

New Mexico Whitewater

A Guide to River Trips



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

WHITEWATER BOATING

Introduction	Page 2
Rights of Boaters	Page 2
Care of the Environment	Page 4
Recommended Craft	Page 5
Basic Equipment Checklist	Page 6
First Aid	Page 7
Safety	Page 8

WHITEWATER RIVERS

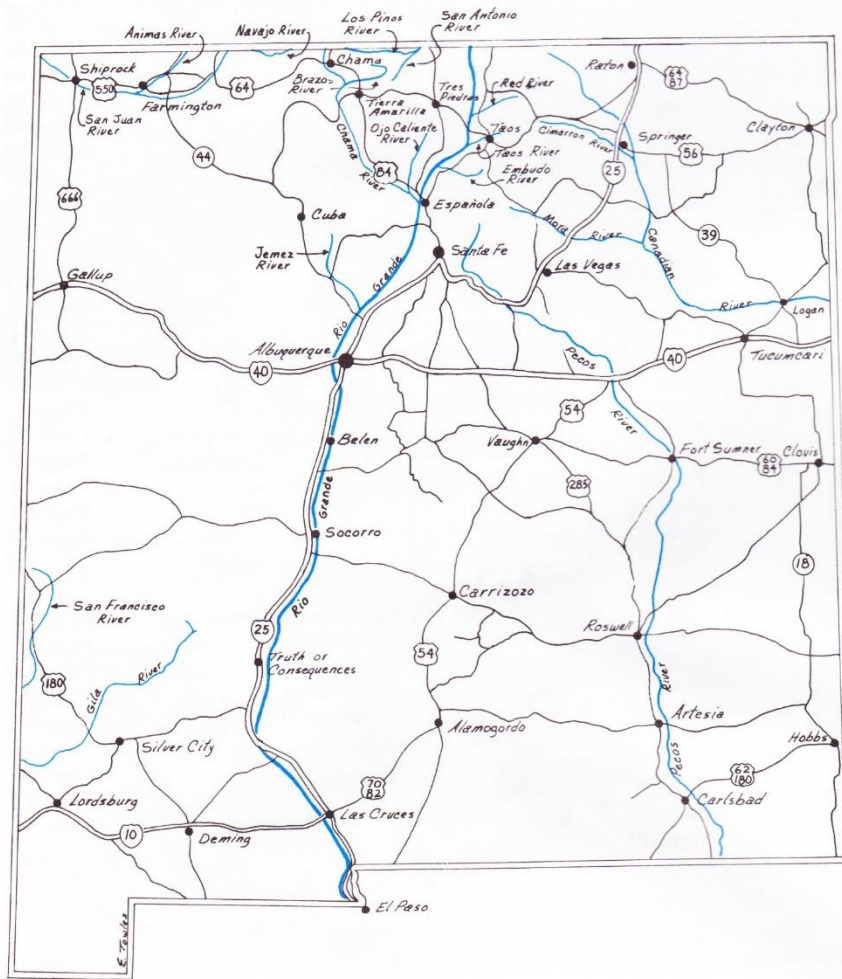
The River Survey	Page 10
Difficulty Rating Scale	Page 10
Animas River	Page 11
Brazos River	Page 12
Canadian River (A)	Page 13
Canadian River (B)	Page 14
Chama River (A)	Page 16
Chama River (B)	Page 17
Chama River (C)	Page 18
Chama River (D)	Page 20
Chama River (E)	Page 22
Cimarron River	Page 23
Embudo River	Page 24
Gila River (A)	Page 26
Gila River (B)	Page 28
Gila River (C)	Page 30
Gila River (D)	Page 32
Gila River (E)	Page 34
Jemez River	Page 35
Los Pinos River	Page 36
Mora River	Page 37
Navajo River	Page 38
Ojo Caliente River	Page 39

Pecos River (A)	Page 40
Pecos River (B)	Page 42
Pecos River (C)	Page 44
Red River	Page 45
Rio Grande Wild River	Page 46
Rio Grande (A)	Page 48
Rio Grande (B)	Page 49
Rio Grande (C)	Page 50
Rio Grande (D)	Page 51
Rio Grande (E)	Page 52
Rio Grande (F)	Page 54
Rio Grande Flatwater	Page 55
Rio Pueblo de Taos	Page 56
San Antonio River	Page 58
San Francisco River (A)	Page 59
San Francisco River (B)	Page 60
San Juan River (A)	Page 62
San Juan River (B)	Page 63
San Juan River (C)	Page 64
Whitewater Boating References	Page 65
Glossary of Common River Terms	Page 68

MAPS

Whitewater Rivers of New Mexico	Page 1
Chama River (Lobo Lodge)	Page 15
Chama River (El Vado Dam)	Page 19
Gila River (Wilderness Run)	Page 25
Gila River (Mogollon Creek)	Page 29
Gila River (Middle Box)	Page 31
Pecos River	Page 41
Rio Grande (Upper and Lower Box)	Page 47
Rio Grande (White Rock Canyon)	Page 53

WHITEWATER RIVERS OF NEW MEXICO



New Mexico Whitewater Boating

INTRODUCTION

RIGHTS OF BOATERS

The popular image of New Mexico is of a dry, cactus-studded region of desert landscapes. Yet each spring, as the deep high-mountain snows of winter melt, water courses down to swell the state's streams and rivers, the most prominent of which is the Rio Grande — the "Great River" which offers some of the best whitewater boating in the West.

Arid New Mexico has, in fact, a surprising number of other rivers with the potential for whitewater boating. Many are shallow and narrow with highly variable water levels and boating conditions, but if they are floated at the right time of year, they can offer river runners challenging rapids and ample opportunities for both excitement and solitude in wild natural settings.

This booklet is designed to provide a ready reference to New Mexico's whitewater rivers, along with guidelines for safe enjoyment of the sport of river running. Information is included covering physical characteristics, rapids, recommended craft, running seasons, hazards, maps, permits, and access points for individual stretches of rivers throughout the state.

The rivers discussed were surveyed by boat, whenever possible, or by riverside hiking when circumstances did not permit floating observation. *It cannot be guaranteed that every danger and river characteristic has been identified in this guide*, since conditions on these streams are constantly changing. Hazards like diversion dams, fences crossing rivers, and debris jams are common and may be encountered on one occasion but not the next. It is therefore imperative that boaters get the most current information available and, when in doubt, scout rivers before traveling them — always keeping in mind the inherent dangers of whitewater boating.

It is hoped that the data contained in this guide to New Mexico's rivers will help boaters choose trips that match their interests and abilities, and will serve as an aid to planning safe whitewater adventures.

The rights of boaters and property owners with respect to natural streams were interpreted by the New Mexico State Supreme Court in 1945. The court determined that although a landowner may have exclusive property rights to both banks as well as to the bed of the river, it does not necessarily follow that the landowner has exclusive rights to the water flowing through his or her land. State law guarantees all citizens the right to recreational use of public waters. Floating down a river is not a trespass on the property of the underlying riverbed.

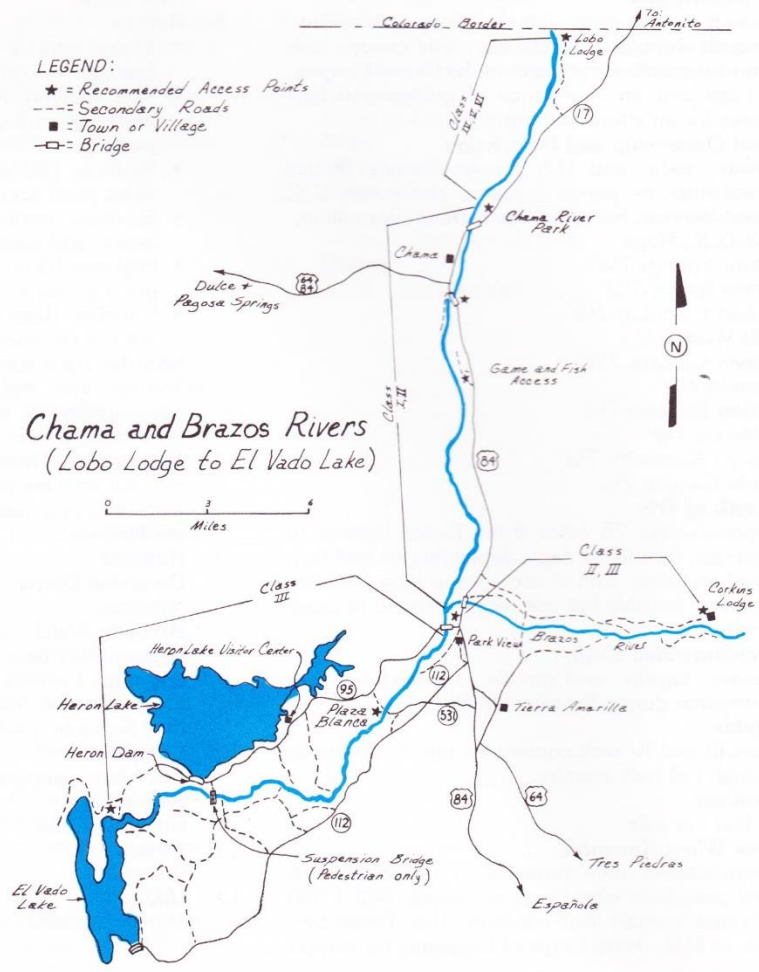
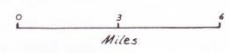
Many of the whitewater rivers in New Mexico run through privately owned property, where one or both banks of the river or islands in midstream are not public. It often becomes necessary to leave the water and go onto private land to scout rapids or hazards or to portage around them. Whenever possible, permission of the landowner should be obtained before entering private land. If this is not practical, the landowner's property should always be respected — gates and fences should be left as they are found, firewood should not be cut or collected, and care should be taken in the disposition of trash and human waste (see "Care of Environment" section). Unless permission is obtained ahead of time, camping is an infringement on a property owner's rights.

A party's behavior on private property may influence a landowner's attitude toward future boating activity on his land. In many cases, the only access to a stretch of river is provided through the courtesy of a private landowner, so any damage done to that property may preclude its use by other boaters.

LEGEND:

- ★ = Recommended Access Points
- = Secondary Roads
- = Town or Village
- = Bridge

Chama and Brazos Rivers
(Lobo Lodge to El Vado Lake)



CHAMA RIVER (A)

Lobo Lodge to Chama River Park

General Description

A highly scenic run through a V-shaped gorge, requiring maximum concentration because of narrowness, fast water with tumbling drops, and intermittent logjams. **For experts only!**

1. Land Ownership and Permission

Private (Lobo Lodge); obtain permission and information on current flow conditions from Lobo Lodge (756-2150).

2. U.S.G.S. Map

Chama 15'

3. Length of Trip

Six miles; travel time highly variable, depending on extent of scouting and portaging.

4. Recommended Craft

Kayaks only; too narrow and difficult for other craft.

5. Rapids

Class IV to VI continuously; for experts only!

6. Gradient

60 feet per mile.

7. Time When Runnable

Late May and early June for highest water (desirable for clearing rocks and obstacles).

8. Access

- Lobo Lodge, on forest road north of Highway 17 (six miles north of Chama), offers good access and parking.
- Take-out is possible anywhere along Highway 17 or at Chama River Park at Highway 17 bridge crossing.

Shuttle: Highway 17 is paved, forest road is dirt; 20-minute drive; high-clearance vehicles recommended for dirt road; may be snowdrifts in spring.

Emergency: Can take out anywhere to get help.

9. Hazards

Logjams: Intermittent; be on lookout.

Fences: May be a few; portaging may be necessary.

Rapids: Dangerously fast water with sudden drops.

10. Camping

None; private land.

11. Water

Bring your own.

12. Firewood

Do not build fires on private land.

13. Hiking

None; private land.

CHAMA RIVER (B)

Chama River Park to Park View

General Description

Many fences make this a dangerous suburban run through a broad valley.

1. **Land Ownership and Permission**
Private; no permit required.
2. **U.S.G.S. Maps**
Chama 15'
Tierra Amarilla 15'
Also: Carson National Forest (U.S. Forest Service, Taos)
3. **Length of Trip**
Approximately 15 miles to Highway 95 bridge north of Park View; four hours at 200 CFS.
4. **Recommended Craft**
Kayaks and canoes because of frequent hazards and portages.
5. **Rapids**
Mostly Class I; Class II near Chama River Park and at Highway 95 bridge; several sharp turns.
6. **Gradient**
33 feet per mile.
7. **Time When Runnable**
Mid-April to late May; minimum 150 CFS required; no maximum; call Bureau of Reclamation for flow information.
8. **Access**
 - Chama River Park, just north of Chama and northeast of Highway 17 bridge, provides excellent access and parking.
 - Highway 84 bridge south of Chama offers good access, but on private land.
 - New Mexico Game and Fish Department campground, south of Chama on east side of river, offers public access and parking.
 - Highway 95 bridge just after confluence of Brazos River provides good parking and access on northeast side.
 - The ford at Plaza Blanca, one mile southeast of Highway 95 bridge, offers good access and parking.

Shuttle: Approximately 15 miles, all highway; 25 minutes.

Emergency: Highway and houses always nearby for help.

9. **Hazards**

Fences: Frequent and dangerous; fence below Highway 84 bridge; some may be portaged; take extreme care.

Bridges: Debris and rapids below Highway 95 bridge.

10. **Camping**

At Chama River Park and New Mexico Game and Fish Department campground (free).

11. **Water**

Bring your own.

12. **Firewood**

Plentiful; use in campgrounds only.

13. **Hiking**

None recommended.

CHAMA RIVER (C)

Plaza Blanca to El Vado Lake

General Description

A challenging stretch that runs through meadows in a deep canyon with an abundance of ponderosa pine and wildlife. This is an interesting and exciting day-run that passes through Heron Lake and El Vado Lake state parks.

1. **Land Ownership and Permission**
Private and New Mexico State Park and Recreation Division; no permit required; for current conditions call Heron Lake State Park.
2. **U.S.G.S. Map**
Tierra Amarilla 15'
3. **Length of Trip**
Approximately 15 miles from Plaza Blanca to El Vado Lake take-out; four to six hours.
4. **Recommended Craft**
Kayaks, canoes, and small rafts if below 800 CFS; anything, if greater than 800 CFS.
5. **Rapids**
Primarily Class III; first half has a few easy Class II rapids, second half has many Class II-III rapids; "Big Mama Chama" rapid (located one mile above Heron Spillway) is Class III and may need to be portaged because of debris clogging channels; El Vado Lake is flatwater with frequent winds, so rafts are discouraged.
6. **Gradient**
22 feet per mile.
7. **Time When Runnable**
April and May, when 200 CFS and higher.
8. **Access**
 - Highway 95 bridge just after confluence of Brazos River offers good access and parking.
 - Ford at Plaza Blanca, one mile southeast of Highway 95 bridge, provides good access and parking.
 - Rio Chama Trail off Highway 95 provides difficult, but possible, access under suspension bridge.
 - Heron Dam spillway just past suspension bridge

is sporadically open (check with dam or state park) and provides excellent access and parking.

- At El Vado Lake, the first access road off Highway 95 offers good access and parking; dirt road difficult when wet.

Shuttle: Approximately 10 miles; one-half hour on Highway 95; dirt road difficult in wet weather.

Emergency: Can take out at ranches and farms on first leg; second part is in deep canyon, so proceed to suspension bridge or spillway for help.

9. **Hazards**

Diversion Dams: Below Plaza Blanca there is a runnable, Class II concrete dam; scout before running.
Fences: Several possible; could be dangerous, requiring portaging.
10. **Camping**
Many attractive sites.
11. **Water**
Bring your own.
12. **Firewood**
Plentiful.
13. **Hiking**
Some short side-canyon hikes.



Chama River
 (El Vado Dam to Rio Grande Confluence)

0 10 20
 Miles

CHAMA RIVER (D)

El Vado Dam to Abiquiu Lake

General Description

A highly scenic, isolated run beneath red sandstone cliffs and through forested canyons with abundant wildlife.

1. **Land Ownership and Permission**

Private, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and U.S. Forest Service (Santa Fe National Forest); no permit required, but necessary to request permission from private landowner if launching from El Vado Ranch; boaters must register at ranch.

2. **U.S.G.S. Maps**

Tierra Amarilla 15'
Navajo Peak 7½'
Laguna Peak 7½'
Echo Amphitheatre 7½'
Ghost Ranch 7½'
Cañones 7½'
Abiquiu 7½'

3. **Length of Trip**

Approximately 33 miles; allow two days.

4. **Recommended Craft**

Kayaks, rafts, and canoes are suitable.

5. **Rapids**

Class I, II, and III; most rapids are below the Christ in the Desert Monastery.

6. **Gradient**

15 feet per mile.

7. **Time When Runnable**

Usually late April until early July; unpredictable water levels because of dam control; fast changes in flow occur throughout season; always check El Vado outflow with Bureau of Reclamation in Albuquerque before departing.

8. **Access**

- El Vado Ranch, off El Vado Reservoir Road 112 south of Park View, offers excellent access; there is a parking/launching fee; contact El Vado Ranch (588-7354) for information.
- Numerous good take-out points exist along five-mile stretch above Abiquiu Lake.
- Adobe ruins take-out is reached by Forest Road

151, one-half mile north of Ghost Ranch Museum; road can be treacherous when wet.

Shuttle: Approximately 50 miles; mostly paved; dirt access road may be difficult when wet.

Emergency: Best to float to access point north of Abiquiu Lake.

9. **Hazards**

Bridges: A low concrete bridge about five miles south of monastery may be dangerous at high water; must be scouted.

Fences: None when surveyed, but always a possibility.

10. **Camping**

Many possible sites; avoid private land.

11. **Water**

Bring your own.

12. **Firewood**

Plentiful.

13. **Hiking**

Many short hikes possible.

CHAMA RIVER (E)

Abiquiu Dam to Rio Grande Confluence

General Description

A flat, meandering run through ranchland with many irrigation diversions.

1. **Land Ownership and Permission**
Private, Indian, and U.S. Forest Service (Santa Fe National Forest); no permit required.
2. **U.S.G.S. Maps**
Abiquiu 7½'
Medanales 7½'
San Juan Pueblo 7½'
Española 7½'
3. **Length of Trip**
Approximately 25 miles; one long day.
4. **Recommended Craft**
Kayaks and canoes best because of probable portages.
5. **Rapids**
Class I and II; several diversion dams have chutes with three- to five-foot drops that make run more difficult; Class II rapids below Medanales bridge.
6. **Gradient**
Less than 10 feet per mile.
7. **Time When Runnable**
Unpredictable; dependent on Abiquiu Dam releases; call U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for Abiquiu outflow prior to departure.
8. **Access**
 - Below Abiquiu Dam there are several good access points from dirt side roads.
 - Highway 96 bridge near Abiquiu provides good access.
 - Medanales bridge offers good access.
 - Highway 285 bridge north of Española gives good access.

Shuttle: Approximately 25 miles, on paved roads except for dirt access road below Abiquiu Dam.
Emergency: The highway is close to the river, so there are numerous emergency take-out points.
9. **Hazards**
Diversion Dams: Several; some require portaging;

very dangerous dam near Highway 285 bridge, with steep drop and hazardous reversal.

Fences: A few; be on the lookout.

10. **Camping**
None; private land.
11. **Water**
Bring your own.
12. **Firewood**
Do not build campfires on private land.
13. **Hiking**
None recommended.

PECOS RIVER (A)

Cowles to Pecos

General Description

A swift, mountain run through a beautiful, wooded, limestone canyon, with challenging rapids and some hazards that require portaging.

1. **Land Ownership and Permission**

U.S. Forest Service (Santa Fe National Forest), New Mexico Game and Fish Department, and private; permit needed for access in public areas; contact Santa Fe National Forest, Pecos, for current information.

2. **U.S.G.S. Maps**

Cowles 7½'
Rosilla Peak 7½'
Pecos 7½'

3. **Length of Trip**

Approximately 20 miles; ordinarily a two-hour run, varies with amount of portaging and scouting necessary.

4. **Recommended Craft**

Kayaks and canoes best due to shallow water and narrowness of channel.

5. **Rapids**

Continuous, fast, Class II and III, with some Is and IVs; dams may be Class IV when runnable; Forman Falls extremely narrow Class IV; easy to portage when necessary.

6. **Gradient**

Approximately 60 feet per mile.

7. **Time When Runnable**

May and part of June in most years; need minimum 150 CFS; 300-400 CFS ideal; call National Weather Service for current flow information.

8. **Access** (all off Forest Road 63)

- Bridge near Cowles on the way to Winsor Creek Campground offers good access and parking.
- New Mexico Game and Fish Department area one mile below Cowles provides good access and parking.
- Area near Elk Mountain Road provides good access.
- Terrero offers good access and parking for one-

half mile on both sides of the river.

- Forest Service day-use and fishing areas at end of private land after Terrero offer good access and parking.
- Bridge north of Pecos offers adequate access and parking.

Shuttle: Approximately 20 miles on Forest Road 63; passable with any vehicle, but last four miles from Terrero to Cowles are very muddy when wet.

Emergency: Forest Road 63 is always nearby, but may require a 200- to 300-foot climb out of the canyon in places; usually best to float further downriver, if possible, for easier take-out.

9. **Hazards**

Diversion Dams: Several small ones below Cowles; the Tres Lagunas Dam (below Terrero); and the fish hatchery dam.

Fences: Several dangerous ones, especially in private stretches; five in first mile-and-a-half below Terrero; try to flag for others if not done already.

Bridges: Several low private road and foot bridges that may catch debris.

Sweepers: Logjams, fallen trees, and branches are common.

Other Obstacles: Watch for fishing lines and hooks; beware of narrow passages where boats can get stuck sideways.

10. **Camping**

Many New Mexico Game and Fish Department sites on Forest Road 63; a Forest Service campground near Pecos.

11. **Water**

Side streams may be potable; best to purify or bring your own.

12. **Firewood**

Plentiful away from camping areas.

13. **Hiking**

Numerous Forest Service trails and canyons without improved trails. Terrero Cave about two-and-one-half miles downriver on west side.



PECOS RIVER (B)

South San Ysidro to Villanueva State Park

General Description

A pastoral canoe run that meanders through small canyons with steep rock walls and past several picturesque Spanish Colonial villages.

1. **Land Ownership and Permission**

New Mexico State Park and Recreation Division and private; no permit required; use public access.

2. **U.S.G.S. Maps**

Rowe 7½'
North San Ysidro 7½'
Villanueva 15'

3. **Length of Trip**

Approximately 25 miles; eight to twelve hours, depending on amount of paddling and portaging.

4. **Recommended Craft**

Canoes and kayaks at all water levels.

5. **Rapids**

Mostly sluggish Class I with some Class II; dam below Pueblo bridge is a Class IV run at high water levels.

6. **Gradient**

22 feet per mile.

7. **Time When Runnable**

May through June during wet years; runnable above 200 CFS.

8. **Access**

- South San Ysidro bridge, located off frontage road south of I-25 and opposite Pecos River campground, offers excellent access and parking.
- North of Rowe, take road to old bridge that begins at stop sign, seven-tenths of a mile north of freeway underpass, then continue north 1.8 miles to river, where there is good access between fences.
- Off San Juan exit from I-25 there is limited access and parking.
- Old San Jose bridge north of I-25 provides fair access and good parking.
- Site of San Jose bridge ruins south of freeway of-

fers good access and parking.

- Ribera bridge on Highway 3 offers fair access, but parking is difficult.
- Bridge in town of Pueblo on Highway 3 offers good access and parking.
- Villanueva State Park offers good access and parking almost anywhere.

Shuttle: Approximately 25 miles; 45-minute drive; use high-clearance vehicles in wet weather to cope with muddy roads.

Emergency: Highways and habitation never too far away for help.

9. **Hazards**

Diversion Dams: Several; worst ones below ruins of San Jose bridge (after San Miguel) and below Pueblo bridge; most are easy to portage.

Bridges: Several that can catch debris; be on alert for low private bridges.

Fences: Very frequent and dangerous; flag for others when possible.

Sweepers: Always possible; be on alert.

10. **Camping**

At commercial campground or Villanueva State Park.

11. **Water**

Bring your own.

12. **Firewood**

Available; campfires not recommended because land mostly private.

13. **Hiking**

A few short trails from Villanueva State Park.

PECOS RIVER (C)

Villanueva State Park to Tecolotito

General Description

A challenging and potentially dangerous one-day run through the steep-walled canyon at Villanueva State Park. The Pecos here seldom has sufficient water for boating.

1. **Land Ownership and Permission**
New Mexico State Park and Recreation Division and private; no permit required.
2. **U.S.G.S. Maps**
Villanueva 15'
San Juan 15'
Anton Chico 15'
3. **Length of Trip**
19 miles; one long day.
4. **Recommended Craft**
Canoes, kayaks, and small rafts at all water levels for ease of portaging.
5. **Rapids**
Many Class II and III; a few Class IV.
6. **Gradient**
29 feet per mile.
7. **Time When Runnable**
May and June during wet years after extended snowmelt; call National Weather Service for flow information.
8. **Access**
 - Villanueva State Park offers excellent parking and access.
 - Tecolotito bridge, southwest of Highway 84 towards Dahlia, offers adequate access.

Shuttle: Approximately 60 miles; one and one-half hours on paved roads.
Emergency: It is possible to climb out of canyon north of Forest Service roads; better to travel down canyon to inhabited ranch.
9. **Hazards**

Diversion Dams: Several; the one in Anton Chico Canyon cannot be run safely and usually requires a difficult portage.
Bridges: A few; watch for debris.

Fences: Several barbed-wire fences, including one at end of Villanueva State Park campground.

Logjams and Sweepers: Always possible, especially at high water levels.

10. **Camping**
Villanueva State Park campground; many other possible sites.
11. **Water**
Available at Villanueva State Park.
12. **Firewood**
Plentiful.
13. **Hiking**
Many side canyons to explore.