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Guide Lu Warner holds the 14-pound rainbow

A 'REEL' FISHING TALE

Drama surfaces when landing 32-inch rainbow trout

Warner revives the massive fish in well-oxygenated water.



Lu Warner
Special to the Times

Mike West and I were fishing a dry/dropper on the stretch of the Taylor River located along Wilder on the Taylor July 9, at a place that I call the swimming hole. Dry fly fishing had slowed down a bit from earlier in the day but after a few casts a 12- to 14-inch brown trout came to the surface, which Mike hooked on his dropper. The brown thrashed around on top and after a few seconds, a giant Rainbow slowly came up from the depths and inhaled the brown like a mayfly. Gulp! The brown was gone, just like that!

Mike's line tightened up and snapped immediately under the weight of the big fish. Wide-eyed, we looked at each other and couldn't believe the size of the rainbow that we had just seen. I said that I thought it was 30 inches or better.

We thought about it for a bit, settled down and decided to re-rig and put on a streamer to try to catch the big rainbow. After two or three casts, Mike mended the streamer down pretty deep, and we saw a huge flash. Then his line tensioned up, and the big fish was on! He jumped four times like a tarpon (a tropical marine fish), ran up and down the pool, and after several minutes finally settled into the tail of the pool about 20 yards below.

Mike and I were wading deep above a dead tree; to move down the pool to land the fish was going to be difficult and it appeared that he wasn't going to come to us. The fish held in the tail for what must have been 6 or 8 minutes, and my hopes were rising that we would land it.

Just then, the fish bolted over the cascade below and downriver. By the time we could react, we were well into the backing, maybe 100 yards as the fish was now in fast water and heading downstream like a freight train. Mike held tension and we stumbled our way to the tail of the pool, but we were losing ground. The big fish was now more than 200 yards and two pools away. Not good!

At the cascade, Mike wisely stopped as we were in a sketchy spot in the



Mike West holds the massive, 32-inch rainbow trout that took two people — and quite a bit of scrambling — to land.

Courtesy photos

middle of the river. Quickly he gave me his rod and I ran down the middle of the river stumbling, trying to regain some line, and figuring out where the fish was and if we even still had it on the line. In the meantime, Mike crossed back to the bank and the river trail and was running downstream as fast as possible. It was quite a sight — we were both completely at our aerobic maximum!

Twice the fish hung the line up on rocks on the other side, and I thought we had lost it, but each time the line unwrapped and came tight again. After more than 400 yards of running, I finally got the fly line to the reel for the first time in nearly a half hour. Mike entered the water with his net ready far below in the lower bench hole, and I was able to swing the fish, now wrapped up in the line, across the current to Mike. Somehow he doubled the fish up to fit inside on the first scoop, and we had it. When we netted the fish, the Adams fly was still hanging out of its mouth attached to the dropper and the brown trout inside the rainbow's stomach.

This is the biggest rainbow I have seen landed at Wilder on the Taylor in five years of guiding there. It was a healthy, wild fish of 32 inches and estimated at a minimum of 14 pounds. It took two of us to land it and we were lucky to have done it! After several minutes of reviving the fish in well-oxygenated water, the rainbow was released and we watched it swim back into the main river.

(Lu Warner is a master fishing and mountain biking guide at Wilder on the Taylor, a ranch community located between Gunnison and Crested Butte, and has been fly fishing and tying flies since the young age of 8. Since 1985, he has worked as a fly fishing guide in Idaho, Montana, Colorado, Alaska, Argentina and southern Chile. Warner has guided the summers in the Grested Butte/Gunnison area since 2000. From October through May, he resides in the Patagonia of Chile where he owns and operates the Valle Bonito Lodge, which specializes in fly fishing, hiking and mountain bike adventures.)