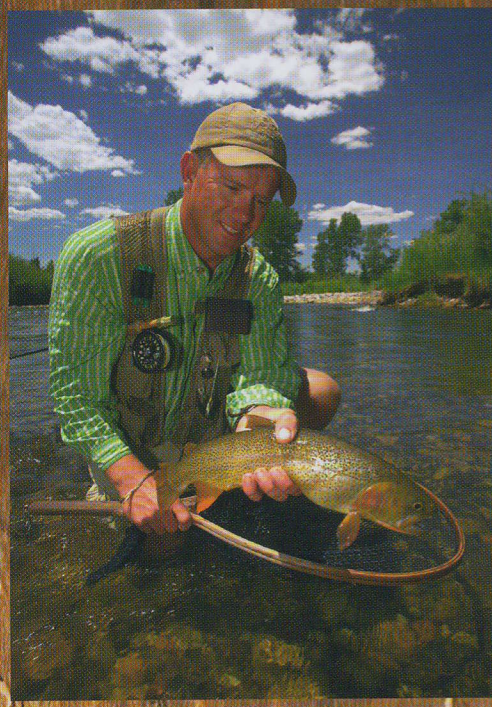
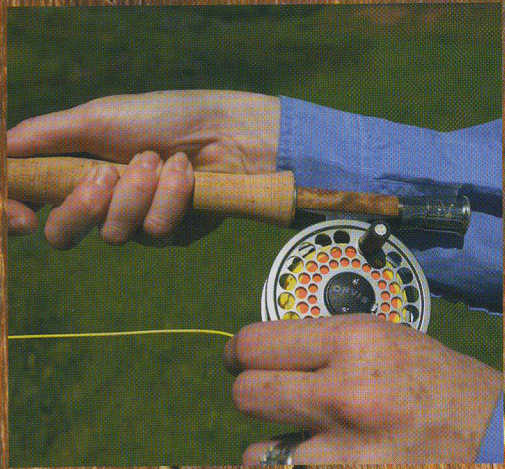


Catching cutthroats on  
the banks where Doc  
Holiday once walked.



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# COLORADO COWBOYS

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Story by Tom Keer • Images by John Bleh



**H**aving grown up a dairy farm boy in a Connecticut town sandwiched right in between two gun manufacturers, Winchester and Colt, I learned early on that I'd rather be ropin' 'em instead of milkin' 'em. But the closest I got to my cowboy fantasy was watching John Wayne westerns and staging a few gun-slinging shoot-outs with my pals. While I eventually found a new passion I could really rope, fishing; I never lost the urge to live out my cowboy dream. Guilty as charged, I am a cowboy at heart.

After 35 years of Eastern trout fishing, I decided it was time to relive the past, this time, to fish in the land settled by the Conestoga wagon, gold nuggets, the Winchester 94 and the Colt Peacemaker. Wanting a similar view of the world as Wyatt Earp, it made sense to pick up where Doc Holiday left off, namely, the ring around Glenwood Springs, Colorado.

# COLORADO COWBOYS



I planned my trip based on the simple adage: “anything done in moderation shows a lack of interest.” I had waited a long time to travel out West, and I wanted a broad enough sampling to satisfy my hunger until my next Clint Eastwood adventure. With one week to hit streams, ponds, spring creeks and a float trip, this was no doubt a Go-Hard or Go-Home trip.

## High Lonesome Ranch – De Beque

I decided to set up a base camp in early July at the High Lonesome Ranch in De Beque. The 50,000-acre ranch is situated on the Western Slope of the Colorado Rockies and is bordered by the Book Cliff Mountain range. A couple of connecting flights would get me from Boston to Grand Junction. I’d be able to acclimate to the elevation and time changes

while fishing over 80 ponds on the property, none of which would be more than a 30-minute drive from my front door. From High Lonesome, I could get on several different streams, rivers and spring creeks in about an hour. When you’re tight on time it helps that speed limits are more liberal out west.

My trip began with Buzz Cox, the camp manager at High Lonesome, picking my wife Angela and I up at the airport. The high temperature made us skeptical, but I’ll tell you this: the Massachusetts humid 80 degrees feels far hotter than Colorado’s dry 105. The drive past the mountain ranges and mesas reminded me of every cowboy movie I had ever watched. In the middle of nowhere we took an abrupt left turn on to a long, dirt road that led to the ranch. Grazing in between the sagebrush and cottonwoods were elk and trophy mule deer. Pheasants and Spruce grouse gritted leisurely, hawks rode the air stream high above, all near a corral of painted horses. My cowboy fantasy suddenly became reality.

The main lodge was an authentic log ranch, recently renovated, with a long porch, a hitching post, and a tin

# COLORADO COWBOYS



Mountainous backdrops and raging rivers set the stage for extraordinary trout fishing.

roof. Aunt Linda, the camp cook, performed magic by turning 3-squares a day into a little slice of Heaven. Breakfasts might be pancakes, French toast, or eggs and grits. Lunches were soup and deluxe sandwiches, and after fishing all day, the open bar for cocktail hour was followed by Pheasant quesadillas or prime rib for dinner. I left room for dessert, but wished I had starved myself for a few weeks before leaving the East Coast.

Angela and I wandered into the Pro Shop to get licenses, and it was chock-a-block with enough hard-and soft goods to suit any want, desire or true need. A regional fly assortment completed the picture.

As we walked out to catch a ride to our first fishin' hole, we heard a bunch of commotion behind the pioneer cabin, with lots of yelling and a tremendous amount of dust in the air. A cattle drive! Some cowboys and cowgirls were moving a herd from the higher Spring elevations down to their Summer pastures. I watched in awe for about a half hour until Angela reminded me it was time to fish.

## Bring Your Camera

One of the benefits of using High Lonesome as a base camp was the flexibility to fish the other areas. De Beque is a small rural town, so if you're looking for nightlife you'll have to travel to Glenwood Springs or Grand Junction.

The main attraction in Glenwood Springs is the hot mineral water bubbling from the ground. Choose between the Hot Springs Lodge & Pool and the Yampah Spa Vapor Caves, a natural underground hot mineral water steam bath. Soak your aches and pains away in the 125-degree water. There are wonderful events and festivals in Glenwood Springs. The Downtown Market offers fresh produce, arts and crafts, and shopping in a historic district. October's Culinary Arts Festival features samples of delicious food from local restaurants and microbreweries.

For the active traveler, you can enjoy a round of golf, a rodeo, take a day trip to

rock climb at Rifle Falls State Park, mountain bike in Fruita, or try rafting on the Colorado River. Follow it with dinner at a number of outstanding local restaurants. Families will enjoy Glenwood Cavern's Adventure Park, which offers a 32-foot climbing wall, a mechanical bullride, horseback riding, and a petting zoo. A variety of outdoor rides complete the experience. [www.glenwoodchamber.com](http://www.glenwoodchamber.com).

When you enter Grand Junction, keep in mind you're in the heart of Colorado's wine country, with over 17 different award-winning vineyards that offer tours (and samples). Work up a thirst by hiking in the Grand Mesa National Forest or on the 50 hiking/biking trails in the 23,000-acre Colorado National Monument. Or, hit the links on one of five golf courses followed by a romantic dinner in the Historic District. For more information, check out [www.visitgrandjunction.com](http://www.visitgrandjunction.com).

# COLORADO COWBOYS

## Where To Toss The Bags

One way to get to the Grand Junction area is to fly to Denver, rent a car, and drive. If you have time to kill, you'll roll down I-70 West through either traditional or ski towns such as Silverthorne, Vail, Gypsum and Breckenridge. With a few stops, the 245 mile ride goes quickly. Denver is a major airport, so flights are seldom problematic.

Six regional air carriers, such as Allegiant Airlines, American Airlines, Delta Connection/Skywest, Frontier Airlines, Great Lakes Airlines, United Express/Skywest, and U.S. Airways fly directly into Grand Junction's Walker Field Airport ([www.walkerfield.com](http://www.walkerfield.com)). To charter a plane, try Thunder Mountain Ground Service (970.243.7718). Once you get to Grand Junction you'll find all major car rental agencies offering vehicles suited for every purpose.

Guests can expect deluxe accommodations at High Lonesome. Buzz and Rose Cox have managed a variety of sporting camps for over three decades and they are attentive to every facet. There are two guest houses overlooking the mountains and fields teaming with wildlife. One guest house was built around a natural pond which makes for an easy pre-breakfast fishing jaunt.

The historic Redstone Inn was John Cleveland Osgood's private home, built in 1892. The 20-room Tudor inn was the former bachelor's quarters for Osgood's miners, and was converted to serve the public in 1925. There is an a la carte bar/restaurant where all meals are served, and guests can walk through the grand entrance hall on their way to catch trout.

A five-bedroom farmhouse is available to anglers' at the K-T. The 3,000 square foot home was recently renovated for comfort. With long verandas and sweeping mountain views, you'll relax in style. Bear in mind that the K-T is still a working ranch.

### Ranch

De Beque, CO  
970.283.9420  
[www.thehighlonesomeranch.com](http://www.thehighlonesomeranch.com)

### The Redstone Inn

Redstone, CO  
800.748.2524  
[www.redstoneinn.com](http://www.redstoneinn.com)

### Roaring Fork Anglers

Glenwood Springs, CO  
970.945.0180  
[www.roaringforkanglers.com](http://www.roaringforkanglers.com)

### K-T Ranch

Fruita, CO  
970.260.1855  
[www.smokingriverguides.com](http://www.smokingriverguides.com)



We piled into one of the trucks, and drove past the split rail fences to some of the ponds. My first reaction to still-water fishing is a yawn, but these ponds were addictive. They're spring fed, about 15 feet in depth, and natural. There was plenty of blow down, weedbeds and channels to give even the most experienced angler a run for his money. Some of the larger ponds were better accessed by boat, and High Lonesome spared no details. Strategically positioned on the banks were individual pontoon boats, oars, anchors, and life preservers. With such clear, bright skies we sight-fished for brookies, browns, rainbows and cutts. Hatches came off regularly and for the most part, we matched the hatch. Other times we tied on attractors and hopper-dropper combinations, which worked like a charm.

High Lonesome has some of the biggest brown and rainbow trout I've ever seen in my life. While we were rigging up, Angela spotted a big rainbow.

Floating down-river or standing alongside it today, visitors catch and release huge trout in the same waters Doc Holiday once enjoyed.



"I think that's a two-footer," she said.  
 "That's a nice fish," I responded.  
 "I'm going to take him," she winked.  
 She worked out about 20-feet of line and dropped a #18 Elk Wing Caddis next to some brush. The big rainbow turned but didn't get there fast enough; a hungrier eighteen incher beat it to the fly. No matter, Angela's second trout was 22 inches and her third fish was that two-footer.

Author John Gierach was fishing on the other side of the ranch, and on one day he landed a 27-inch rainbow. We talked about it over dinner. "That's a nice trout for a Trout Bum," I said. "I've heard that before," he said smiling. "I saw a few others in that same range and I'm going back for them first thing tomorrow morning."

At lunch the next day we saw photos of Gierach's 26-½ inch rainbow, a veritable twin of his first fish. That fish was taken while the day was still young.

The next morning came early as we were up before the sun to rendezvous with a long-time friend, John Bleh. We headed down the mountain and caught a pink and white sunrise wrapped in a blue backdrop. Some of the mountaintops were still capped with snow. A slow, steady run-off left perfect fishing conditions in the valley.

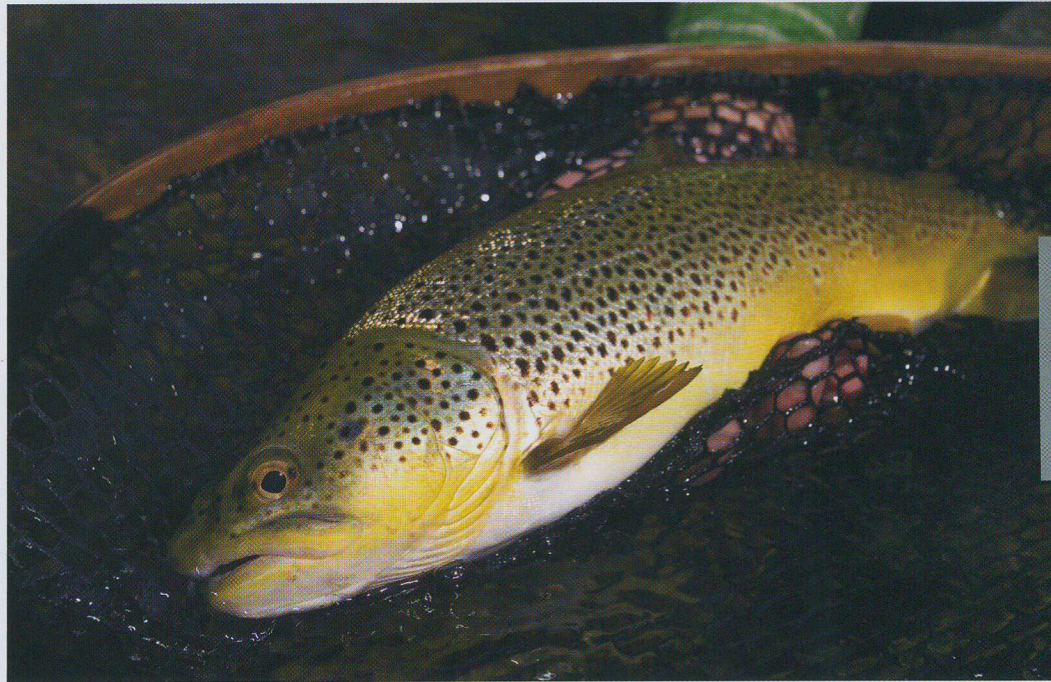
We headed through Glenwood Springs, the final resting place of Doc Holiday, towards Redstone's Crystal River. We found many deep pools interspersed with runs and riffles in this freestone river. Tasty looking bends pockmarked small, mid-stream islands. Odd, but there were lots of large, white rocks scattered along the riverbed.

"What's the white rock?" I asked.

"Marble," John muttered.

"Marble, just lying around the river? Is that from runoff washing away the streambed?"

"The town of Marble is nearby and was famous for its mining operations. A runaway train wrecked in the late 1800s and scattered it along for nearly a mile stretch. Look down there; see that steam coming from that pond next to the river? That's a hot spring."



We ear-marked that spot for a post-fish dip. Nothing beats a natural hot tub after a long day of fishing.

Downstream from the Redstone Coke Ovens, a series of outdoor beehive furnaces that carbonized mined coal, were browns and rainbows that held close to the sagebrush-lined banks. I blew out a few fish when I stepped into the river. John stayed on the bank and pick-pocketed several quick ones, a mix of browns and rainbows, in the 12-15 inch range. A hopper-dropper combo with a #8 Dave's Hopper and a #18 Copper John trailer were the ticket. After a sandwich, we headed to the Redstone Inn to access the upstream water.

The historic Redstone Inn overlooks the river. For \$80.00 a day per rod, we fished their

private 1.5 mile stretch. We walked along a dirt road that was 15 feet above the river and hid in the evergreens and Aspens to spot fish for each other, New Zealand style. That approach worked wonders, particularly when John put a 19-inch brown on the bank. After a while we split up, with John opting for a long, sweeping riffle, and Angela and I picking a run that dumped into a corner pool for some high-stick nymphing.

A trip to Colorado would not be complete without a drift boat, so the following day we booked a two-boat drift with Bruce Stolbach, owner of Roaring Fork Anglers in Glenwood Springs. The shop guides use a combination of drift boats and self-bailers. There is more room in the drift boats and with the exception of a few fast moving rapids, we stood for most of the day.

# COLORADO COWBOYS



Sandhill cranes grace the air with their clumsy flights.

The rubber rafts bounce off the rocks, and were perfect for casting while sitting. We then hit the Carbondale to Glenwood Springs stretch.

We timed our trip to hit the Green drakes, PMD's, and a mix of caddis, but we were off. The river level was perfect, the water was clear, but the bugs just weren't coming off like anticipated. No matter, with about 5,000 fish per mile there were plenty of hungry trout that hit attractors. We rigged up a few different rods, all with combinations of tandem flies. One was rigged with a dry/nymph combo, another had two dries, and a third two nymphs. It came as no surprise that this close to the 4th of July, the trout preferred a Patriot fly.

Most of the fish were in the mid-teens, and we had a few corkers over 20 inches. They were spread out along the irregular banks and wherever there was a recess, there was a fish.

The beauty of any kind of drift boat is that the oarsman can usually hold it in position long enough to make a cast. Our guide, Chandler Roth, kept us where we needed to be. Most of the time we'd throw reach casts, but to get a long, progressive drift, we'd sometimes work a series of downstream mends. My tendency was to want to pick up and cast to all of the beautiful pockets, but I quickly learned that keeping my fly in the water put more fish in the net.

Guides constantly say "if it's foam, it's the zone." Anytime we saw foam, we'd cast into it and around it, and a trout ate. There was lots of foam on the Fork, and Angela's first fish was a foot-and-a-half brown that came from the edge of a foam line.

We pulled over for lunch in a cottonwood grove, with bald eagles flying overhead. While we ate, John proved that you don't need to float to catch fish, and tagged a 16-incher just below our pullout. Still, we couldn't wait to get back into the boats to try.

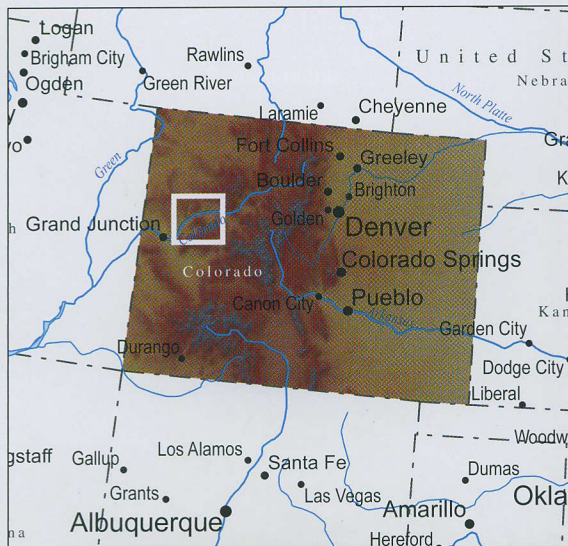
Day four had us in Meeker on the White River. Starting at the Flat Top Wilderness in the White River National Forest, the White River cuts through canyons and cattle ranches on its way to the Green River in Utah. The river needs no introduction to fishheads; simply put, it's loaded with browns and rainbows. In sharp contrast to the arid land, the area around Meeker is an oasis. We passed lush, green hay fields, herds of Black Angus and mule deer, and flocks of Sandhill cranes.

There were two stretches to fish. The Rocky Mountain Angler's Club has three beats which total about 1.5 miles of river. High Lonesome is a member of the RMAC and we could fish that stretch, but instead, we opted for the K Bar T's stretch because that ranch contained two spring creeks. Well-known guide Ted "Mustang" Relihan set up a guide network called

the Smoking River Guide Service that services the White River and the K Bar T Ranch.

Lots of seeps in the fields makes for perfect haying and grazing, but it was too wet to get a truck through. Instead we used mules – quads - to zip through the slop to get to the river. It would have been enough to start fishing the White, being there were rising trout in nearly every feeding seam we saw. Instead, we violated the "never leave fish to find fish" rule and waded past them, hiked through a cottonwood grove for about 20-minutes, and arrived at a medium-sized creek, chock-a-block with water cress and feeding lanes with big browns and rainbows drifting in and out.

Mustang prefers a family fishing approach, where one angler casts and the rest observe. You can rotate after a set number of landed fish or use a time limit, whichever you prefer. Presentations were more intricate due to the high sagebrush that threatened every backcast, but when the fly hit the water, the two-foot plus trout were receptive. John and I took turns on some browns until we got the call from Angela.



## Other Notes of Interest About Colorado

- **Capital:** Denver
- **Land area:** 103,717 sq mi.
- **State parks:** 44
- **Population:** 4,861,515 (2007)
- **Religion:** Christian 68%
- **Time Zone:** Mountain
- **Record Fish:**
  - Rainbow trout 19 lbs 10 oz.
  - Brook trout 7 lbs. 10 oz.
  - Brown trout 30 lbs. 8 oz.
  - Cutthroat (native) 16 lbs.
- Highest temperature recorded in Colorado was 118°F while the lowest was -61°F.
- In Fruita, the town folk celebrate "Mike the Headless Chicken Day." Seems that a farmer named L.A. Olsen cut off Mike's head on September 10, 1945 in anticipation of a chicken dinner - and Mike lived for another 4 years without a head.

For more information visit [www.colorado.gov](http://www.colorado.gov)

"There are a bunch of big rainbows up here," she said.

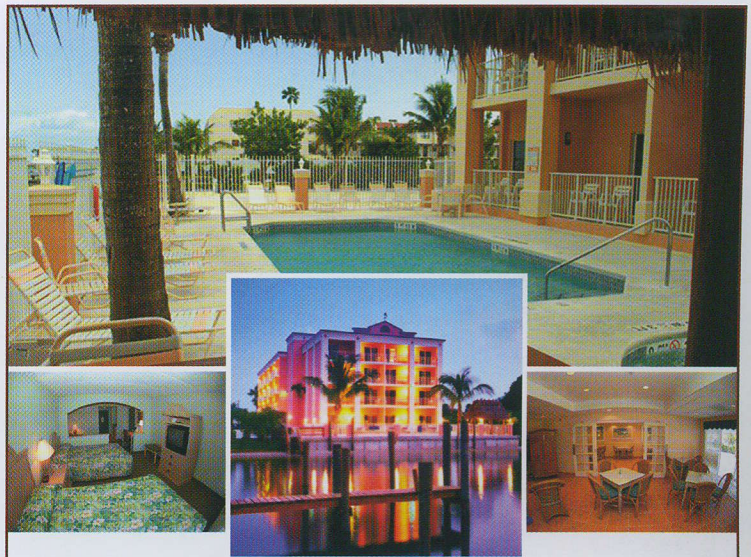
"How many is a bunch?"

"Eight." There are some things you don't need to say twice.

Lunch came too early that day, and I could have spent a month fishing the K-T from dawn-to-dusk and still wouldn't have said Uncle. We spent the afternoon on the main stem of the White. There were wonderful riffles that dropped into pools and pockets with a mixture of trout. As we walked along the bank we'd see some big fish sipping emergers in the film and pause to cast to 'em, and other times we'd see smaller fish flashing a foot or so under the surface. We hit about a dozen stretches of the White, sharing the river only with a beaver and a few antelope.

On our last night at High Lonesome, I thought about our trip. My only complaint was that I did not get to see a Saguaro cactus. Alas, they grow further to the south. We all stayed up way too late that night listening to live bluegrass music around the campfire, but still managed to get up and fish with Buzz' 15-year old grandson, Jonathon, at sunrise. Jonathon's first trout of the morning was an 18-inch brown. Sleep? Not this cowboy. After all, anything done in moderation shows a lack of interest.

*Tom Keer is a full-time freelance writer who lives on Cape Cod, Massachusetts. He is at work on his first book, a collection of fly-fishing essays, to be published by Barclay Creek Press.*



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