lot of deep pools which hold large trout. There are good hatches of stoneflies, caddis, and mayflies during the season. The peak season is from mid June to mid September, and fall can offer excellent fishing on the Gunnison. The fall kokanee salmon run brings very large numbers of hard-fighting sockeye salmon up the Gunnison River from Blue Mesa as they run all the way to Roaring Judy Fish Hatchery on the East River.

There is a catch-and-release season for kokanee from August 1 to October 31. And big trout will follow the salmon up to feed on their eggs. A 9-foot 5-weight fly rod is a good all-purpose choice for the Gunnison River. A 6-weight rod can also be used during the salmon run.

***Regulations:** There are several public access points on the Gunnison River between Almont and Blue Mesa, including SWAs and National Park Service (NPS) access areas. From the headwaters down to the US 50 bridge in Gunnison, fishing is allowed with artificial flies and lures only. An angler may keep two brown trout, 16 inches or longer. All rainbow trout must be released immediately. In addition, taking of kokanee salmon is prohibited from August 1 through October 31.*

## **East River**

The East River is a freestone river that drains out of Emerald Lake, which is located at about 10,500 feet in the Rockies near Crested Butte. It flows down through the valley to Almont, where it joins the Taylor River. Most of the river flows through private property, and there is limited public access. The most popular public access area is at Roaring Judy Fish Hatchery, just a few miles north of Almont.

The East River is a low gradient river with nice long pools and plenty of riffles. The East is easily waded and a very enjoyable river to fish. The section by the hatchery is wild trout water with special regulations (flies only). The river holds nice rainbows, browns, and some cutthroat. Due to the limited public access, it can get busy on this stretch, especially during the salmon run.



*Kokanee Salmon on the East River*

Like the Gunnison and Taylor, the East River gets good insect hatches and provides anglers with plenty of dry fly fishing opportunities during the summer months. The peak fishing season is from about late June (after run-off) to late September. Many anglers will pursue kokanee salmon on the East River during September and into October. An 8 to 9-foot, 4-weight or 5-weight fly rod is a good choice for the East River. A 5-weight or 6-weight outfit is recommended for kokanee.

*Regulations: The most popular public access point on the East River is the stretch near the Roaring Judy Fish Hatchery. This section of the river, from the property boundary at the hatchery down to the Taylor River, is restricted to fishing with artificial flies only. An angler may keep two trout with a maximum size of 12 inches long. In addition, taking of kokanee salmon is prohibited. During the salmon run (August 1 through October 31), the lower part of this stretch of river is closed to all fishing. This is the section of the East River from the hatchery outlet downstream to the bordering private property line.*

NOTE: For specific details and official regulations, please refer to the *Colorado Parks & Wildlife* fishing regulations.

# The Hatches

## Overview of Insect Hatches and Fly Patterns

The following is a general overview of the main hatches we see here in the Gunnison Valley throughout our fishing season (March through October). Some recommended fly patterns are included as well.

### March through April (before run-off)

The main early season hatches consist of midges and the first mayfly hatch of the season - the Blue-Winged Olives (BWOs). The BWOs can hatch as early as mid to late March, depending on weather and water conditions. However, we normally see this hatch around mid to late April or so as water temperatures rise. Fish activity will increase in early spring when water temperatures rise over 40 degrees.



*Early Season Mayfly*

During the early season before run-off, trout will feed on midges, mayfly nymphs, and also large stonefly nymphs. You can fish a tandem nymph rig with a big stonefly nymph pattern and small mayfly nymph or midge trailing behind. Fish will also begin to chase streamers.

Midge (larva, emerger, adult):	gray, black, olive, red, cream - sizes 18 to 24
BWO (nymph, emerger, adult):	sizes 16 to 20
Stonefly Nymphs:	20-Incher, Rubber Legged Stones, Golden Stones - sizes 6 to 8
Mayfly Nymphs:	Barr BWO Emergers, Pheasant Tails, Copper Johns - sizes 16 to 20
Streamers:	Muddy Buddy, Sculpzilla, Woolly Bugger - sizes 4 to 8

### May through June (run-off)

Run-off can be difficult to predict and it varies each season based on snow-pack and weather. Typically, you can expect run-off to begin by late April or early May. Run-off conditions can last anywhere from four to eight weeks, but it could be more or it could be less. During run-off, there are some hatches of BWOs and caddis, and also some stoneflies, but these hatches are normally not fishable during this time due to the high water. You'll also find rainbow trout spawning from late April throughout May, and it is best to leave spawning fish alone during this time. It's a great time to fish the smaller creeks. The summer hatches will begin earlier on the small streams and provide great dry fly fishing opportunities.

### June through August (after run-off)



*Golden Stonefly*

We see peak insect activity and the best dry fly action during the summer months here in our part of the Rocky Mountains. You can expect good hatches of BWOs, caddis, stoneflies, Green Drakes, and Pale Morning Duns (PMDs). BWOs and caddis will hatch throughout summer.

The big Western Green Drake will begin to hatch in late June. This hatch starts in the lower part of the Gunnison River, just above Blue Mesa Reservoir. The hatch progresses up through the watershed and will eventually occur on the Taylor River and East River. The Drakes will continue to move up the Taylor River to the C&R (Catch-and-Release) section below the dam. The hatch is different every year and is very difficult to predict. It can take anywhere from two to four weeks to move from Blue Mesa to Almont and beyond. We can also see PMDs hatch just before, during, and after the Green Drake hatch. There have been many times when the PMDs have dominated. They are an important food source for trout during a large part of the summer.

BWO (nymph, emerger, adult):	sizes 16 to 20
Caddis (pupa, emerger, adult):	tan, olive, brown, black, yellow - sizes 12 to 20
Stonefly (adult):	Salmon Fly, Golden Stone - sizes 4 to 8
Little Yellow Stonefly (adult):	Yellow Sallies - sizes 16 to 18
Green Drake (emerger, adult):	sizes 10 to 12
PMD (emerger, adult):	sizes 14 to 18
Hoppers:	tan, yellow - sizes 6 to 10

After the major summer hatches are complete, late summer brings hoppers. August is a great time to fish big hopper patterns. In general, terrestrials can be a food source from late July (and sometimes sooner) through August, and even into September.

Fishing dry-dropper rigs during summer can be very effective. This involves fishing a dry fly with a nymph or emerger dropped below it. You can also fish a hopper on top with a nymph below it (hopper-dropper rig).



*A nice Taylor River Brown Trout*

September through October

Fall can be an excellent time to fish in the Gunnison Valley. The fall hatches are limited and can be more sparse as compared to the summer hatches, but the fish are active. There is a Gray Drake (also referred to as a Slate Drake or Slate Gray Drake) hatch which can start as early as late August and run through late September and into October. In addition, there is a good fall BWO hatch. These BWOs are very small, in the size 20 to 24 range, but they are significant. They will hatch from about late August through September/October. Trout will rise up and sip these BWOs from the surface.

Fall is also a good time to fish streamers and egg patterns. Brown trout and kokanee salmon spawn in the fall, and they will become very aggressive prior to spawning during mid to late September and into October. Streamers can be very effective during this time. Once the browns and kokanee begin to drop their eggs, rainbow trout will move in behind them and feed on the eggs. Egg patterns are effective during fall and straight through the winter months.

BWO (nymph, emerger, adult):	sizes 20 to 24
Gray Drake (emerger, adult):	sizes 12 to 14
Streamers:	Muddy Buddy, Sculpzilla, Wooly Buggger - sizes 4 to 8
Egg Patterns:	roe, chartreuse, cheese - size 14



*27-inch Brown Trout caught in September*

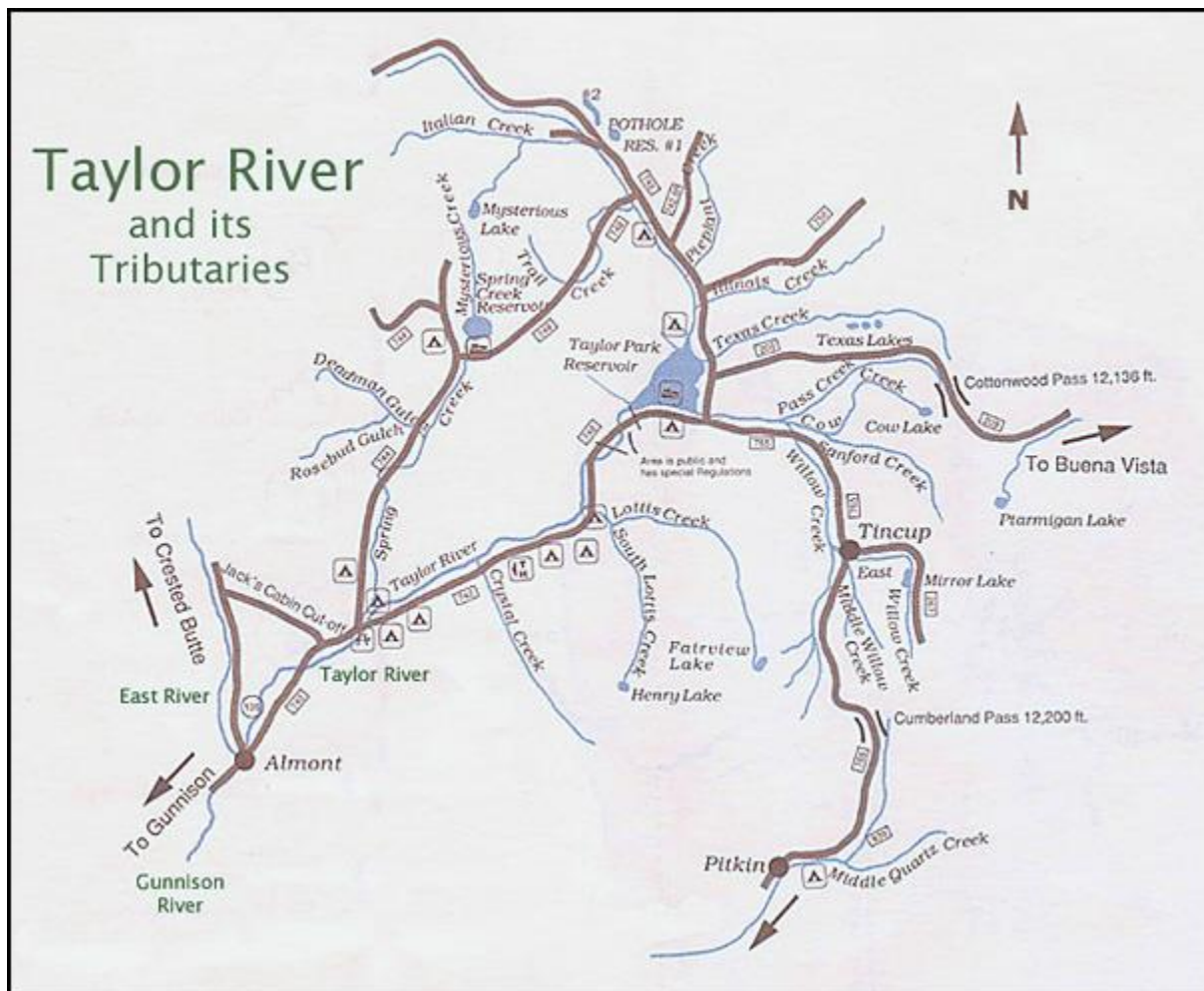
## Fishing the Taylor River Tailwater From Almont to Taylor Reservoir



Taylor River

The Taylor River tailwater begins below the dam at Taylor Reservoir at an elevation of about 9,300 feet. This section of the river is 20 miles up County Road 742 (Taylor River Road) from Almont. The river flows down through Taylor Canyon and eventually joins the East River to form the Gunnison River in Almont, at an elevation of about 8,000 feet.

There is approximately 12 miles of public access on the Taylor River, with plenty of fishing opportunities for brown, rainbow and cutthroat trout throughout Taylor Canyon. Recent fish sampling by *Colorado Parks & Wildlife* resulted in trout density estimates of between 6,000 and 7,000 fish per mile on the lower stretch of the Taylor River.



The Taylor River tailwater can be divided into three sections: The first section includes nearly five miles of river from Almont up to Five Mile Bridge. This is a lower gradient stretch which offers plenty of access and fairly easy wading. The river consists of riffles and pools, and some pocket water. The second section is beyond Five Mile Bridge, from Harmel's Resort up to the Catch-and-Release (C&R) section below the dam. This upper stretch of river also includes some nice riffles and pools, but it is higher gradient with big boulders and a lot of deep pocket water. It can be tougher to wade, and many places are better fished from the bank. Many anglers wear chest waders and use a wading staff when fishing the Taylor River. The third section is the Taylor River C&R. This is our famous trophy trout water below the dam. It is the special regulation section of the Taylor River which is designated catch-and-release fishing only.

### Section1: Almont to Five Mile Bridge

Public access on the Taylor River begins in Almont, about a quarter mile up County Road 742 from the intersection with Highway 135. There is good access and a nice pool right there across from the Post Office. There are several more public access points as you travel up Taylor River Road the first couple of miles, as well as one small stretch of private property. This lower section of the river, up to about MM3 (Mile Marker 3), includes a lot of riffles and easy wading opportunities.

At about MM3, there is a campground at Gunnison Mountain Park. This section of river includes some good water which holds some nice fish. Trout over 18 inches are not uncommon here. There are some big boulders and pocket water, and plenty of riffles. There is also plenty of access beyond Gunnison Mountain Park up to about MM4.

The river at MM4 includes some nice long pools and pocket water, with riffles in between. From MM4 to Five Mile Bridge is very good water and you can normally find a lot of fish here. You can park near MM4 or at the pull-off just before the bridge. There is a fairly steep hill to walk down to get to the river, but there will be several visible trails to follow. Wading this section of river is not too difficult, but there are plenty of big rocks and holes to watch out for. During high water, you will need to fish the edges. You can fish another quarter mile or so above the bridge before you run into private property at Wilder Ranch below Harmel's Resort.

### Section 2: Harmel's Resort to the C&R



*25-inch Brown Trout from upper Taylor Canyon*

From the public access area just above Harmel's Resort at about MM7 all the way to the C&R section below the dam, the river tends to be higher gradient with big boulders and lots of deep pocket water and whitewater. Between Harmel's and the next highway bridge at South Bank, there is very good water which holds some big trout. There is easy access here with plenty of parking. There is a campground

just above Harmel's, and this is

also a popular area for rock climbing. South Bank is where rafts will put in and take out during summer.

From South Bank up to One Mile Campground and Rosy Lane Campground (roughly MM8 to MM9) the river includes some whitewater and rapids, and can be tough to fish. But there are some great fishing opportunities in this section and up past MM9 as well. There is parking along the road and easy access to the river. It can be busy here during the summer months with all the campers and boat traffic.

You'll continue to find quality water to fish from MM9 to MM10, and also beyond the US Forest Service cabin which is just above MM10. There are some deep pools here which hold a lot of fish, including some larger trout. There are parking areas off the road near MM10 with easy access to the river. This stretch of river will have a lot of boat traffic during peak summer months.

There is nearly another mile of good public water beyond MM10 until you reach some private property just below the White Water Resort. One of the main put-ins for rafting is just above White Water Resort. There is another large parcel of private property at Crystal Creek, at about MM13, with some public water in between these locations. As you continue traveling up above Crystal Creek, you'll come to Lodgepole Campground at about MM14. This is a popular area with a lot of fish. There is easy access right off the highway, with a large parking area on the river across from the campground.

From Lodgepole to Cold Spring Campground, there is over a mile of quality water to fish. Some of the river here is not as easily accessible and you must walk up the bank and/or wade the river. This reach includes long riffles and pools, as well as some good pocket water. There are some nice fish in this upper stretch of the Taylor River.

As you travel beyond Cold Spring at about MM16, the road curves and comes back to the river again below where Lottis Creek flows into the Taylor River. This part of the river is home to huge boulders and deep pocket water. It holds a lot of fish and can get some pressure during the peak season since it is right off the road. There is private property across the road from Lottis Campground at about MM17, and there is no more public access on the river until you reach the lower boundary of the C&R section at MM20.

### Section 3: The Taylor River C&R

The C&R section of Taylor River is trophy trout water which includes about .4 miles of river designated catch-and-release by *Colorado Parks & Wildlife (CPW)*. The special regulations permit flies and lures only, and all fish caught must be returned to the river. There are signs which clearly mark the boundaries of the C&R section, which is patrolled by CPW. They routinely check anglers for proper fishing licenses and habitat stamps. There is a parking area with portable restroom facilities next to the bridge just beyond MM20.



*A nice Cutthroat from the Taylor River C&R stretch*

You can look over the bridge and see huge browns and rainbows in the river below. The fish here feed on small midges and Mysis shrimp year round. Fishing the C&R involves technical fishing with small flies and sight fishing to huge trout weighing up to 10 pounds or more. Due to the limited access and large trout, it can get very crowded during the peak season, especially when the summer mayfly hatches kick in.

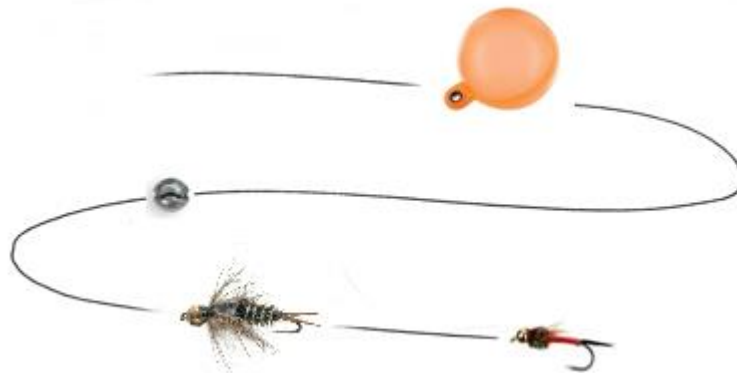
Fishing this trophy trout water requires skill and plenty of patience. Once hooked, these trout can run like freight trains. Hooking and landing fish at the C&R is certainly a challenge, even for the experienced fly fisher. If it's too crowded, or if the fish are not cooperating, anglers should not hesitate to venture down Taylor Canyon where they can find plenty of fish.

## Appendix A: The Tandem Rig

### Fishing Two Flies

Fishing a tandem rig involves fishing two flies at once. This is also referred to as a *dropper rig*. A tandem rig can consist of any two flies in any combination, such as nymphs, dry flies, emergers, streamers, etc. Fishing two nymphs is a very standard approach here in the Gunnison Valley, and it is an extremely successful technique. The following steps include basic instructions for setting up a standard tandem nymph rig:

1. Attach a tapered leader to your fly line (such as a 9' 4X or 5X leader).
2. Attach about 20 inches of tippet (usually 4X or 5X) to the leader with a double surgeon's knot or other knot of your preference.
3. Attach the first fly to this tippet end so that it is about 12 inches (give or take) from the knot. An improved clinch knot can be used for this.
4. Tie another 20-inch section of tippet (4X or 5X) to the bend or eye of the first fly hook. You can use an improved clinch knot for this, or another special dropper knot of your choice.
5. Attach the second fly to the end of this tippet end so that the flies are about 12 inches apart (or about the same distance used in step 3).
6. Attach any weight needed above the knot tied above the top fly. The knot will keep the split-shot in place.
7. Pinch down the barbs on both flies. (Fishing barbless flies is recommended.)
8. Attach the strike indicator at a distance of about 1 to 2 times the depth of the water you will be fishing. This is the distance from the strike indicator to the split-shot. Adjust this distance as needed based on water depth and current speed. (The distance between flies can also be adjusted based on experience and preference.)



#### Examples:

##### Two Nymphs

A standard tandem nymph rig involves fishing two flies below the surface. This can be two mayfly nymphs, a stonefly nymph with a smaller mayfly nymph or midge trailing behind, or an egg pattern with a nymph under it. A typical example includes a large stonefly nymph with a smaller Pheasant Tail or Copper John below it.

##### Dry-Dropper

A dry-dropper rig involves fishing a dry fly on the surface and dropping an emerger or a nymph below it to fish in the film or deeper below the surface. Typical examples include fishing an adult mayfly or stonefly pattern, or hopper (hopper-dropper), while dropping a small nymph (which could be weighted) below it. The distance from the dry fly to the nymph

depends on how deep you want to fish (typically anywhere from one to three feet). You can also fish two dry flies in tandem. You might fish a larger dry fly up front with a smaller dry fly behind it. A good example of this which is very effective in the summer is fishing a big Green Drake with a PMD trailing behind it.

### Two Streamers

Fishing two streamers can be a challenge due to the combined weight of the rig, but it can be very effective, especially in spring and fall. You can also add split-shot above the first streamer to get the flies down deeper (and faster). No indicator is required with this rig. Vary the size and color of the streamers for the best results. A typical example of this rig would include a large streamer pattern like a Muddy Buddy or Sculpzilla with a smaller wet Western Coachman trailing behind it.

## Appendix B: Watching the River Flow

### *General Guidelines for Wading*

When the rivers are high and flowing strong, wading can be challenging. Anglers should never underestimate the power of water. If it looks unsafe to wade, it probably is. The following information serves as a general guideline only. Anglers should factor in their wading experience, fitness, and comfort level before wading any of the rivers.

- The Taylor River can be a difficult river to wade. Anglers with some experience will wade the river up to about 500 cfs to 600 cfs (cubic feet per second). Flows above 600 cfs can be very challenging for most anglers. Flows in the 300 cfs to 400 cfs range provide good wading opportunities and great fishing. There is a USGS gage below Taylor Dam which reflects the release from the reservoir, and there is also a gage in Almont. (*Find USGS gages on the web at: [waterdata.usgs.gov](http://waterdata.usgs.gov).*)
- The East River can be waded comfortably in most places up to about 400 cfs to 500 cfs. There are some areas near the Roaring Judy Fish Hatchery which can be fished close to the banks at flows up to 600 cfs or even 700 cfs. Flows in the 200 cfs to 300 cfs range are ideal for wading on the East River. The USGS gage for the lower East River is located in Almont.
- The Gunnison River is the largest river in the Gunnison Valley, and it can be tough to wade in the summer. It is a popular river to float. Anglers who would like to wade the river should look at the flow at the headwaters in Almont and also the USGS gage in town. For the flow at the headwaters, you can add the Taylor River and East River flows together. If this is greater than about 900 cfs to 1,000 cfs, wading can be challenging. When the gage in town reflects flows greater than about 1,000 cfs to 1,200 cfs, wading the town stretch or lower river can be very difficult.

Anglers new to the area should check with local fly shops and/or fishing guides for recommendations on where to wade. They will have all the current information related to flows and conditions for all the rivers in the Gunnison Valley, and they are excellent resources.

