

# Piedra River Complex

## The Piedra River Complex

By Paul B Downing

The Piedra serves as a watershed for the San Juan mountains in Archuleta, Hinsdale, and Mineral counties in Colorado. Located in the Southwestern portion of the state, the Piedra takes its start at the confluence of East, West, and Middle Piedra. You could say it starts higher up in the Forks but for our purposes it starts here and we start to talk fishing. The confluence is located at N37.43883, W107.18059 and it ends at the Navajo Reservoir at N37.05603, W107.41127, a distance of some 40 miles. The MAP Icon at the top of the article is the Piedra and Williams Creek confluence.



The Mountains Above Williams Creek

Along the way we encounter a variety of interesting places as described in the article covering the Lower, Middle, and Upper Piedra River. A lot of the upper area above the Forks is a special management area which means a limitation on development and activities of that nature thus keeping it pristine not unlike a Wilderness designation. As you work down the river, there are a number of trails for hiking which can also be used for fishing access.

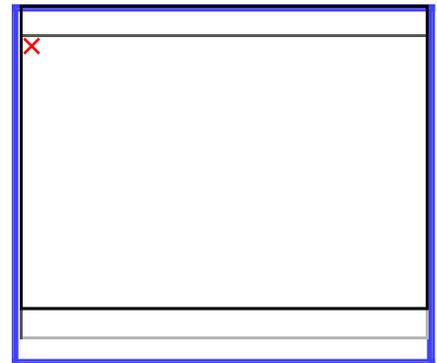
There are several points to reach the Piedra but a good deal of it is away from roads and occasionally in box canyons. The good news is lots of good size rainbows and brown and in the upper reaches, brookies and cutts

Friends told me about this area in glowing terms. I had never visited it until two years ago. Now that I have, I can tell you that it is a great place to wet a line.

### **Lower River      37.228406   107.347908**

Driving east from Durango or west from Pagosa Springs on Hwy 160 you will reach the lower Piedra. Look for the Lower Piedra Campground sign. Follow this dirt road north a half mile or so to the river. The lower part of this

section of the river has nice runs and some undercut banks. I have found lots of willing modest size browns here. They respond well to attractor flies with a bead head nymph dropper. As you work your way upstream into the campground, the water changes to become mostly pocket water. Here the browns are somewhat bigger and are supplemented with the occasional rainbow. Just when you think you have found trout fishing heaven above the campground, you run into private land. Time to regroup and head for the middle section.



### **Middle River      37.353481   107.324006**

Go back to Hwy 160 and turn left. Almost immediately you will cross the Piedra. Just on the other side of the bridge there is a dirt road off to your left (north) called First Fork Road (FR 622). Follow this road north. It climbs above the river which forms a deep canyon named First Box Canyon. The road is narrow but easy to drive. The steep drop-off on the left side of the road may put some people off but with care you can make it with a passenger car. At the end of the road there is a bridge over the river. Park in the open area before the road crosses the bridge.

The stretch below the bridge fishes very well.



Starting on the near side (east) walk downstream as far as you want and fish back up. The first part of the walk is in open land. Shortly, trees close in and the path is narrow and rough. I am lazy so I stop at the trees. Strong runs and large boulders here provide wonderful holding water for trout. They do, however, create complex currents that are a challenge to fish properly. Start with the water on the edge and work your way out toward the middle of the stream. In most years I find the current a bit too strong to wade very far out but younger legs may do better. The multiple currents around the boulders make presentations tricky. I cast up and across with an upstream reach cast,

then do an additional upstream mend to get just a few feet of drag free drift over a likely spot. I miss a few takes on the slack line this creates but that is better than not getting any attention with a dragging fly. The photo is just below the first fork bridge.

Standing in one spot, first cover the area near shore. Then wade out into the current as far as you are comfortable to work pockets further away from shore. Wade back toward shore then upstream and cover the next bit of water the same way. Working your way upstream in this manner should yield several nice browns and rainbows. Once I reach the open flat below the bridge, I stop working this side because I find the current above the bridge is too strong to wade safely.

Bridge Crossing view



Climb the bank and cross the bridge then head downstream. I start about as far down as I was on the other side. Work your way upstream as you did on the other side. As you walked downstream you crossed a small side stream, First Fork. When you get back up to it, pay special attention to the deeper hole just below it. I have done very well there. This deeper water is best fished with a nymph rig. After working this hole, shift your attention to a big boulder in the middle of the river. There is a good pocket below it and another just in front of it. Getting a good drift will take a reach and mend. Last time I was there a 15 inch rainbow took my dry just in front of the boulder.

Again I stop at the bridge. There is a trail on the west side of the river which heads upstream toward Second Box Canyon. I have never gone up that trail as I have been alone and going onto wild country alone is not a good idea. Take a friend. I have heard that the fishing is good and the fish are larger.

## **Upper Piedra and Williams Creek**

**37.461686 107.915203**

To reach the upper Piedra and Williams Creek, head back to highway 145 then head east toward Pagosa Springs. As you enter the west end of town there will be several stop lights. Turn left at an intersection labeled Piedra Road. This road, paved initially then dirt, takes you on a beautiful drive back to the scenic mountain vistas of the San Juan National Forrest, some of the most spectacular mountain views in Colorado. Winding back and forth and bearing left at any fork, you will eventually reach a bridge over the Piedra. There is a dry camp ground just over the bridge. You can fish upstream from the camp ground in some beautiful pool and riffle water. However, this area is heavily fished and I have had limited success here. You can also follow a trail on the west side of the bridge downstream into Second Box Canyon. A short walk will bring you to a gentle slope that gives you access to a short section of river below the bridge. This section is seldom fished. I am told that where the Williams Fork enters the Piedra, about a mile hike down the trail, there is good fishing in both rivers although I have not ventured down there yet, again because I was

alone.

Following the road northwest toward Williams Reservoir and keeping to the left at a fork in the road, you clear a rise and head down into the Williams Creek valley and another excellent fishing opportunity. The road will cross the bridge over Williams Creek. You will find a campground just beyond the bridge. You have just entered heaven for a small stream fisher like me. Park in the area before the bridge and walk downstream as far as you like. Williams Creek offers all types of water and all sorts of brown trout. Runs drop into deep holes with complex currents that can be a challenge to fish but the rewards are great. Hit it right and you will attract an amazing number of 10 to 12 inch fish on a dry and dropper. There are even some 14 to 16 inchers. Then there are days that it is hard to attract anything except the local bushes. The further downstream from the road you get, the better the fishing.

The area around the campground is fished fairly hard in the summer. However, after Labor Day, the campground is closed, crowds go home and the browns work their way up river from the Piedra. Fishing improves substantially, both in numbers and size. Park at the campground entrance, cross the cattle guard and fish upstream. I have caught some very nice browns here in the fall. The same attractor fly and dropper that worked in the lower river will usually work here too.

Continuing on the road west toward the Reservoir, you will find a number of places where you can park and hike down into the valley. Some of these more hidden areas offer great fishing. You could spend a week just fishing this part of the Williams Creek.

Follow the signs, right at the Y, to get to Williams Creek Reservoir. If you thought the views were spectacular before, you will love this lake. Cimarrona Peak towers over the lake with the Continental Divide serving as a backdrop. I have seen the lake covered with rising fish. Rainbows and Kokanee are the major attraction here. The lake is best fished with a belly boat or a boat and motor. There are three campgrounds in this area and a convenience store at the lake.

Going back toward the Piedra, the Middle Fork of the Piedra can be accessed on another road. As you headed from the upper Piedra bridge toward Williams Creek you saw a Y in the road at the top of the hill. Instead of bearing left, bear right toward Piedra Falls. If you are coming back from the Williams Creek, turn left. This road will cross the Middle Fork of the Piedra then continue on to a trail head that leads to the Falls. The river below the parking lot offers runs into deep pools. I have only fished here once with limited success but others have reported that they do very well here. If nothing else, the scenery is well worth the trip. There is one wet river crossing that could be a problem for low clearance cars.



The Middle Fork at the bridge has very nice looking water but I have yet to find a fish in it. With so much great water so close, it does not seem to me

to be worth fishing.

All in all, the Piedra and Williams Creek offer a lot of wonderful fishing. Pagosa Springs is the closest town. It has many motels, good restaurants, and a wonderful natural hot springs. The San Juan River runs through town and the fishing through town is excellent and encouraged. The State and the Town manage this water in an effort to provide the highest quality experience possible. I have caught numerous 14 inch plus rainbows and browns just upstream of the eastern most bridge.

This area is a great spot for a vacation.

**Size:**

There are approximately 15 miles of easily accessible stream with more if you are willing to hike a bit. Overall, the river runs about 40 miles from the confluence to the Navajo Reservoir. For the stout of heart and limb there is a lot of water to look at.

**Weather:**

Spring (March and April) are cool with a chance of snow. Summer is pleasant with highs in the 70s and 80s. Fall begins in September and may last well into October depending on the year. Winter limits access substantially.

**Gear and Techniques:**

A 3 to 5 wt fly rod will work well. Use 5x tippet. Dry and dropper are generally the ticket although stripping a streamer may work well in fall. Spin fishers will find success with a small spinner like a Rooster Tail.

**Fishing Seasons:**

There is no closed season on trout in these streams but winter and spring runoff will limit fishing. The run off can leave the river very dirty. It starts to clear in late July and August which means the fall is really the best of the year.

**Access:**

All three sections mentioned in the article are accessible by good dirt roads. The sections below Hwy 160 going towards the Reservoir are either Indian Lands or privately owned and not open to the public.

**Species At This Location:**

Trout Brown

Trout Rainbow