

Special Fly Fishing Adventures Report

COLORADO EXPLORATORY TRIP, OCTOBER 2006



Famous Rocky Mountain “private water” lodges like Elk Creek and the Marvine Ranch (both of which have become completely private in recent years) as well as Elk Trout Lodge and the newest and finest, Three Forks Ranch, are all located in Colorado.

I returned 10/12 from an exploratory trip to Colorado with an answer to a question that has always puzzled me: “Why are the best private waters fisheries in the West located in Colorado?” The answer was easy to discover – Colorado state law states that landowners also own the rights to the river and stream surfaces and the land underneath the water on all waterways on their property. This allows landowners to restrict access to their watersheds, unlike many other states in the West, which encourages the Colorado property owner to improve their waters and fisheries. Couple the legal reason with the stunning natural beauty and trout-friendly environment created by the Colorado Rockies, and you have the complete answer.

THREE FORKS RANCH: The Outdoor Sportsperson’s Fantasy Playground

On the land made famous in the frontier days as the home of Jeremiah Johnson, the famous mountain man, and the hideaway for Butch Cassidy’s Hole In The Wall Gang, this 250,000 acre ranch straddles the border of both southern Wyoming and northern Colorado. It simply is the finest fly fishing lodge operation in the lower 48, bar none. It starts with the quality of the fishing which includes, to quote a well traveled client of ours, “more 20+ inch fish than I’ve ever caught anywhere.” Over 16 miles of private access, easily waded, insect-rich, streams are available, including the South, Middle, and North Forks of the Little Snake River. These are waters that have undergone the most extensive stream restoration program anywhere creating a picture-book string of riffles and pools. For the most part, these streams are 25-50 feet wide and provide challenges for every skill level of fly fisher, from beginner to the most experienced.

The guides match the quality of the fishing – outstanding and qualified teachers for the newcomer. The staff, accommodations, and Rocky Mountain cuisine, from breakfast through dinner, is on a scale with a five star property. Lem Cragholm, who did a father-son trip in September, stated “it met the lofty expectations I had.” Similar comments have been registered from 100% of our clients who have visited in the last two years.

My trip was a chance to verify that all I’d heard was true. And verify I did! I only fished and photographed one day. Conditions were tough as a recent storm had left the water a little off-color and cold. However, these freestone streams clear quickly and we were able to fish dry flies most of the day to rising fish, even in mid-October. We must have had 50 fish respond to our fly and released about 25, including one monster rainbow of 7+ pounds (no scale with us, but having weighed and released numbers of 6 – 8# fish in New Zealand and Labrador, I can eyeball the weight reasonably well).



Being late in the season, there were several hunters on the ranch and many stalks resulting in trophy elk and mule deer were discussed over dinner. Although I’m not a hunter, I enjoyed the banter with the hunters and could appreciate their excitement and tales of the stalk.

Starting in 2008, when the new spa and lodge will open, hunters and fly fishers will be kept entirely apart in different areas of the ranch during September and October. The 6,000 square foot spa will be a welcome addition for non-fishing spouses.....as well as fishing spouses! Currently, spa treatments are available, but not as extensive as the new spa will facilitate.

2007 Availability: One unique aspect of Three Forks is they will do any length of stay from 3 nights to two weeks. Only a few slots remain for one or two rods maximum except for a short stay of 3 nights, 2 days. The exceptions are:

A: first two weeks of June will be open in 2007 for the first time. Certainly there is danger of high and roiled waters due to run-off in early June, but they did some experimental fishing in early June this year and, even with difficult water conditions, fishing was good.

B: For those that can travel over the 4th of July, there is room for up to six rods from June 30 to July 5.

C: We just had a four night slot for a party of two for September 6 – 10 come open.

D: Some reserved space has not yet been deposited and could come open. However, they are running over 80% repeat clients which are pretty solid bookings.

Bookings for 2008: With their policy of allowing “first rights” on return dates to clients, no 2008 bookings are being accepted (with the exception noted below) although I am starting a “wait list” for clients of Fly Fishing Adventures. We will have some “first rights” ourselves as dates open for 2008. The only exception is the period after September 10. Bookings are already being taken for the fall of 2008 because there will be no fly fishers at the Ranch next fall after September 10 to tie up the space with “first rights.”

Pricing: Expensive as would befit the finest operation of its kind. A six night, five day stay runs \$5,500 per person based on double occupancy and shared guide.

SMOKING RIVER GUIDES, WHITE RIVER VALLEY – Early Season Option

Before they went totally private, the Marvine Ranch and Elk Creek Lodge on the White River system near Meeker were two of the finest private water operations in the US. When Elk Creek announced they wouldn't be open to the public starting with this summer, it made several talented guides, each with over 10 years experience fishing the White, available for hire. These guys have banded together and formed the Smoking River Guides Association (Smoking River being the Indian name for the White River). I sampled their program on my trip.

I learned why the White has the outstanding reputation it has as a trout fishery. It is a wonderful river with several braided sections with each braid resembling a small stream environment. I only fished one day plus the evening of my arrival and did take all four species (rainbow, brown, cutthroat, and cutt-bow hybrid) of the Rockies Grand Slam. We released a few fish in the 18-20 inch range and were able to fish dry flies about half the time.

They have private access to approximately 6 miles of the White as well as other privately accessed water. With the hoards of fly fishers today on the waters of the West, private waters like these are an increasingly attractive option.

For accommodations, they have contracted with a 4 bedroom B&B-style ranch house. The house itself is over 100 years old and has been very tastefully restored and is very comfortable, although short on bathrooms with only two. It is operated by a gal who was a cook at Elk Creek and does an excellent job with the meals.

Their prime months are March and April up through mid to late April when the waters begin to become roiled. After the runoff is finished in late June, July is excellent. August continues to be good if the late summer heat and rains aren't too severe. Mid-September through October, as long as the weather holds, are also considered prime although hunting season starts here around mid-October changing the overall atmosphere of the area.

For a group with a minimum of four to a maximum of six rods, the ranch house is exclusive just for that group making it a very private overall experience. The ideal package with the Smoking River gang is a 4 night stay with three days fishing. The price per person for that 4n/3d package is \$2,070 and includes lodging, meals, private access rod fees, and shared guide (2 anglers per guide).

Slide presentations are available for both of these Colorado destinations.

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