



A MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

# THE ANGLING REPORT

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## DATELINE: NEW MEXICO

### Free-Fishing Report An On-Site Report On Soaring Eagle Lodge

*(Editor Note. Online Extra subscriber Kerry M. Gubits was recently selected to visit Soaring Eagle Lodge in New Mexico and fish the lower San Juan River from there, completely free, in return for a detailed report on the experience. We don't push subscribers on free trips to be promotional, by the way. The enthusiasm Gubits shows for Soaring Eagle is genuine. See box on page 4 for more details on our Free-Fishing Program.)*

**W**hen *The Angling Report* invited me to go fishing free in the private waters of the lower San Juan River on the Jacquez Ranch at Soaring Eagle Lodge, I thought I knew this fishery. After all, I had spent lots of time fishing the "Quality Waters" below Navajo Dam.

Wow! What a surprise this place was. The Soaring Eagle experience is completely different. Anyone who wants to know just how diverse and good the fishing can be on this river needs to give Soaring Eagle a try.

For the sake on those who have not fished the San Juan, let me start by putting you in the picture. The upper tailwater on this river is a manmade trout bonanza that slithers through the desert of northwestern New Mexico at 42 degrees Fahrenheit. It's located in the mythic Anasazi country of the Four Corners region, where Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona and Utah touch each other.

The first four miles of public access below the Dam – known as the "Quality Waters" – exhibit a rich broth of midge activity that nourish tens of thousands of fat rainbows, cutbows, cutthroats and browns.

Baetis are also present in huge numbers. In addition, aquatic worms and annelids are set adrift to the delight of the resident trout.

The enormous salmonids that patrol the river eat with abandon 12 months of the year. They provide the opportunity to catch significant numbers of 20-inch-plus fish, and you can do it when it's 17 degrees Fahrenheit in January or 95 degrees in July. And, oh yeah, it's pretty out there. Sandstone cliffs frame a riparian scene of willows, junipers and cottonwoods under a bluebird sky more than 300 days per year. Muskrats, golden eagles, osprey, mule deer and ducks



also make this place their home.

So, for the traveling fly fisherman, what's not to like? Well, there are too many of us who like to fish this river. It's the one complaint I hear over and over from buddies who talk about the Juan. And that is where Soaring Eagle Lodge comes in.

Soaring Eagle Lodge is a streamside fly-fishing resort located below the "Quality Waters" section. It provides floattrips down the "Quality Waters" Section and access to two linear miles of private water.

I started my visit to Soaring Eagle last month by linking up with my son, Ben, for a go at the public-access "Quality Waters" section of the river. Ben is a junior at Fort Lewis College

in Durango, Colorado, an hour away. We proceeded to launch black and red ants at rising fish for several hours before dusk. Ben had been tipped off to a side channel where fish seemed to feed on the surface all day. Sure enough, these midging fish were only too willing to devour the larger ant patterns we were serving. We hooked and landed more than a dozen fish in the 15- to 18-inch range. We then drove to the lodge where we found a sumptuous feast that had been graciously delivered to our cabin. We greedily tucked into a chicken and pasta dish, fresh green salad and homemade apple cobbler. It was delicious and expertly prepared.

Our cabin was roomy, comfortable and spotless. A big sliding glass door opened to the living room, affording a great view of the river. Two leather recliners provided a comfortable seating area. Each cabin also included a kitchenette, table and chairs, spacious bathroom and bedroom with one full bed and two twin beds. Ben and I caught the NBA playoffs on the satellite TV. Each cabin contained rod holders and a set of Adirondack chairs thoughtfully placed outside for streamside socializing and wading boot removal.

Soaring Eagle Lodge maintains a really superb little fly shop, well-stocked with clothing, equipment, accessories and flies. Rental equipment is readily available. A large conference and recreation room is part of the lodge amenity package, and anglers who are proficient with a different kind of stick can out-hustle their buddies on green felt after a day on green water.

The next morning I met my guide, Jeremiah Spradling, and spent a few minutes with Soaring Eagle's proprietor, Larry Johnson. Larry is a conge-

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nial host, dedicated angler and river activist. An articulate and well-traveled fellow, Larry left the corporate world to settle down in paradise with his two ever-present black labs, Jake and Sage.

Ben and I joined a group of four couples from Santa Fe for breakfast in the dining room. The buffet was a hungry fisherman's dream and offered everything from eggs, bacon and sausage to blueberry pancakes, fresh fruit, Danish and gourmet coffee. The Santa Fe group were regulars at the lodge and visiting for their fifth consecutive year. They were effusive in their praise for the lodge and their admiration of Larry Johnson.

As Ben had classes that day, I waded up and joined Jeremiah for a trip to the "Quality Waters" section. Our plan was to float from Texas Hole to the takeout in the morning, and then walk-and-wade the private ranch water in the afternoon.

Jeremiah is a 28-year-old fishing fanatic who grew up in nearby Farmington and has nearly 10 years of guiding experience on the Juan. His colleagues at the Lodge have similar experience. These guys know how to put you on fish. Our morning produced the grand slam of fishing - browns, rainbows and cutbows on nymphs, dries and streamers. Jeremiah's expert fly selection certainly advanced my knowledge of effective patterns. Also, floating down from Texas Hole offers the opportunity for casts at numerous pools that are not reachable by wading anglers. I spent a good deal of time throwing dries and streamers and was well rewarded. The most exciting minutes were spent along a run above a bend where cast after cast provoked vicious streamer eats and even a few hooked and landed fish.

Ah, but the best was yet to come! We returned to the lodge for lunch prepared by Jeremiah in a streamside gazebo. As Jake and Sage lazed nearby in the shade of a giant cottonwood, Jeremiah prepared me for the afternoon's attack on The Jacquez Ranch private water. We would fish

the upper mile of riffles, long runs and bend pools. He explained that the deep silt I would encounter on some of the bends would soon be flushed by the spring ramp-up of dam releases scheduled for later that week. He was looking forward to the higher flows that would scour the riverbeds and promote the rejuvenation of insect habitat.

Little did we realize that the habitat was just perfect that afternoon. The season's first caddis began to appear almost immediately as we stepped into the river. Caddis on the Juan? I'd never seen them there. Larry had told me in a phone call before my trip that the ranch waters held bigger mayflies and different bugs than the upper public water. He was right. The caddis hatch was spectacular, and the trout were on 'em.

We switched from dry-dropper to dry-fly-only an hour into the excursion. As the hours flew by, we went from blind-casting to pinpointing rising fish. They rose everywhere in the river from tight-to-the-bank to middle-of-the-pool. A gorgeous 18-inch red-striped 'bow crushed a Stimulator in a five-inch-deep riffle, and several fish performed tail-walking dances for our amusement.

Ben joined us for dinner that evening - college kids are opportunistic feeders! - as we gathered in the dining room for skewered tiger prawns and an accompaniment of tasty courses. My newfound friends from Santa Fe regaled us with stories of lunkers caught on previous trips to the Soaring Eagle.

The next day's outing was ranch water only, starting in the morning with the upper half and ending the day on the lower half. Ben joined Jeremiah and me in the hunt as we set out. The morning saw no caddis activity, so we mostly nymphed Pheasant Tails and pitched streamers. It was thoroughly productive fishing, with 20-some fish brought to hand.

Another streamside lunch and it was off to the lower section. Ben decided to wet-wade, a decision made easier by the stunning weather and

water depths that were mostly waist-high or below. Around 2 pm, the caddis reappeared. The lower section has some phenomenal water, especially the "Trailer Hole" and the "Honey Hole." Both of these beats gave up dozens of trout, some at 17 and 18 inches. And man, did they fight! I had numerous fish go on "bonefish runs," ripping line and refusing to yield. Jeremiah's pattern selection was right-on, as these ravenous fish displayed a surprising selectivity. Our guide enjoyed shooting video of our numerous "doubles" while we spit the caddis out of our mouths and brushed them off our sunglasses.

After dining on some of the best prime rib I've ever tasted, Ben and I decided to fish the caddis hatch at dusk right in front of the cabin. We enjoyed some fast and furious action, landing many large trout and missing dozens in the fading light. At one point, I suggested to my son that he wade out with a net at chest level and scoop up some of the hundreds of fish catapulting into the air in pursuit of flying bugs.

As I said goodbye the following morning, I remarked that I felt that I'd just had a five-day fishing trip in only two days. It was *that* good. The hospitality extended to me by all the staff at the lodge was excellent. And best of all, I discovered a whole new San Juan River, made possible by a great lodge I never really knew about. I'm booking another trip this year! - *Kerry M. Gubits.*

*(Postscript: A six-night, five-day stay at Soaring Eagle costs \$1,500 double-occupancy. The complete package includes lodging, meals and guided fishing. Guests need to bring their own alcohol, as none is served. There is a \$75 daily rod fee for access to the private water when you book a complete package. The fee is \$99 per day if you book only the fishing. Shorter-term packages are available at reasonable rates, as are lodging/meals-only packages. The lodge's web address is: [www.soaringeaglelodge.net](http://www.soaringeaglelodge.net). Or call 800-866-2719. If Larry Johnson is not in, ask for Jake.)*