



Cover: steelhead illustration (Erie Steelhead Guide art).

SAN JUAN RIVER

Navajo Dam to Blanco, New Mexico - the Quality Waters tailwater

The desert tailwater: 3.75 miles of catch-and-release Quality Waters below Navajo Dam, where midges hatch every day of the year and the average rainbow is what other rivers call a big one.

LIVING GUIDE - updated October 15, 2026. Gauge charts in every edition are drawn fresh from USGS data at rebuild. Buyers receive refreshed editions - see the back page for how updates work.

Erie Steelhead Guide - Deep Dive Series | FREE SAMPLE - full example guide, not for sale | Maps, gauge charts, hatch and weather

AT A GLANCE

Fishery type	Trout
County / region	San Juan County, NM - Navajo Dam to Blanco, New Mexico - the Quality Waters tailwater
Watershed size	3260 sq mi
Gauge	USGS 09355500 - San Juan River near Archuleta, NM
Gauge status	Gauged on the stream
Edition updated	October 15, 2026

Species & seasons

Species	Season	Notes
Rainbow trout	Year-round; stocked plus natural reproduction; spawn late winter into spring	The fishery's engine. NMDGF plan-era surveys put mean rainbow length around 16 inches with about half the early-1990s fish over 18, and angler catch rates averaged about 1.1 fish per hour even under some of the heaviest pressure in North America.

Species	Season	Notes
Brown trout	Year-round; self-sustaining - last stocked in 1997 (NMDGF); spawn Oct - Nov	The wild card: browns rose from about 5 percent to nearly 30 percent of the Special Trout Water population in plan-era surveys after spring releases began cleaning the spawning gravel. Fewer, bigger, and mostly earned at dawn, dusk, or on streamers.
Native fish (federally protected)	Lower river reaches, downstream of the trout water	Colorado pikeminnow and razorback sucker - federally listed endangered species - are the reason for the big spring releases. If one ever eats a fly, release it immediately and unharmed.

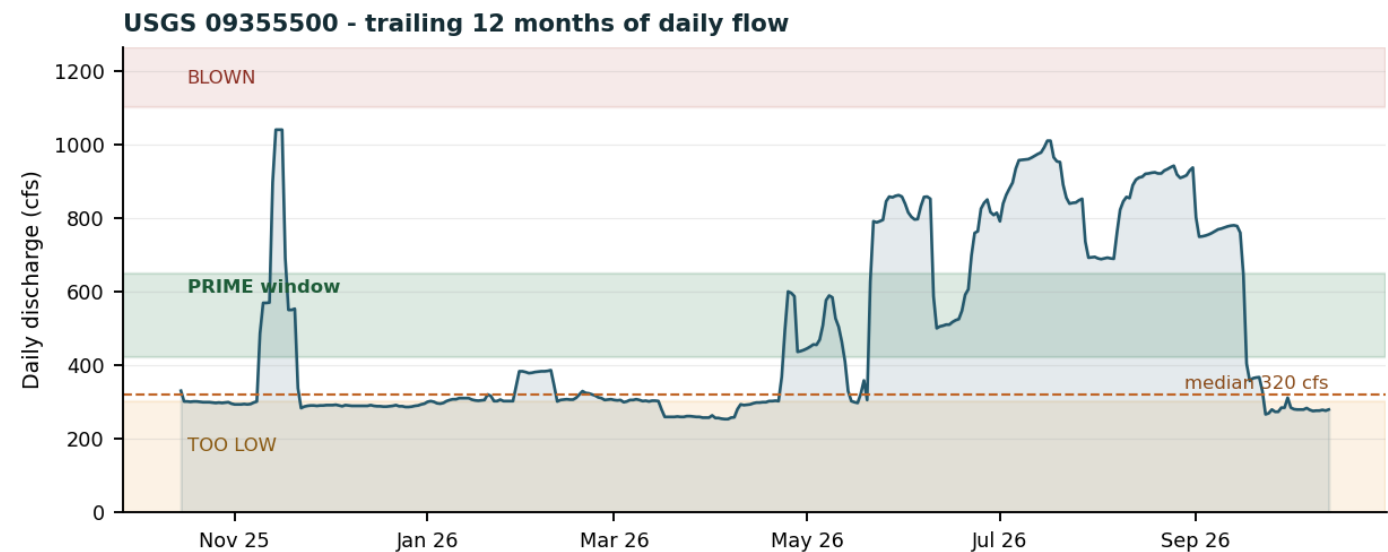
THE STREAM - HISTORY & CONTEXT

Before 1962 the San Juan at Archuleta was a warm, silt-laden desert river. Navajo Dam - an earth-and-rockfill Colorado River Storage Project dam, in service as Navajo Reservoir began storing water in June 1962 - turned it into a cold, clear tailwater: the sediment now settles in the reservoir and the releases, drawn from the depths, run about 6 to 6.5 deg C year-round. NMDGF has managed the water immediately below the dam as Special Trout Water since 1966. Aquatic insect standing crops in the upper tailwater have been measured above 100,000 insects per square meter, and the fishery grew into what the NMDGF management plan calls the finest trout fishery in New Mexico - a claim few who have fished it bother to argue with.

Since 1992 the Bureau of Reclamation has run the dam on a more natural hydrograph for the endangered Colorado pikeminnow and razorback sucker downstream: spring peaks up to 5,000 cfs that scour and clean the gravel, then base flows of roughly 250-500 cfs the rest of the year. Brown trout - last stocked in 1997, self-sustaining since - used the cleaned gravel and climbed from about 5 percent to nearly 30 percent of the Special Trout Water population in plan-era surveys. Anglers log roughly 217,000 hours a year on this river, and about 90 percent of surveyed fish show signs of having been hooked before. That is the whole game here: the fish are big, numerous, and educated.

FLOW WINDOWS & THE GAUGE

Window	Reading
Too low	Under 300 cfs
Low and fishable	300 - 420 cfs
Prime	420 - 650 cfs
High - edges only	650 - 1,100 cfs
Blown out (spring release)	Over 1,100 cfs



Gauge chart: daily discharge, trailing 12 months, USGS NWIS (drawn at build time).

How these windows were set: Working bands derived from USGS daily discharge statistics for station 09355500, 10 years ending Oct 2026: percentiles p10 298, p25 343, median 418, p75 645, p90 884, p95 1,060 cfs, with spring runoff releases reaching about 5,000 cfs. This is a release-driven tailwater - the number is set at Navajo Dam, not by local weather - and the bands are wading bands for the Quality Waters; drift boats fish well above the wading ceiling. Method matches the gauged PA guides in this series.

Color: A tailwater clarity story: the dam traps the sediment the pre-1962 river was famous for, and releases run clear. Color events come from side arroyos and monsoon storms on the lower river; the Quality Waters themselves stay fishable-clear through most weather. The real clarity issue is footing - the cobble wears a slick coat of algae at every level.

Clearing: There is nothing to clear below the dam in the freestone sense: releases run clear. After a release change the river takes a few hours to stabilize at the new level down at the Archuleta gauge; monsoon mud from arroyo mouths stains the lower river below the Quality Waters and settles within about a day.

TACTICS BY FLOW BAND

Same creek, five different fisheries. Find today's band in the table above, then fish the program for that band - rig, holding water, and the safety note that goes with it.

Too low - Under 300 cfs

Rig & flies: Winter-base fishing: the smallest midges you own (24-28) on 7X, one or two flies, an indicator small enough to land like weather.

Where they hold: Fish crowd into the remaining runs and pool tails; the braids run thin - fish the main-channel seams.

Safety: Low water is the safest wading of the year, but the cobble is algae-slick at every level: studs or bars, and a staff in the fast runs.

Low and fishable - 300 - 420 cfs

Rig & flies: The classic Juan program: a worm or egg point fly with a midge dropper on 6X, depth set to tick bottom occasionally.

Where they hold: Everywhere at this level - this is the band the river's reputation was built in. Riser pods form on the flats at midday.

Safety: Watch the release schedule: a step up from base can arrive mid-day. Know your exit rock before you need it.

Prime - 420 - 650 cfs

Rig & flies: The full program: two-fly nymph rigs with real weight, BWO emergers in the film on grey days, streamers on the banks at the edges of the day.

Where they hold: Fish spread across the whole channel; braids and main stem both fish, and the Texas Hole flats hold their famous pods.

Safety: 650 cfs is honest current in the main channel - cross only at wide, shallow tails, never at the head of a pool.

High - edges only - 650 - 1,100 cfs

Rig & flies: Boat water that some still wade: fish the edges only - heavy nymphs and worms in the soft seams, streamers along the banks.

Where they hold: Inside bends, eddy edges, and the water behind the big boulders - anywhere the current bill is discounted.

Safety: At these levels a slip is a swim in 44-degree water. Wade with a partner, belt tight, staff down - and if the gauge is rising, get out.

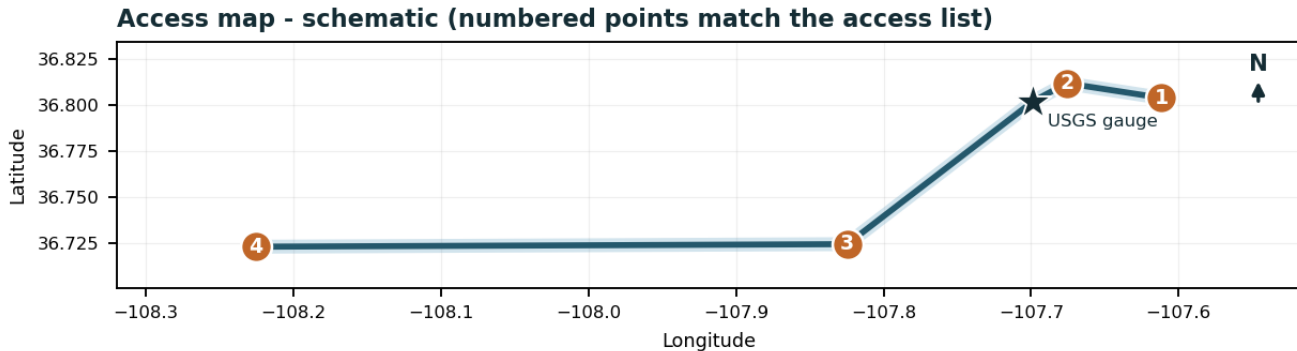
Blown out (spring release) - Over 1,100 cfs

Rig & flies: Spring-release country (peaks to about 5,000 cfs): wading is done. Drift the edges with streamers and worms from a boat, or bank-fish the margins and wait for the ramp-down.

Where they hold: The very edges and flooded margins - from a boat, not from in the river.

Safety: Never wade a rising tailwater. Release schedules are posted by the Bureau of Reclamation - treat a planned peak as a scheduling fact, not a surprise at the ramp.

ACCESS - MAP & POINTS



1. Navajo Dam - top of the Quality Waters

Parking: Day-use and parking areas at the dam base and along NM 173 below the dam (Navajo Lake State Park, San Juan River section); the village of Navajo Dam - fly shops, food, lodging - sits just downstream. GPS: 36.8038, -107.6118

Getting to the water: Short walks from the dam-base parking to the first runs; angler trails thread the upper river.

The water you reach: The coldest water on the river - releases run about 6 to 6.5 deg C (43-45 F) at the dam. Upper flats and the first Quality Waters runs: midge water par excellence.

Best window: Every band starts here, because the release is the river. At winter base flows (about 250-350) this is the most technical, rewarding water on the system.

Pressure: Moderate at the very top - most of the river's pressure concentrates downstream at Texas Hole.

Notes: The Special Trout Water starts at the dam and the Red Chile rules start with it: catch-and-release, single barbless hook. The dam itself is a 1962 Colorado River Storage Project structure, 365 feet of earth and rock fill.

Texas Hole

Parking: The well-known state-park day-use parking off the river road below the dam (Navajo Lake State Park). No pin is printed: the lot's coordinates could not be verified from a checked source. No verified pin - see the parking line.

Getting to the water: Short paths from the day-use parking to the pool and to the boat ramp - the first drift-boat launch on the Quality Waters.

The water you reach: The river's most famous address: a long, deep, glassy pool and the runs below it, holding large, extremely educated rainbows. Wade-only water above; boats launch here and float down.

Best window: Everything except the spring-release peak. At base flows it is the classic midge-and-BWO classroom.

Pressure: The heaviest on the river. Fish it at dawn, in weather, or accept the company and learn from it.

Notes: If you fish one named spot on a first trip, it is this one - and the fish here have seen every fly you own. The two-flies-per-line limit (NMDGF booklet) applies everywhere in the Quality Waters.

2. Cottonwood Campground (Navajo Lake State Park)

Parking: Campground on the river road inside Navajo Lake State Park - camp here and walk to the water; state-park day-use and camping terms per NM State Parks. GPS: 36.8117, -107.6758

Getting to the water: Campground paths reach the river; the braids and side channels are a short walk.

The water you reach: The braided middle Quality Waters: side channels, flats and seams that fish like a spring creek - one riser at a time.

Best window: Base and prime flows. The braids are among the first water to light up with BWO activity on a grey day.

Pressure: Spreads out - the campground crowd fishes close to camp and the braids empty quickly.

Notes: Inside the Red Chile reach - barbless, catch-and-release. A fine base camp for a multi-day trip.

Simon Canyon (BLM day use)

Parking: BLM day-use parking where Simon Canyon meets the river off the river road. No pin is printed: the parking coordinates could not be verified from a checked source. No verified pin - see the parking line.

Getting to the water: River access at the canyon mouth; the Simon Canyon Foot Trail climbs the canyon to a small ancestral Puebloan pueblo - worth the walk in a non-fishing hour.

The water you reach: Runs and flats around the canyon mouth and Simon Point, toward the downstream end of the braids - where insect diversity starts to climb as the river gains temperature swing (NMDGF plan).

Best window: Base through prime; the standard move when Texas Hole is crowded.

Pressure: Light to moderate.

Notes: BLM Simon Canyon Area of Critical Environmental Concern. Flash-flood rule: never enter the canyon with storms anywhere in sight - desert washes run fast.

Crusher Hole Day Use Area - bottom of the Quality Waters

Parking: Day-use area at the downstream end of the Quality Waters (Navajo Lake State Park). No pin is printed: coordinates not verified from a checked source. No verified pin - see the parking line.

Getting to the water: Short walk from the day-use area to the boundary runs.

The water you reach: The last Red Chile water. Below this line the rules change to statewide regulations - know which side of the boundary your fish came from.

Best window: All wading bands; a good first stop to calibrate what the gauge number looks like at the bottom of the special water.

Pressure: Moderate - locals and float trips ending or starting.

Notes: The current NMDGF booklet fixes the boundary here: the Quality Waters run from Navajo Dam downstream 3.75 miles to the Crusher Hole Day Use Area.

3. Blanco - US Highway 64 bridge (lower river)

Parking: Bridge-area and village access at Blanco; much of the lower river bank is private - fish only where access is clearly public or permitted. GPS: 36.7244, -107.8246

Getting to the water: Varies by access; the lower river is mostly a float or permission game.

The water you reach: Regular-regulation trout water in transition. NMDGF's managed trout water runs 17 miles from the dam to this bridge.

Best window: Cooler months and higher releases; summer water warms with distance from the dam.

Pressure: Light.

Notes: Below the Special Trout Water the state has managed a stocked, regular-regulation reach (NMDGF plan). Statewide bag and tackle rules apply - check the current booklet.

4. Farmington - the Animas confluence (basin scoreboard)

Parking: City river parks and trailheads along Farmington's river corridor (the Animas and San Juan river trails) - the pin is the USGS Farmington gauge anchor. GPS: 36.7230, -108.2256

Getting to the water: Paved river trails with bank access in the city parks.

The water you reach: Big, warming river below the managed trout water - included so you can read the whole system's flow, not as a Quality Waters trout stop.

Best window: A gauge-reading and trip-timing stop; trout water per NMDGF ends at the Blanco bridge.

Pressure: City-park pressure.

Notes: USGS Farmington gauge 09365000 (drainage 7,240 sq mi) - the basin's scoreboard after the Animas joins, roughly 44 river miles below the dam.

Schematic map drawn from verified anchors only: Navajo Dam, Cottonwood Campground, the USGS Archuleta gauge, Blanco, and the USGS Farmington gauge. Texas Hole, Simon Canyon and Crusher Hole are listed without pins - their lot coordinates could not be verified from a checked source. Not for navigation.

SEASON PLAYBOOK

Season	The water	Fish present	How to fish it
Spring (Mar - May)	Two rivers in one season - base flows early, then the Bureau of Reclamation spring release builds (May-June peaks). Check the posted schedule.	Rainbows finishing their spawn; browns recovered and hungry.	BWOs on the cloudy days; eggs and annelids around the spawn and the ramp; streamers on the rise.
Summer (Jun - Aug)	Post-peak step-downs into roughly 500-750 cfs base flows; monsoon storms late in the season muddy the lower river, not the dam release.	Rainbows and browns on midges, PMDs and caddis in the lower Quality Waters.	Midges up top, PMD and caddis lower; hoppers and flying ants along the banks after monsoon storms.
Fall (Sep - Nov)	The step-down to winter base - the clearest, steadiest water of the year.	Browns spawn Oct-Nov; rainbows feed hard ahead of winter.	BWOs return; eggs behind the browns; streamers at the banks at dawn. Stay off the redds.
Winter (Dec - Feb)	Winter base release, roughly 250-350 cfs; release water at about 43-45 F while the air runs colder.	Rainbows and browns midging daily at midday.	The connoisseur's season: tiny midges and annelids, 6X-7X, no crowds.

MONTH BY MONTH

The season playbook above is the year in four strokes; this is the same year at working resolution. Windows and hatches are the typical patterns from this guide's data - any given year shifts with weather.

Month	The water	The fish	The play
January	Winter base, about 300-350 cfs (10-year January median 352 at Archuleta); the air is colder than the 43-45 F release.	Rainbows midging at midday; browns deep and quiet.	Midge larva-and-pupa pairs under a small indicator; annelids after any release bump. Solitude is the January bonus.
February	Base flows hold (median 387). The rainbow spawn builds late in the month.	Pre-spawn rainbows, aggressive and colored up.	Eggs enter the rotation below spawning areas - fish the runs beneath the flats, never over the redds. Midges all day.
March	BWO season opens on the grey days; flows still near base (median 382).	Rainbows spawning; browns post-spawn and hungry.	Baetis nymphs and emergers on cloudy afternoons; eggs and worms on the bright ones.
April	The spring BWO peak. Reclamation shapes this year's release schedule in April - check it before any trip (median 442, but release years rewrite the month).	Everything feeding.	The best dry-fly month of spring; PMD nymphs start in the lower Quality Waters late.
May	Spring peak window: the 10-year May median reads only 420, but the 90th percentile is 3,250 - the ramp comes in May-June and takes the river into the thousands.	Fish crowded to the edges on the rise; browns use the high water.	Fish the ramp's first days on annelids and streamers from the bank, then let it go. Never wade a rising river.
June	Peak or step-down: 90th percentile 4,410 early, falling toward base by month's end in most years.	Post-peak fish on cleaned gravel, feeding hard.	The falling water after the peak is the month's prize - BWOs, midges, first PMDs. Watch the gauge trend, not the level.

Month	The water	The fish	The play
July	Summer base about 500-750 (median 700). Monsoon season starts; arroyos can muddy the lower river on storm afternoons.	Rainbows on midges and PMDs; browns at dawn.	Fish mornings. Caddis and PMDs in the lower Quality Waters; hopper and ant patterns along the banks after storms.
August	Base flows hold (median 750 - the year's highest steady month at the gauge). Monsoon afternoons continue.	Educated midsummer fish.	Tiny and precise - midge clusters at midday, flying ants after the first big monsoon wash, streamers at first light.
September	The step-down begins (median 756 and falling); the river clears and steadies.	Browns color up; rainbows feed hard.	BWOs return on grey days; terrestrials still work the banks early in the month. The fall season quietly starts here.
October	Flows settle toward winter base (median 509). The brown spawn builds late.	Spawning browns; egg-eating rainbows behind them.	Eggs and midges; small streamers at dawn. Stay off the redds - those browns are next year's river.
November	Winter base returns (median 343) and the crowds vanish.	Post-spawn browns recovering; rainbows midging.	BWOs on the last grey afternoons; annelids and leeches deep. Some of the year's best fishing, quietly.
December	Base about 300-350 (median 348); release water warmer than the air most mornings.	Rainbows and browns in the winter rhythm.	Midges at midday, eggs and worms in the morning. Short days, long lunches, empty river.

HATCH & FORAGE CALENDAR

Hatch / forage	Typical window	Size	Patterns	Notes
Midges	Year-round	#18-28	Zebra Midge, Disco Midge, Griffith's Gnat, midge larva and pupa patterns	The staple. Diptera dominate the cold, constant upper tailwater (NMDGF plan), and insect standing crops have been measured above 100,000 per square meter.
Blue-Winged Olive (Baetis)	Mar - May and Sep - Nov	#18-22	RS2, WD-40, Juju Baetis, CDC Comparadun	The dry-fly hatch: spring and fall, best on cloudy days, and stronger below Texas Hole as insect diversity climbs downstream (shop hatch charts).
Red annelids and aquatic worms	Year-round, peak on flow changes	#16-22 worms; #20-22 annelids	San Juan Worm (red, tan, pink), red annelid patterns	A constant drift item near the dam; release changes scour them loose in numbers (shop hatch charts).
Trout eggs (spawn drift)	Feb - Apr and Oct - Dec	#14-16	Egg patterns - Oregon cheese, pink, chartreuse	Rainbows spawn late winter into spring, browns in the fall; eggs drift behind active redds.
Scuds	Year-round	#14-18	Olive and tan scuds	A quiet constant in the weed and cobble of the middle river (shop hatch charts).
Leeches	Year-round, best fall - winter	#6-10	Bunny leech, Woolly Bugger (brown, olive, black)	Year-round forage that local guides lean on in the cold months (shop guidance).
Pale Morning Dun (PMD)	Jun - Aug	#16-18	PMD nymph, Comparadun, Sparkle Dun	A lower-river summer hatch: mayfly diversity increases downstream as the water gains temperature swing (NMDGF plan; shop hatch charts).
Caddis	Jun - Jul	#14-18	Elk Hair Caddis, caddis larva and pupa	Lower stretches in summer (shop hatch charts).
Terrestrials - hoppers and flying ants	Jul - Sep	#8-12 hoppers; #14-16 ants	Hopper patterns, Amy's Ant, black ant patterns	Hoppers work the grassy lower banks; large flying ants wash out of the canyon cliffs with the first monsoons and the fish go visibly wild (shop guidance).

Hatch / forage	Typical window	Size	Patterns	Notes
Baitfish and sculpins	Year-round, best fall - winter	#4-8	Sculpin patterns, streamers, Woolly Buggers	Lower-river and big-pool forage - the streamer game for the river's largest browns.

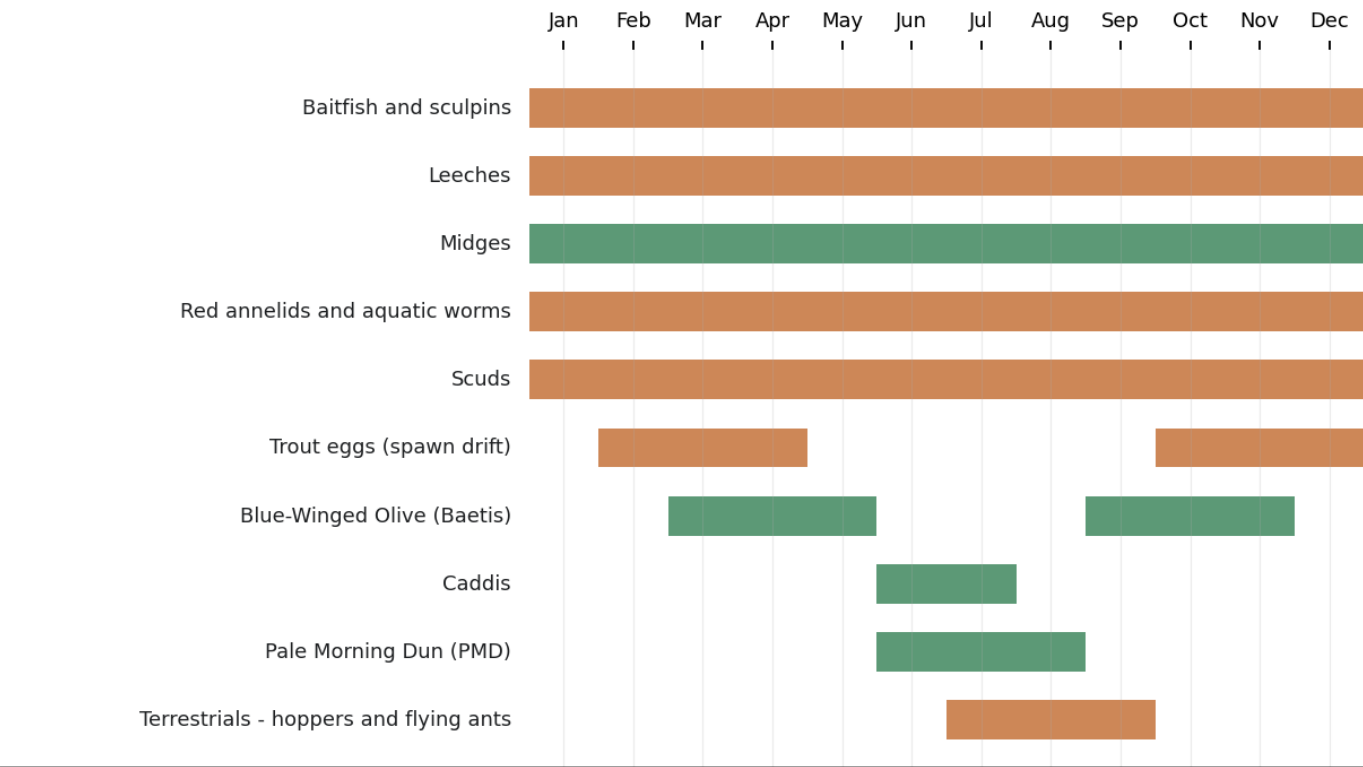
Windows are typical, drawn from the NMDGF San Juan River management plan's insect-community work and published Four Corners fly-shop hatch charts and seasonal reports. Weather and dam-release schedules shift any given year - confirm conditions and the release before you drive.

MATCH THE FORAGE - PATTERN & PRESENTATION

The calendar says when; this table says how. Sizes are the natural's size; presentations are the standard plays for each forage family.

Hatch / forage	Tie on	Size	Fish it like this
Midges	Zebra Midge, Disco Midge, Griffith's Gnat, midge larva and pupa patterns	#18-28	Two-fly rigs of larva plus pupa, dead-drifted at the fish's level under a small indicator; a Griffith's Gnat when they are sipping clusters in the film. If in doubt on this river, you are looking at a midge problem.
Blue-Winged (Baetis)	Olive RS2, WD-40, Juju Baetis, CDC Comparadun	#18-22	Nymph the runs before the hatch, emergers in the film as it starts, duns over risers at the peak. These fish define selective - long leaders, and the first cast counts.
Red annelids and aquatic worms	San Juan Worm (red, tan, pink), red annelid patterns	#16-22 worms; #20-22 annelids	Dead-drift deep as the point fly, especially on a rising or just-changed flow. In winter, a worm trailed by a midge is the river's oldest joke - it still works.
Trout eggs (spawn drift)	Egg patterns - Oregon cheese, pink, chartreuse	#14-16	Fish eggs below spawning areas, never over them. One egg with a midge dropper covers both stories.
Scuds	Olive and tan scuds	#14-18	Dead-drift deep through the flats and along the weed lines; a scud behind a worm is a full-meal rig.
Leeches	Bunny leech, Woolly Bugger (brown, olive, black)	#6-10	Slow-swing or strip-pause through the deep pools at first and last light; a leech trailed by a red annelid is a local winter rig.
Pale Morning Dun (PMD)	PMD nymph, Comparadun, Sparkle Dun	#16-18	Emergers in the film on the lower Quality Waters flats; fish the spinner fall at dusk in the back eddies.
Caddis	Elk Hair Caddis, caddis larva and pupa	#14-18	Pupa in the drift in the morning; the adult skated or dead-drifted over risers in the evening.
Terrestrials - hoppers and flying ants	Hopper patterns, Amy's Ant, black ant patterns	#8-12 hoppers; #14-16 ants	Bank-tight drifts on the lower river. When the ant fall is on, nothing else matters - fish the foam lines and eddy seams.
Baitfish and sculpins	Sculpin patterns, streamers, Woolly Buggers	#4-8	Dawn, dusk, and release changes - swing or strip streamers along the banks and through the deep pools. The takes are the river's biggest.

The year at a glance - green: hatches rust: forage



Built from this guide's hatch & forage calendar (typical windows). Use it to plan the year: pick the month, see what is on, then read that month's row in the month-by-month playbook.

READING A RELEASE-DRIVEN RIVER

On a freestone creek you read the sky. On this tailwater you read a schedule. The Archuleta gauge tells you the level; the trend tells you the fishing. Learn the five states of this river and every other section of this guide falls into place.

Gauge trend (Archuleta)	What the dam is doing	The play
Steady 250-450 for days	Winter / base release holding	The classic Juan: midges, tiny nymphs, long fine leaders, fish the seams at their level.
Stepping up / rising	BOR ramping toward a spring peak or a release change	Annelids and worms come loose in the drift. Fish the soft edges as it climbs and plan your exit - wading water shrinks hourly.
2,500-5,000, days on end	Spring runoff release for the endangered native fish downstream	Wading is done. Float the edges with streamers and worms if you go at all; most anglers wait it out or fish the ramp days.
Falling after the peak	Ramp-down onto scrubbed, clean gravel	Often the best big-fish window of the year. BWOs and midges go hard; fish are hungry and the lies are obvious.
Sudden change, no notice	A release change or a monsoon event - check the gauge timestamp	Arroyo mud can stain the lower river in an hour. In the Quality Waters, get out of side canyons first and ask questions second.

The single highest-value habit on this river costs nothing: read the Archuleta gauge the morning of, and know whether the number is steady, rising, or falling. Every tactic in this guide keys off that trend, because on a tailwater the dam - not the weather - writes the fishing.

The Bureau of Reclamation posts Navajo Dam release schedules and changes. In spring especially, check the schedule before you drive: a planned ramp to 5,000 cfs is a reason to fish the days before it, not a surprise to wade into.

WEATHER & CONDITIONS PLAYBOOK

Condition	What changes	Tactics & flies	Verdict
Stable base release (the default)	The dam holds one number for days and the river fishes like a giant spring creek.	Standard program - midges and BWOs by the calendar, long fine leaders. Throw: Midges, RS2s, annelids	Go - this is the Juan being the Juan.
Spring release rising	Reclamation ramps toward the spring peak (up to 5,000 cfs); edges soften hourly and the drift loads with annelids.	Fish the soft edges from the bank on worms and streamers, and plan your exit before you wade in. Throw: San Juan worms, annelids, streamers	Fish the first days, then stop.
Spring peak holding (2,500-5,000)	Full runoff simulation for the endangered fish downstream; the Quality Waters become a flood channel.	Wading is over. Float the edges if you go at all; most anglers fish elsewhere and wait. Throw: Streamers and worms, from a boat	Wait it out.
Release falling / step-down	The river drops onto clean, scoured gravel and insect activity surges.	Often the best window of the year - cover water; the fish are hungry and the lies are obvious. Throw: BWOs, midges, PMDs by season	Go now.
Monsoon storm (Jul - Sep)	Arroyo washes can muddy the lower river in an hour; the dam release itself stays clear.	Fish the Quality Waters above the mud lines, and never linger in side canyons. Throw: Standard Quality Waters program up top	Fish high; stay out of washes.
Winter cold snap	Air in the teens while the release water runs 43-45 F - the river is the warmest thing out there, with shelf ice only at the very edges.	Midges at midday in the sunniest runs; short sessions, warm truck nearby. Throw: Midge larva and pupa 22-26	Go - the locals' season.
Desert wind (spring afternoons)	Canyon winds build most afternoons; casts shorten and indicators skate.	Fish the morning. In the wind, shorten up, go a fly size heavier, and fish the lee banks. Throw: Heavier two-fly nymph rigs	Mornings.

TACTICS

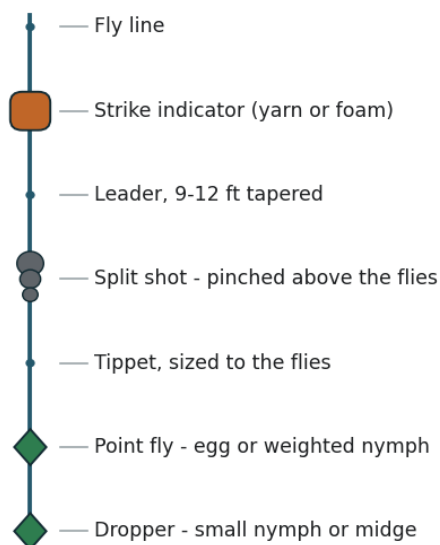
- Depth before pattern: the fish feed at one level in the column, mostly near the bottom in the runs and in the film on the flats. Get the flies to the level before you open the fly box.
- Two flies, no more: the Quality Waters cap a rig at two flies or lures on a single line - build the pair as a story (worm plus midge, egg plus midge, leech plus annelid).
- These are the most educated trout in the West: NMDGF creel work found about 90 percent of surveyed fish had been hooked before. Long leaders to 6X-7X, first-cast discipline, and drag-free drifts are the price of admission.
- Fish the release, not the clock: the gauge trend (steady, rising, falling) outranks time of day. Check Archuleta before you rig.
- In the braids, fish it like a spring creek: one riser, one cast, from below and to the side. In the main channel at Texas Hole, fish it like a big river: mend for depth and let the rig soak through the whole pool.
- Barbless is the law here, and it makes the release easy: keep fish wet, in the net, in the water.

TOP FLIES & BAITS BY SEASON

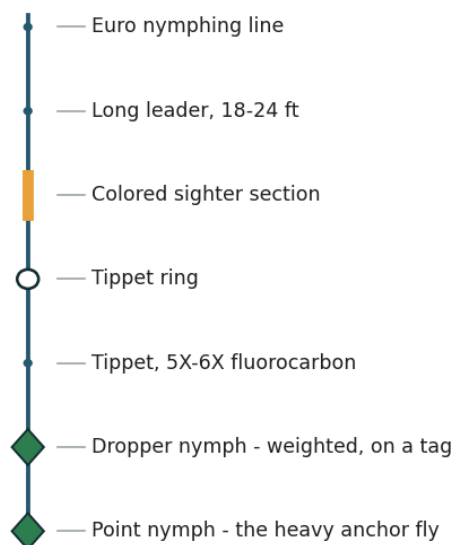
Season	Tie on / rig
Spring (Mar - May)	BWO nymphs and emergers 18-22, egg patterns 14-16, red annelids, midges 20-26, San Juan worms.
Summer (Jun - Aug)	Midges 18-26, PMD 16-18 and caddis 14-18 in the lower Quality Waters, scuds 14-18, hoppers and ants along the banks.
Fall (Sep - Nov)	BWO 18-22, eggs behind the spawning browns, streamers at dawn, midges.
Winter (Dec - Feb)	Midge larva and pupa 20-28, red annelids 20-22, San Juan worms, leech-plus-annelid rigs.

RIGGING & PRESENTATION

Indicator nymph rig - creeks & trout water



Tight-line / euro rig - pocket water



Rig schematics - components top (rod side) to bottom (fly). Not to scale; proportions follow the leader formulas in the text.

The indicator rig is the default searching tool: 9-12 ft tapered leader, indicator set at roughly 1.5x the water depth, shot pinched 8-12 inches above the flies, and two flies - a weighted point and a small dropper that matches what's drifting that month.

The tight-line (euro) rig owns pocket water: 18-24 ft of leader with a colored sighter, a tippet ring, and two weighted nymphs - the heavier point fly anchors the drift, the dropper rides a tag 16-20 inches above it. No indicator; the sighter is the indicator, and it fishes slots a float rig can't enter.

Shot patterns: for indicator work, bulk shot goes high with one small shot near the flies; for euro work, the weight lives in the flies themselves - add shot only when the water is up.

Leader formulas: 5X for general nymphing, 6X for midges and low clear water, 4X for streamers. Fluorocarbon below the surface, nylon for dries. In the special-regulation water in this catalog, long and fine is the local dialect.

Dry-fly presentation is the third rig and the simplest: a tapered leader, one fly, no drag. If the rise is on, put the indicators away - the sections above tell you which evenings matter.

PRESENTATION - MAKING THE RIG WORK

Drag is the refusal you can't see: if your fly crosses current seams at the surface's speed, trout read it as wrong even when the pattern is right. Feed line, mend early, and shorten the cast before you change the fly.

Emergers solve more refusals than any other change: when fish bulge or short-strike dries, drop a size, go to the film, and slow the drift. Most 'wrong fly' problems are wrong-stage problems.

Set the hook on the rise with a short, quick lift - and on nymph takes, lift at any hesitation of the indicator or sighter that you cannot explain. The cost of a false lift is one drift; the cost of a missed take is the fish.

In pocket water, presentation is footwork: get close, stay low, keep the rod high, and lead the flies with the rod tip so the drift lasts exactly as long as the slot does. Short-line fishing is accuracy fishing.

Play special-regulation trout like you borrowed them: side pressure, quick to hand, unhooked in the water. The big fish in this catalog's special-regulation water are community property in the best sense - they get caught again because they were released right.

YOUR FIRST TRIP HERE

Start where the river starts: park at the dam-base area in the morning and look at the water, then drive the river road down to Texas Hole for your first real session.

THE ROUTE

- Read the Archuleta gauge (09355500) with breakfast: a steady 300-650 is your day; rising means edges; over 1,100 means sightseeing.
- Warm up in the upper Quality Waters near the dam: a midge rig, modest fish, honest feedback on your drift.
- Mid-morning at Texas Hole: fish the runs at the head of the pool, then the flats. Expect company, and expect to watch fish refuse other anglers - free lessons.
- Afternoon: move down to the Cottonwood braids and fish the side channels like a spring creek - one riser at a time.
- Finish toward Simon Canyon, or back at Texas Hole for the last light - BWOs if the day is grey.

When to move: Move when the gauge trend changes, or after an honest hour without a look in water that should hold fish. On this river, re-rigging (depth first, then fly size) outranks relocating.

What success looks like: One big rainbow fooled clean on a fly it has certainly seen before - landed on light tippet and released in the water. Numbers come easily here on good days; the education is the trophy.

Bring:

- NM fishing license plus Habitat Management & Access Validation
- Waders and boots with studs or bars - the cobble is slick at every flow
- Midges 20-28, BWO emergers 18-22, annelids, eggs, and a few streamers
- 6X and 7X tippet and long leaders - bring more than feels reasonable
- Sun and wind layers: high-desert sun at about 5,600 feet, canyon wind by afternoon

Etiquette: Catch-and-release is the law in the Quality Waters and barbless is both the law and the courtesy. These fish are caught and released many times a year - keep them wet, skip the hero shot over dry rock, and give wading anglers the water they are fishing: on the Juan the next pool is always somebody's plan B, so share like it is yours.

REGULATIONS - READ BEFORE YOU GO

Summaries here are for trip planning. Regulations change - check current NMDGF rules for the exact water and date you fish.

- Quality Waters = Red Chile Water (NMDGF Special Trout Waters): San Juan River from Navajo Dam downstream 3.75 miles to the Crusher Hole Day Use Area - catch and release only; artificial fly or lure with a single, barbless hook; never more than 2 flies or lures on a single line (NMDGF Fishing Rules and Information Booklet).
- Below Crusher Hole, statewide regulations apply - standard statewide trout limits and tackle rules as printed in the current booklet. NMDGF's managed trout water runs 17 miles from the dam to the US Highway 64 bridge at Blanco.
- License: a valid New Mexico fishing license is required, plus a Habitat Management & Access Validation for anglers 18 and older; a Second Rod Validation is optional. The license year runs April 1 - March 31.
- Navajo Lake State Park: the Quality Waters accesses sit in the park's San Juan River section - state park day-use and camping terms apply; check NM State Parks (EMNRD) for current rules and fees.
- Simon Canyon is BLM land (an Area of Critical Environmental Concern) - a Habitat Stamp is required for fishing on BLM and US Forest Service lands in New Mexico.
- Federally listed endangered fish (Colorado pikeminnow, razorback sucker) live in the lower river: any native fish hooked must be released immediately, unharmed.
- Summaries for planning only: check current NMDGF rules for the exact water and date you fish.

SOURCES & THE LIVING-GUIDE PROMISE

- USGS NWIS station 09355500, San Juan River near Archuleta, NM - site record (drainage 3,260 sq mi, coordinates) and 10-year daily discharge statistics computed Oct 2026; station 09365000, San Juan River at Farmington, NM, for the lower-river anchor.
- New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, Fishing Rules and Information Booklet (2024-2025) - Special Trout Waters / Red Chile listing for the San Juan River Quality Waters; statewide limits, license and validation requirements.
- New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (2005), Long Range Plan for the Management of the San Juan River Special Trout Water - dam history (1962), Special Trout Water since 1966, release regime since 1992, insect standing crops, catch rates and population surveys.
- Duranglers (Durango, CO) - published San Juan River hatch guidance, fly-pattern lists and seasonal fishing reports; Four Corners fly-shop hatch charts for typical windows.
- OpenStreetMap geocodes (Oct 2026) - Navajo Dam, Cottonwood Campground, and the village of Blanco anchors. Texas Hole, Simon Canyon and Crusher Hole are deliberately unpinned: their coordinates could not be verified from a checked source.

This guide is generated from a maintained data file. When gauges move, easements change, or NMDGF updates a regulation, the data file is corrected and the guide is rebuilt - with fresh USGS charts and a new edition date on the cover. If your edition's date is old, ask for the current one: refreshes are free to buyers.

Good fishing. - Erie Steelhead Guide