

Rio Grande south of Alamosa

May 10-11, 2025

By Penelope Purdy

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Put-in: Alamosa County Road Z bridge. Take-out: Colorado Highway 142 bridge. Trip Coordinator: Penelope Purdy, solo canoe. Other paddlers: Karen Amundsen and Randall "Randy" Purrett, solo canoes; Natalie Mack, solo kayak.

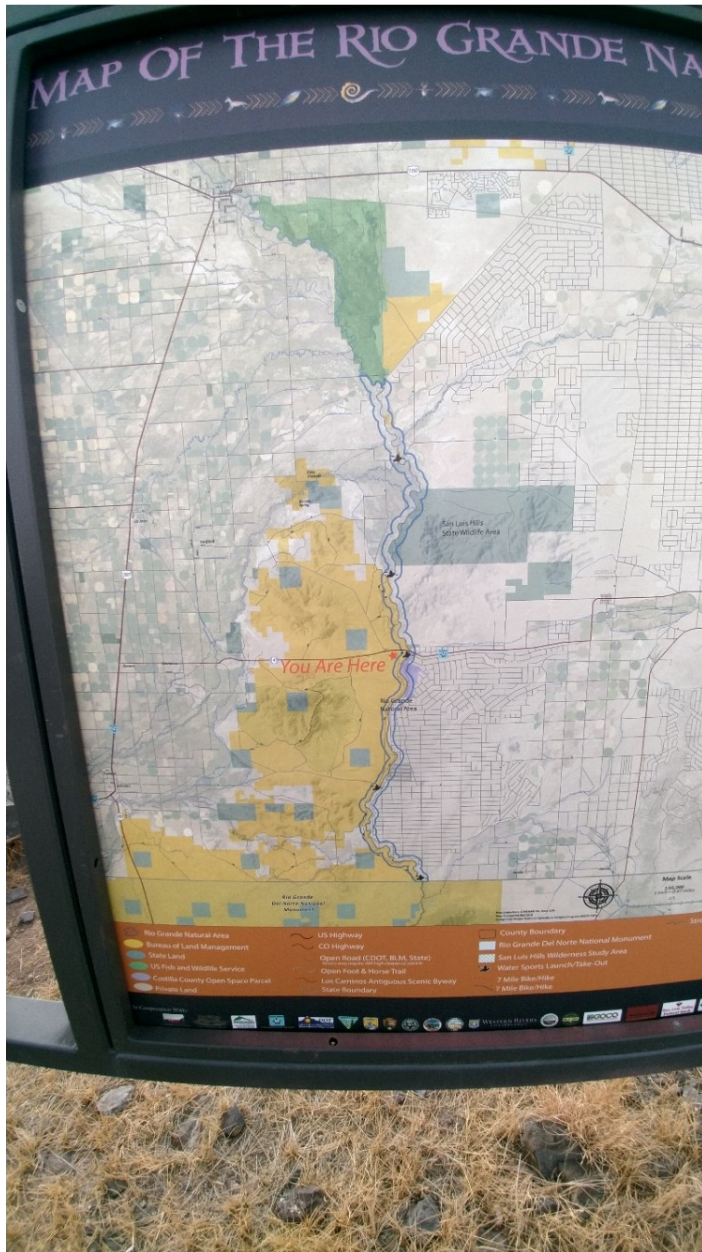
Four RMCC members enjoyed a wonderful two-day journey on the historic Rio Grande south of Alamosa, Colorado, during a rare opportunity when this Class I+ stretch of river holds enough water for pleasant paddling. Along the way, they saw elk, wild horses, several raptors, and songbird species, as well as historic homesteads and layers of complex geology. If you follow in their paddle strokes, please treat this uncrowded river stretch as though it is the final exam for a master class in Leave No Trace Ethics – this area remains remarkably unspoiled, despite 10,000 years or more of nearby human presence (including prehistoric Natives).

Indeed, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management calls this canyon a "natural area," and along with Colorado Parks and Wildlife, maintains the riparian ecosystem to protect the [endangered southwestern willow flycatcher](#). That goal is complicated, however, because every cubic foot of the Rio Grande's precious liquid is claimed by farms, ranches, and towns in Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, and the Republic of Mexico. So, the timing of a canoe or kayak trip depends as much on when farmers in the San Luis Valley take water out of the river as it does on how much rainfall and snowmelt the Rio Grande's tributaries receive in the San Luis Valley, the western flank of the Sangre de Cristo Range, and the main Rio Grande headwaters in San Juan Mountains.



The southwestern willow flycatcher is more easily heard than seen. Photo courtesy of the U.S. National Park Service. [Listen here.](#)

Local paddlers recommend this part of the Rio Grande during the first two weeks of May, because that's usually the only time that the river is full enough to avoid the numerous sandbars that form by early summer and elevate the difficulty from a novice-friendly Class I to a Class I+. We paddled in about 300 cubic feet per second of flow, but that's as low as I'd recommend a river trip here. Please consult the spreadsheet, shown at the bottom of this report, which was prepared by Karen Amundson and shows the past 16 years of river flow data.



The BLM map at the CO 142 take-out shows the land ownership along the Rio Grande in southern San Luis Valley.

Day One, Saturday, May 10:

Three of the four paddlers opted to stay in nearby Alamosa on Friday night, with one driving from Salida on Saturday morning, so we began the shuttle reasonably early in the day – not the 9 a.m. start the trip coordinator had hoped for, but close enough that we got on the water before the San Luis Valley’s notorious winds awakened. The drive to the put-in --- where County Road Z crosses the Rio Grande

on a good bridge – became part of the adventure: in the spring, big, deep mud puddles form along the dirt Road Z when farmers flood their fields, making passage impossible for passenger cars and even most AWD. Fortunately, we four arrived in 4WD pickups and true SUVs, which could handle the slippery and rutted road.

I'll give directions for the put-in and take-out after the trip description. For now, just know that the best put-in is on the southwest corner of the Road Z bridge; the small, unmarked dirt access road is about 100 yards west of the bridge, on the south side; from here, you can maneuver the boats to the water through a short gap in the otherwise continuous fence that extends south from Alamosa to the state line. Randy and I stayed with the boats while the others shuttled to the take-out at Colorado Highway 142, with Randy using the time to photograph a nearby mommy killdeer and her nest.

The footing was a bit tricky as we hauled our boats down the short but steep bank to the river. Downstream, the first two boats on the water easily entered a decent-sized eddy on river right, to wait for the last two to launch.



Karen A. and Randy P. get ready to launch below Road Z.

The first few river miles meandered past leafed-out cottonwoods, plentiful willows, and tall grasses, ideal habitat for many native birds that live here year-round or migrate by the tens of thousands every spring. (We were about one week too late to catch the flocks of blue herons, mergansers, plovers, mallard ducks, and other birds that my friend Elliott and I had spotted the previous weekend when we scouted the river and its banks.) The Rio Grande here passes by private land, including farms whose water rights pre-date Colorado statehood. Note that the locals call this part of the San Luis Valley “Lasasues,” or the willows, but we were too early for the willows’ annual, Jurassic-sized mosquito hatch. We saw an elk browsing near the river, but the wild animal trotted into the willows as our boats quietly approached.



Karen A. (foreground) and Penelope paddle past the willows while savoring views of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.



The gentle river created wonderful reflections on the calm first morning, as Randy P. paddles along with the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in the background.

By late morning, the San Luis Valley's complex geology started to unfold. We left the flattish Lasauces (whose sandy bottoms were deposited by an ancient inland sea about 250 million years ago) and entered a wide canyon, with sagebrush-covered hills rolling upward on both river left and river right.

While gazing at the dramatically rising terrain on river left, Karen, Natalie, and Randy spied large groups of horses, running free just below the nearly barren mesas. Karen counted 34 of them. The animals weren't on private land, but roamed around BLM and state property. Surely no right-minded rancher believed that this harsh landscape offered good forage for domestic horses. Oh my gosh! These proud, long-maned animals were *wild* horses, carrying their tails, and their liberty, high.

Less than an hour later, we saw another four feral horses on river right as they drank from the river. As our boats approached, they cantered easily up the hill – then they halted and turned toward us in unison, eyes wide, ears straight, obviously curious. The terrain soon hid them from our sight. But not for long.

They timed their reappearance for maximum drama. All four magnificent beasts – one almost pure white and another a glorious bay -- galloped out of the sagebrush on river right, thundered down the river bank, and pounded through the water – right in front of Karen’s canoe. The vision reminded me of a scene in the first Lord of the Rings movie, where the elf princess Arwen saves Aragon and Frodo from the ring-wraiths by conjuring up the river’s horse spirits.

The wonderful real-life episode happened too fast for any of us to grab our cameras, but our expressions of wonder evidenced that the moment was in our memories.



Wild horses watch our boats from the nearby hills.

Soon afterward, I earnestly began to track our progress on the map because property ownership here is complex, with bits of private land on the east bank scattered among BLM lands and the newly purchased San Luis Hills State Wildlife Area (the latter is a project to which RMCC donated some funds). In late afternoon, we reached part of the river when the mainstream turns sharply right, so that the Rio Grande runs more westerly than its usual north-south. Here, I felt comfortable locating our camp on a gentle, grassy stretch protected on both river banks by volcanic hills but with open enough to provide magnificent views. This campsite, on river left, is near the north end of the state wildlife area. The coordinates: 37°13'58.0"N 105°44'35.5"W

Important: We took care not to put the tents, kitchen area, or groover in the willows or in the undisturbed sagebrush groves because those are the endangered flycatchers' favorite habitat. A few ATV-riding teenagers accessed nearby motorized trails into the late evening. But for the most part, we basked in exceptional solitude and unimpaired natural beauty.

From our campsite, for instance, we looked directly at the snow-covered Sangre de Cristo Range, which at just 25 million years old is among the youngest (and longest) range in the entire, continent-long Rocky Mountain chain.



Our campsite nestled near a large eddy where the Rio Grande temporarily runs east-west.

The Evening

Under state law and CPW regulations, every person over age 12 who uses a state wildlife area must have a Colorado hunting or fishing license, or a wildlife area access card. For Colorado residents over age 65, the annual fishing license is just under \$12 and lets us into any state wildlife area, so it's worth the cost. Karen hadn't fished for years, so I gave her a basic lesson in spin casting. She learned quickly, but neither she nor I -- nor Randy, who cast a few hundred yards upstream -- caught anything edible. Natalie and Karen later enjoyed a pre-dusk walk in the rolling hills above camp.

We set up a tarp to shade our kitchen from the intense, early evening sun.



A short evening walk offered charming views of the winding river.

Second Day, May 11

The dawn brought clear skies and sunlight shimmering off the snowy Blanca Peak, a mountain that's sacred to several Native tribes. We had no luck fishing again that morning, but I insisted that Karen still finish her habitual morning tea because we only had another 6 miles or so to paddle. This entire trip is, in fact, do-able as a day paddle – but it's so beautiful and peaceful there's no point in rushing.



The sun begins to rise behind the Sangre de Cristo, as seen from our campsite. The tall uplift on the right includes the famous “fourteeners” Blanca Peak (the highest mountain) and Little Bear (to Blanca’s left).

As the Rio Grande travels southward, it cuts ever deeper into the volcanic rock -- rocky, nearly perpendicular cliffs show silent evidence of the explosive violence that shook southern Colorado and northern New Mexico about 10 million years ago.

So now, our four little boats were flanked by towering, sharp lava crags split into dramatic columns and punctuated by dark, gloomy caves whose depth we could only guess. Eddies sometimes pulled us closer to the cliffs, while in other places the river split and curved, requiring us to select the channel with the most water and fewest protruding boulders.



Hills formed by volcanic forces loom above (left to right) Penelope, Karen, and Natalie.



Natalie, Penelope, and Karen get a closer look at the volcanic cliffs.



The volcanic cliffs sported one formation that resembles an Easter Island statue.



Randy and Penelope continue from the lunch stop toward the take-out.

We had lunch on river right, because there's plenty of BLM land on the river's west side here, but pieces of private land intertwine with the state wildlife area on the east bank, as marked by the "keep out" signs.

After our lunch stop, the lava cliffs and rolling hills pulled back from the river, creating an open landscape for about a mile before the Colorado Highway 142 bridge.

The best take-out is on river left before the bridge; this place requires paddlers to haul their boats up a grassy hill about 70 yards long. It's the only public access near the bridge where the wildlife fence doesn't block the way to the water.

(Notice how wide apart the river banks are here – an indication of how massive the Rio Grande's natural flow must have been before it was dammed and diverted.)

About that fence

I mentioned that CPW and BLM are working with BLM to protect the endangered southwestern willow flycatcher. To do so, they must keep the hundreds of cattle that graze in these parts from trampling the willows and sagebrush upon which the tiny song birds depend. So, from above Road Z and south past CO 142, there's a barbed-wire fence about four feet tall that prevents cattle from getting to the river and destroying the flycatchers' habitat. Just stepping over the barrier required me to re-engage old cowgirl skills, so it'd be difficult at best to get even a Kevlar boat over it. Thus, it's easier to use put-in and take-out that I've described.

Getting There:

Drive to Alamosa in south-central Colorado. From the middle of Alamosa, find the intersection of U.S. Highways 160 and 285. Take U.S. 285 south from town for about 11 miles. Go left (east) on County Road 15 S. (If you enter Conejos County, you missed the turn.) Drive approximately 5.5 miles east on (often muddy) CR 15 S to a T-intersection with County Road 24. Turn right (south) on (sort of-paved) County Road 24 and drive about 3 miles to the junction with County Road Z. Turn east (left) on CR Z and follow it about 5 miles as it curves a few times before reaching the modest bridge over the Rio Grande. The put-in is on the southwest side of the bridge, accessed by a small, unmarked dirt track on Road Z's south side.

Coordinates for the Road Z bridge over the Rio Grande: 37°13'58.0"N
105°44'35.5"W

For the take-out: Back track on Road Z less than 1 mile to the intersection with County Road 28. Turn left (south) on CR 28 and drive about 7.5 miles to the sharply angled junction with County Road V. Go left (east-ish) on CR V for about 2 miles. Then turn left (east) on Colorado Highway 142. The bridge is less than a half mile from this turn. The take-out is on the east side of the river, north of CO 142, and is accessed by an unmarked dirt road that leads through a (usually) open barbed-wire ranch gate. You'll see the river to your left, down a long, grassy hill.

Coordinates for the CO 142 bridge over the Rio Grande: 37°10'50.6"N
105°43'46.4"W

Additional Information:

Other river trips are possible south of CO 142 but the technical difficulties increase and timing the water levels gets tricky. See [this document](#) (courtesy of Karen A.) that has daily flows from May 1 to June 14 for the last 16 years. South of CO 142, low water makes one rapid especially tricky and there's no sane portage around it – and that fence makes putting in impossible below the ragged, rocky section. Karen did it at 440cfs about 10 years ago, but don't try to run it at any lower level.

For the section below CO 142 (which we didn't do re: low water) there's another take-out south of Conejos CR G, which uses a rocky BLM dirt road -- but the slope between the river and the cars is steeper than some 14ers I've hiked. As my friend Elliott says, "it's too much like work."

The further south you paddle, the tougher the technical rapids become – and the whitewater south of the state line reportedly is at least Class III and has a takeout that is 1/3 of a mile long with part of it on a steep, rocky slope...indeed, "too much like work."

Karen Amundson's Wonderful Data Analysis of Rio Grande Flows