



# SOUTHWEST PADDLERS

Outdoor Recreation Guide for  
Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and Utah



Canoes, Kayaks &amp; Rafts

Gear

River Outfitters

Campgrounds

Apparel

Instruction

## Rio Grande

Report by Marc W. McCord

### Lobatos Bridge to Lee Trail ~ 24 miles

#### General Description

The Rio Grande, or Rio Bravo del Norte, as it is known in Mexico, flows from its headwaters near Alamosa, Colorado, through New Mexico and down the Texas-Mexico border through Big Bend to Brownsville and the Gulf of Mexico. However, paddling in New Mexico is generally limited to the Taos Box area near Taos, though it is possible to paddle several other sections of the river, as well. The river enters northcentral New Mexico in a remote, mountainous area between US Highway 285 to the west and SH 522 to the east. It flows about 450 miles to the Chihuahuan desert of southcentral New Mexico where it forms the national border between Texas and Mexico. Along the way it flows through the Rio Grande Gorge National Recreation Area and the Towns or Cities of Taos, Espanola, Albuquerque, Socorro, Truth or Consequences and Las Cruces. Joining the Rio Grande along the way are the Red River, Rio Pueblo, Rio Brazos, Rio Chama and Rio Embudo, all located in northcentral New Mexico, and all offering excellent whitewater runs when they flow. Due to diversions, impoundments and other impediments to flow the Rio Grande below Velarde Dam down to Elephant Butte Reservoir is usually too low to paddle and offers extremely limited access due to private property ownership and a general lack of roads. Except for brief periods right after significant rainfall the reach below Elephant Butte Reservoir to Las Cruces is generally not navigable. Click [HERE](#) for the history and anthropology of the Rio Grande.

Beginning across the state line at Lobatos Bridge in southcentral Colorado is a splendid, and often challenging, 24 mile whitewater run with Class II rapids, ending at Lee Trail. The run is on a shallow 5 fpm gradient, the first 11 miles of which are in Colorado, flowing through a broad lava-rock plain known locally as the Ute Mountain Run. An

#### Technical Data

Class Rating	II
Length	24 miles
Minimum Flow	300 cfs
Optimum Flow	500-900 cfs
Maximum Flow	2,500 cfs
First Put-in	Lobatos Bridge (Colorado)
Lat. / Long.	37.078701 / -105.7563019
Last Take-out	Lee Trail
Lat. / Long.	36.8637009 / -105.7054977
Elevation	msl
Gradient	5 fpm
USGS Gauge	
Boats	Canoes w/ flotation, Kayaks
Season	Early to mid-spring
Permits	Yes - see details at left



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intermediate access point is at the stateline, allowing a shorter run of 13 miles. Another access point is at Sunshine Valley Trail off Sunshine Valley Road, just a short distance above Lee Trail, where this reach ends. Lee Trail is a steep and unimproved access ascending 200 feet in elevation in just one quarter mile making it a very difficult access for canoes and kayaks, and insane for rafts. The Sunshine Trail access is very similar to Lee Trail. Please take note of the fact that the run above Lee Trail in New Mexico is closed to the public from April 1 through May 31, during the mating season for prairie falcons and golden eagles, though probably not to each other. You are only allowed to launch one time per day on the upper 24 miles. Boaters should call the BLM office for reservations, and register at the self-service permit station at each access point where you want to begin a trip.

This gorgeous 24-mile reach is not a frequent destination for most paddlers, but those who come here are treated to some of Mother Nature's finest work. Birds of many species are everywhere, so wear a hat, if you know what I mean! Boaters will probably see antelope, elk, deer, squirrels, racoons and numerous other animals. The quality of this whitewater run and its scenic beauty make the difficult take-outs bearable for canoeists and kayakers. Camping along this reach requires a steep climb of the canyon walls to reach the rim above, so it is best to make this a day trip run. Fishing is excellent, but requires a New Mexico fishing license (a Colorado license is required above the state line.) Be sure to pack your camera and use it frequently on this awesome trip.

### Location

Southern Costilla County, Colorado and northcentral Taos County, New Mexico. There are no major cities or towns nearby. By road, US Highway 160 in Colorado is about 50 miles above the put-in, and New Mexico SH 522 generally parallels the run a few miles to the east. Questa, New Mexico is just east of the take-out.

### Distance from Major Cities

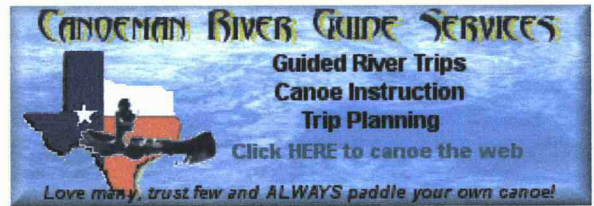
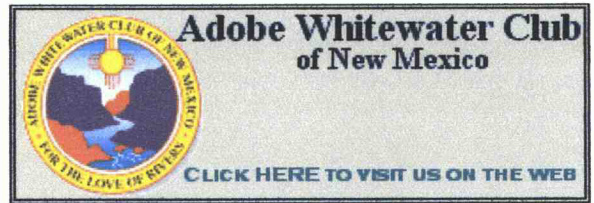
Santa Fe 120 miles; Albuquerque 181 miles; Phoenix 639 miles; Durango 192 miles; Denver 240 miles; Salt Lake City 647 miles; El Paso 448 miles; Dallas 849 miles; Austin 884 miles; San Antonio 911 miles; Houston 1,070 miles; Oklahoma City 723 miles; Little Rock 1,062 miles; Kansas City 958 Miles. (All distances are approximate, and depend upon starting point, destination point on the river and route taken.)

### Water Quality and Flow

Water quality in this section of the Rio Grande is usually very good to excellent. Flow is dependent upon winter snowpack and the amount of water being drained for agricultural irrigation.

### Best Times to Go

The prime season is usually early to mid spring, before the farm planting season, though flows may be adequate later in



the year after a heavy winter snowpack. The reach between the New Mexico State Line and Lee Trail is closed to the public from April 1 through May 31, during the mating season of prairie falcons and golden eagles. Unfortunately, this is part of the best time when the river flows at a navigable level, but the birds were there first!

### Permit Requirements

All private boaters are required to make reservations through BLM (505-751-4731) for paddle trips on this reach of the Rio Grande. There is no fee, and registration at self-serve stations at each access make the process fast and easy. Only one launch per day is allowed, whether it is one paddler or one group of paddlers. The BLM Taos Office maintains a list of reservation days, so call or write to secure your launch before arriving for the Ute Mountain run. No permits will be issued between April 1 and May 31, due to the mating season of native birds of prey.

### Hazards to Navigation

Other than the remoteness of this section, there are no major hazards of consequence in the upper 24 miles of this run. Below about 300 cfs the river will be too low for enjoyable boating. Runs should be avoided by all except advanced to expert boaters when the river flows above about 1,500 cfs. Scout any blind drops, and anything else that does not reveal a clear line through the hazard. Some portages may be required. Boaters should have at least strong intermediate level whitewater skills in canoes or kayaks this reach. Rafts should avoid this section because of very difficult to impossible access, as well as the narrow, tight, technical turns necessary to negotiate the river.

### River Access Points

Lobatos Bridge at the Rio Grande, about 14 miles east of US Highway 285 at Antonito, Colorado, at 0.0 miles; Stateline public access trail at about 11.0 miles; Sunshine Valley Trail at about 21.0 miles; Lee Trail, south of Sunshine Valley Road, at about 24.0 miles. There are no other access points for this reach of the Rio Grande. Please note that Sunshine Valley Road may be impassable during or for several days after any significant rainfall or other precipitation.

### Campgrounds and Accommodations

There are no campgrounds located along the Ute Mountain run and few, if any, natural campsites can be found along the river. Camping between access points usually requires climbing a steep canyon wall to the rim. Avoid camping on private property without advance permission, and always leave the area cleaner than you found it. Camping is available at Sheep Crossing Campground and Chiflo Campground, both below this run, where excellent facilities are available. Numerous other excellent campgrounds are available between Chiflo Campground and the Red River confluence, as well as between Taos Junction Bridge and the Town of Pilar, just a few miles below Chiflo. Bear in mind that the Taos Box runs are very popular, so competition for campgrounds in this area may be fierce.



during the prime season.

## Liveries, Outfitters & Shuttle Services

There are no liveries or outfitters located anywhere near this section of the Rio Grande. However, numerous outfitters run trips to the Taos Box section immediately below, and it may be possible to contract with one of them for shuttles, though you would need to provide your own boats and gear. Plan to setup and run your own shuttles if you cannot contract with a licensed outfitter.

## Reviewer's Comments

While not a widely popular run, the Ute Mountain reach of the Rio Grande offers an excellent trip of about 24 miles on Class II water with interesting and sometimes moderately challenging rapids. Scenery is spectacular, and an abundance of birdlife and wildlife will be seen along the way. The put-in is at Lobatos Bridge, east of Lobatos and Antonito in Colorado, just a few miles across the state line, and is the **ONLY** easy access on this run. Difficult accesses at the Colorado-New Mexico stateline, Sunshine Valley Trail and Lee Trail limit this run, for practical reasons, to canoes with floatation and kayaks paddled by boaters with at least strong intermediate level whitewater skills, and canoeists face a formidable challenge getting to or from the river at access points other than Lobatos Bridge. Unfortunately, paddling is prohibited between the New Mexico State Line and Lee Trail from April 1 through May 31, when falcons and eagles are mating - during the prime season for navigable flows on the Ute Mountain run. The Class II reach can be paddled anytime there is sufficient flow of at least 300 cfs, below which the river is **WAY** too bony for enjoyable boating. Except for those with advanced to expert level paddling skills, this reach should generally be avoided when flows exceed about 1,500 cfs. Only one launch per day is allowed. BLM reservations are required, and there is a self-permitting station at each access point for convenience. However, it is strongly recommended that you make reservations in advance to avoid getting there to find that another group has already launched, and that you will not be allowed to put-in on that day.

Click the links below for information regarding the section of the Rio Grande and its tributaries where you want to paddle.

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## Rio Grande

Report by Marc W. McCord

### Orilla Verde ~ 6 miles

#### General Description

The Rio Grande, or Rio Bravo del Norte, as it is known in Mexico, flows from its headwaters near Alamosa, Colorado, through New Mexico and down the Texas-Mexico border through Big Bend to Brownsville and the Gulf of Mexico. However, paddling in New Mexico is generally limited to the Taos Box area near Taos, though it is possible to paddle several other sections of the river, as well.

The Orilla Verde Recreation Area between Taos Junction Bridge and Orilla Verde Campground offers about 6 miles of moderate Class II whitewater on a gentle 8 fpm gradient. Most adjacent land is BLM-controlled, but the area around the hamlet of Pilar is privately owned and is designated as a "quiet zone", where voices should be kept to a conversational level and stopping is not permitted other than in emergency situations. This area is popular with fishermen, and it is recommended that paddlers use the opposite side of the river from where anglers are plying their sport. At least four public camping areas are located on river left along this reach of the Rio Grande, and mooring of boats is permitted in these areas. Some campsites are sheltered, while others are open. As a courtesy to others please refrain from walking through occupied campsites. There are no fees for river access, but reservations through the BLM (505-751-4731) are required and self-permitting stations can be found at all access points.

There is ample parking at each end, but be sure to use ONLY designated spaces. Daily use fees apply to all private vehicles, though a season pass can be purchased for \$15. Daily fees and season passes can be paid at the self-permitting stations, or can be paid at the Rio Grande Gorge Visitor Center. The tamer waters in this section make it popular with less experienced paddlers, so expect larger

#### Technical Data

Class Rating	II
Length	6 miles
Minimum Flow	600 cfs
Optimum Flow	800-2,000 cfs
Maximum Flow	5,000 cfs
First Put-in	Taos Junction Bridge
Lat. / Long.	
Last Take-out	Orilla Verde Campground
Lat. / Long.	
Elevation	msl
Gradient	8 fpm
USGS Gauge	Web: <a href="http://08276500">08276500</a> (Taos Junction Bridge)
Boats	Canoes, Kayaks, Rafts
Season	year-round, weather permitting
Permits	Yes (see details at left)



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crowds on weekends and around Mother's Day especially. The Orilla Verde reach is quite scenic, so pack your camera. Beware the bridges across the river when flows exceed about 4,000 cfs - they become dangerous hazards to navigation.

### Location

Almost due west of Rancho de Taos between the intersection of SH 567 and SH 570 down to the hamlet of Pilar at the intersection of SH 570 and SH 68. The Town of Taos is just a few miles to the northeast of Taos Junction Bridge.

### Distance from Major Cities

Santa Fe 61 miles; Albuquerque 0 miles; Phoenix 458 miles; Durango 212 miles; Denver 437 miles; Salt Lake City 604 miles; El Paso 266 miles; Dallas 668 miles; Austin 703 miles; San Antonio 730 miles; Houston 853 miles; Oklahoma City 542 miles; Little Rock 81 miles; Kansas City 777 Miles. (All distances are approximate, and depend upon starting point, destination point on the river and route taken.)

### Water Quality and Flow

Water quality is generally very good to excellent, flowing clear, clean and cold from snowmelt in the upper elevations above this reach. Best conditions for paddling occur at flows in excess of about 600 cfs.

### Best Times to Go

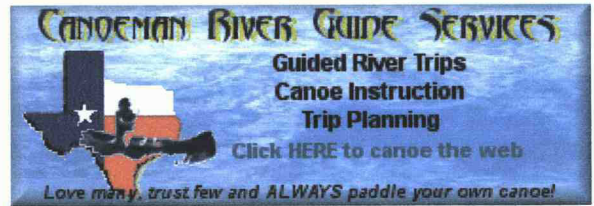
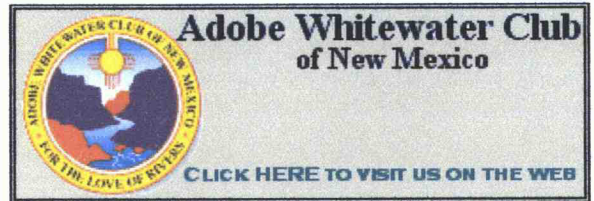
The Orilla Verde reach is generally most favorable in late spring through early summer depending upon the amount of winter snowpack in the mountains to the north. The season may span a period of April through June in average snowpack years.

### Permit Requirements

All private boaters are required to register for Orilla Verde area trips. Reservations are not required for this reach of the Rio Grande. There is no fee, and registration through a Ranger or at self-serve stations at each access make the process fast and easy.

### Hazards to Navigation

There are no significant rapids on this reach of the Rio Grande. The primary hazards are cold water temperatures, possibly coupled with cool to cold air temperatures, and the potentially dangerous low-water bridges across the river when flows exceed about 4,000 cfs. Paddlers should be attired for cold water and cold weather paddling to avoid hypothermia. Knowing the locations of low-water bridges and avoiding them in high flow conditions will prevent disasters leading to serious injury, death and/or damage to or lost boats and gear.



## River Access Points

Taos Junction Bridge on river left at 0.0 miles; Cable Site (kayaks only) on river left at about miles; Lone Juniper Site on river left at about miles; Arroyo Hondo Campground on river left at about miles; Orilla Verde Campground on river left at about 6.0 miles. SH 570 closely parallels the river all along this reach and access points are within a short distance of the highway. There is no portage allowed at Pilar Bridge, which is impassable when flows exceed about 4,000 cfs.

## Campgrounds and Accommodations

Campsites are available at the access points listed above, as well as on other reaches of the river above and below the Orilla Verde Recreation Area. There are no fees for campsite use except in the Orilla Verde Recreation Area (\$7.00 per night), but they are available on a first-come basis, so please respect the privacy of those who arrive ahead of your party and avoid walking through their campsites.

## Liveries, Outfitters & Shuttle Services

There are no known liveries or outfitters located along or near this section of the Rio Grande. Boaters should plan to setup and run their own shuttles. Easy access and close proximity make the shuttle run fast and effortless. Be sure to park ONLY in designated parking areas.

## Reviewer's Comments

The Orilla Verde Recreation Area is a well-developed public access area with great campsites, easy river access, plenty of natural scenery and a great ride on moderate Class II whitewater. Located very near the Town of Taos, this New Mexico run is very popular, especially on weekends, during the late spring and early summer months. It is snowmelt dependent, so its normally short season of April through June may be cut shorter by light winter snowpack or extended slightly by above normal snowfall in the mountains to the north. Paddlers, campers and other recreation enthusiasts should take care to avoid the "quiet zone" designation around the small hamlet of Pilar. This is a popular area for fishing, and boaters are encouraged to paddle on the opposite side of the river from where anglers are located. Bring your camera and take lots of great memories home with you. Bring a wetsuit or drysuit and base layer to prevent hypothermia in the very cold waters of the Rio Grande.

Click the links below for information regarding the section of the Rio Grande and its tributaries where you want to paddle.

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## Rio Grande

Report by Marc W. McCord

**Bosque**  
~ 6.5 miles

### General Description

The Rio Grande, or Rio Bravo del Norte, as it is known in Mexico, flows from its headwaters near Alamosa, Colorado, through New Mexico and down the Texas-Mexico border through Big Bend to Brownsville and the Gulf of Mexico. However, paddling in New Mexico is generally limited to the Taos Box area near Taos, though it is possible to paddle several other sections of the river, as well.

From Taos County Line down to Embudo Station is a 6.5 mile run on Class II whitewater that can be a run of its own or a continuation of the reach or two above. Bosque is an area with a gentle 12 fpm gradient flowing through a "quiet zone" and riparian area that is home to many species of birds and animal wildlife that live along the river banks. This reach is easy enough for anybody with moderate whitewater exposure in canoes, kayaks or rafts and short enough to do two or three runs in a single day if you start early. It also offers an additional take-out at Velarde Dam about 2 miles below the Embudo Station Restaurant access for those who do not want to stop after 6.5 miles. Only about 30% of adjoining land is BLM-controlled, so paddlers need to be mindful about not trespassing. Watch for signs indicating where you may legally make a landfall. Only designated access points should be used for launching or recovering craft and gear. For those with advanced or higher level whitewater skills this reach could be the culmination of nearly 42 miles on the Rio Grande starting at the top of the Lower Taos Box. Scenery demands that you pack the camera, and you just might be fortunate enough to capture some good shots of animals and birds along this reach that are not found on other reaches.

### Technical Data

Class Rating	II
Length	6.5 miles
Minimum Flow	300 cfs
Optimum Flow	cfs
Maximum Flow	cfs
First Put-in	Quartzite Public Access
Lat. / Long.	
Last Take-out	Gauging Station
Lat. / Long.	
Elevation	msl
Gradient	12 fpm
USGS Gauge	Web: <a href="http://08276500">08276500</a> (Taos Junction Bridge)
Boats	Canoes, Kayaks, Rafts
Season	April through June
Permits	Yes - see details at left



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### Location



Rio Arriba County along SH 68 between Dixon and Velarde just northeast of Santa Fe and Albuquerque. The Rio Embudo confluence sits at the bottom of this reach.

### Distance from Major Cities

Santa Fe 137 miles; Albuquerque 78 miles; Phoenix 377 miles; Durango 290 miles; Denver 515 miles; Salt Lake City 682 miles; El Paso 190 miles; Dallas 660 miles; Austin 695 miles; San Antonio 706 miles; Houston 881 miles; Oklahoma City 620 miles; Little Rock 959 miles; Kansas City 855 Miles. (All distances are approximate, and depend upon starting point, destination point on the river and route taken.)

### Water Quality and Flow

Water quality is generally very good to excellent, flowing clean, clear and cold from the snowmelt runoff of the mountains above Taos and southern Colorado. Seasonal springtime through early summer is the normal season for the Bosque reach.

### Best Times to Go

The prime season for this section of the Rio Grande is April through June in normal snowpack years. By mid-summer the river may be too low for enjoyable paddling unless an exceptionally heavy winter snowpack accumulated in the mountains to the north.

### Permit Requirements

All private boaters are required to register for Bosque area trips. Reservations are not required for this reach of the Rio Grande. There is no fee, and registration at self-serve stations at each access make the process fast and easy.

### Hazards to Navigation

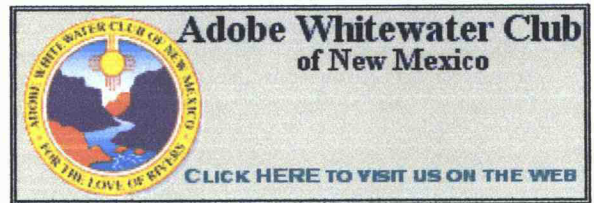
There are no significant whitewater hazards on this section of the Rio Grande. Cold water and possibly cold air temperatures should be considered as hazards, and proper attire should be worn to prevent hypothermia. Typically, this is an easy reach that almost anybody can paddle and enjoy.

### River Access Points

County Line Public Access off SH 68 at 0.0 miles; Gauging Station Public Access below the bridge at about 6.5 miles. There are no other public access points on this reach of the Rio Grande. Most adjoining property is privately-owned, and trespassing is not permitted.

### Campgrounds and Accommodations

There are no public or private campgrounds located along this reach of the river, though numerous riverside campsites can be found nearby on reaches above and below this one. Most adjoining land is private property, so avoid camping or stopping there.



## Liveries, Outfitters & Shuttle Services

There are no liveries or outfitters operating along this section of the Rio Grande. Plan on setting up and running your own shuttles. DO NOT park within 30 feet of SH 68! State troopers love to write parking citations along this area. Be sure to leave room for large busses pulling trailers to turn around, and use ONLY designated parking spaces. Avoid using the Embudo Station Restaurant parking lot at the take-out. An alternate parking lot and public access is across the street from the restaurant.

## Reviewer's Comments

The Bosque reach of the Rio Grande is the last of eight whitewater runs between Lobatos Bridge in southern Colorado and the Rio Embudo confluence. It is an easy, Class II run with moderate rapids, excellent scenery, a wildlife raparian area that is home to many riverside birds and animals and easy access along SH 68. While the rapids are smaller the water remains cold and it may be necessary to wear wetsuits or drysuits to avoid hypothermia. This area is much flatter than the gorge and canyon areas near Taos, where the much larger rapids are found. Like Orilla Verde and Racecourse, the Bosque area is very popular, so expect to see other paddlers in canoes, kayaks and rafts, as well as more traffic and competition for parking spaces at the access points. Please observe the "quiet zone" that is in effect for this entire reach and do NOT trespass on private land - signage furnished by BLM indicates when you are entering or leaving land under its control. Use the gauging station access below the bridge for taking out below Embudo Station Restaurant. Please avoid using the restaurant property for parking or access (unless eating there, and with management's permission.)

Click the links below for information regarding the section of the Rio Grande and its tributaries where you want to paddle.

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