



Oak Creek, AZ

Seduced by Sedona

By Steve Larese

When I take in Sedona's red-rock desert beauty and surreal arid landscape, fly fishing may not be the first thing that comes to mind. But flowing through Sedona and the canyon above it is one of the most beautiful trout streams in the Southwest.

I'm on Oak Creek this morning with Jim McInnis, owner of Gon' Fishen Guide Service. At 75, McInnis jumps from rock to rock like a cat on a windowsill, flicking a size-12 caddisfly dry to waiting rainbows. We're playing a beautiful stretch at Banjo Bill Campground, and I'm too busy studying McInnis's graceful casts to concentrate on my own. McInnis is pulling out feisty stocked rainbows like they're old friends.

Spring-born Oak Creek begins life just south of Flagstaff, in its eponymous grand canyon that can be taken in at the spectacular Oak Creek Canyon Vista Point, where you can also purchase pottery and jewelry from Navajo and Hopi vendors. From here, the stream travels 45 miles southwest, passing through Sedona, until it contributes to the Verde River, Arizona's only federally-designated Wild and Scenic river.

Need Caption

For fly fishing, I stick to the upper 12 miles or so of Oak Creek between Pine Flat and impressive Midgely Bridge, where the water is trout-cold and well oxygenated. Warm-water species such as smallmouth bass are found in the lower, warmer water popular with spin-casters. Hairpin National Scenic Byway (Arizona Route 89A) follows Oak Creek into Sedona from Flagstaff, and access to the water is easy, with nine camping or picnic areas, each offering different types of water. Banjo Bill has flat, riparian grassy banks with towering oaks; Grasshopper's desert banks are rocky ledges edged by steep outcrops, with Sedona's famous red formations contrasting above. At these camping and day-use areas, the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AGFD) stocks rainbows, which join native browns and brookies. From Junipine Resort (1 mile north of Slide Rock State Park) to the West Fork Trail, regulations limit anglers to single, barbless flies and catch-and-release fishing. Anglers also need a Red Rock Pass to park in some areas (\$5/day or \$15/week, available at many businesses throughout Sedona); restrictions and fees for campgrounds and various other stops in these high-impact areas are quite complicated, so visit redrockcountry.org for details about permits.

"There are two browns in Oak Creek," McInnis quips, "and I caught them both."

He explains that the wild browns are far more cautious than the relatively tame AGFD-raised rainbows, but that once, while waiting for a client, he made a casual cast and pulled out a 23-inch brown, his personal record for Oak Creek.

While these spots can be relatively packed with mostly picnickers and swimmers in the warm months, especially at Slide Rock State Park, hip waders or careful rock-hopping

helps anglers travel the creek and get away from crowds.

Oak Creek fishes fairly straightforward, says McInnis, with early mornings being the key time. The water is spring fed and clear; the cobblestone bottom and boulder groupings often swarm with hatches and trout waiting in the shadows or under bank overhangs. His favorite pattern is the Elk Hair Caddis, size 12.

"I picked the wrong time to get into fly fishing, with my eyes going," quips the septuagenarian. "I like big flies. I figure if I can't see it, neither can the fish."

McInnis uses a 7.5-foot, 3-weight Steffen Brothers rod, which, when I try it, makes my 5-weight tippet feel like an iron pipe by comparison. He says he was originally looking for a 6-foot rod for Oak Creek, but he couldn't pass up the deal he got on his Steffen, which is made locally in Flagstaff (steffenbrothers-flyrods.com).

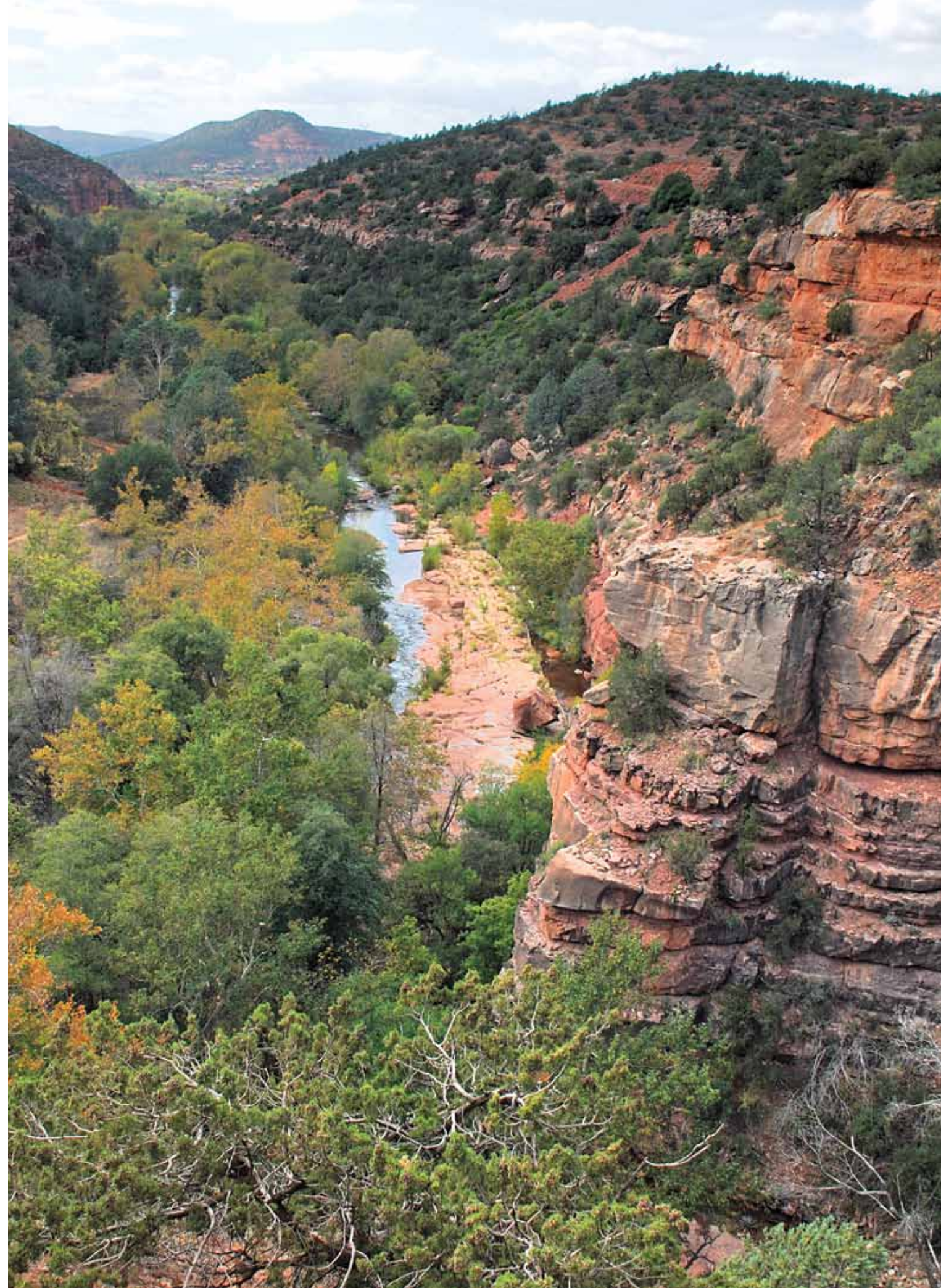
Paul Shearon, manager at Babbitt's Fly Fishing in Flagstaff, notes the stocked rainbows are fairly fearless, but you really have to stalk the browns if that's what you're going for.

"Oak Creek is a year-round fishery," he says. "The Blue Wing Olive hatch is prolific here from about March through November, as are the mayfly hatches. Caddis patterns do great here."

Shearon says his favorite fly is a Parachute Adams, and he uses bead head nymphs, such as Copper Johns and other emerging patterns in the early spring. Tricos—small, black, size-20 mayflies—work well in late summer and increase the challenge of keeping a fish on the line.



Need Caption





Need Caption

Time on Oak Creek is well spent even if you're not fishing. The clear water gurgles through steep-sided red rock with geology similar to that of the Grand Canyon to the north, and through oak-lined, grassy banks perfect for camping.

On this trip, however, I've opted for more comfortable digs at the Briar Patch Inn, briar-patchinn.com, a charming collection of 19 cabins that housed movie crews in the 1940s. My wife, Kat, loves the rustic Southwestern décor, the lush gardens, and the homemade muffins; so do I, but more to the point, it's right on Oak Creek. There's a gorgeous pool yards from our cabin door and I can be on the water in minutes while my wife sleeps in, and then play the hero by bringing her breakfast in bed. This is a fishing trip during which I'm actually scoring points.

After a glorious morning on Oak Creek with McInnis, and with the trout fishing slowing down for the day, Kat and I make sure to explore Sedona. Magical Sedona is many things to many people: a breathtaking red-rock

paradise, a New Age mecca, a tony playground, an art lover's dream. This destination is always one fishing trip to which my wife insists on accompanying me, even

though she has no intention of hitting the water.

When friends would regale us with stories of their visits to Sedona, I always envisioned a Southwest Brigadoon—high in the mountains, nestled in a canyon, so impossibly beautiful it must be mythical. Even its lyrical name, Sedona, struck me as too perfect.

The stone ruins and petroglyphs left by the Sinagua people between 1100 and 1400 show Anglos were far from the first to settle here. In fact, they didn't do so until 1876. The Hopi 50 miles north of here have long considered this land to be sacred. Today, Sedona is known worldwide for

its uplifting energy originating from its five vortices – areas in the red rocks that are said to possess increased electric and magnetic energy, which can imbue calming and euphoric feelings in people who visit the sites. Kat and I bite, and hike through a red sandstone labyrinth

Arizona Peacock Lady

Tied by Paul Shearon



PHOTO BY SOUTHWEST FLY FISHING

Hook: 2XL or 3XL standard wire

Tail: Golden pheasant tippet

Rear hackle: Grizzly

Body: Peacock herl ribbed with fine wire

Collar: Soft brown and grizzly hackle, mixed

OAK CREEK NOTEBOOK



When: Year-round; March–November are prime.

Where: The upper section of Oak Creek flows 12 mi. from Pine Flat to Midgely Bridge. AZ 89A parallels the creek from south of Flagstaff to Sedona. Pullouts are clearly marked. Red Rock Pass (\$5/day, \$15/week) required for parking at day-use and camping areas (available at many businesses in Sedona).

Headquarters: Sedona. *Information:* The Sedona Daily Directory, sedonainformation.com; Sedona Chamber of Commerce, (800) 288-7336, sedonachamber.com; Red Rock Ranger District, redrockcountry.org.

Appropriate gear: 6- to 7.5-ft, 3- to 5-wt. rods; floating line; 7-ft. leader; 3X–5X tippets.

Useful fly patterns: Elk Hair Caddis, Parachute Adams, Copper John, Trico patterns, Arizona Peacock Lady.

Necessary accessories: Wide-brimmed sun hat, plenty of drinking water or a water filter, polarized sunglasses, good hiking footwear, sunscreen, energy snacks, emergency rain poncho, hip waders or boots, wading sandals or shoes for wet wading in the warm months.

Nonresident license: \$17.25/1 day, \$32/5 days, \$39.75/4 months, \$70.25/annual.

Fly Shops/guides: *Flagstaff:* Babbitt's Flyfishing Specialists, (928) 779-3253; Peace Surplus, (928) 779-4521, peacesurplus.com. *Peoria:* The Hook Up Outfitters, (888) 899-4665, thehookupoutfitters.com. *Scottsdale:* Desert Sportsman, (480) 368-9280, desertsportsman.com. *Tempe:* Arizona Fly Fishing, (480) 730-6808, azflyfishing.com. Gon' Fishen Guide Service (Jim McInnis), (928) 282-0788.

Books/maps: *Flyfisher's Guide to Arizona* by Will Jordan. *Arizona Atlas & Gazetteer* by DeLorme Mapping.

to the Boynton Canyon vortex. Sedona was seabed 330 million years ago, give or take. The red of the sandstone is iron oxide—rust. Don't wear your Sunday best when fishing or hiking in Sedona.

We reach a soaring sienna spire named Kachina Woman, a vortex said to be a mix of feminine-magnetic and electric-masculine spirit, making up a strong ying/yang balance. I can't say the feeling matches the euphoria of landing a 24-inch brown, but it's hard not to feel incredible when hiking in this landscape.

Having experienced Sedona's metaphysical side, we decide to learn a little about the actual town. We visit Uptown Sedona, the city's center with public art, tour companies, restaurants and shops, and Tlaquepaque (tlaq.com), a maze of galleries and stores that mirrors a Mexican villa a short distance from Uptown on U.S. Highway 179. The Sedona Art Center (sedonaartcenter.com), which was opened by sculptor Nassan Gobran in 1961 and galvanized the Sedona art scene, offers classes, a local gallery, and art shows (excellent deals can be found here). We toast our health at the Cowboy Club Grille & Spirits, where in 1965, four cowboys ordered drinks and formed the Cowboy Artists of America, which today is an elite, juried organization of Western artists whose work sells in the six figures internationally. Max Ernst, who inspired Europe's Dada and Surrealist movements, moved to Sedona in 1946, bringing artistic credibility to the farming community. At the Sedona Heritage Museum (sedonamuseum.org), we learn that the city was named after Sedona Schnebly, wife of T.C. Schnebly, who established successful apple and peach orchards here in the 1870s.

For the next several decades, Sedona existed as a peach paradise, until 1923, when Zane Grey's novel, *The Call of the Canyon*, was filmed as a silent picture in Sedona, the book's setting. The abundant light and landscape brought a constant stream of movie crews, defining for the world the American West. In 1945, John Wayne produced *Angel and the Badman*, and had a western town set built near the Coffee Pot Rock in town. In all, 43 films and hundreds of commercials were made here, their producers lured by the area's iconic scenery that couldn't be matched. Joan Crawford, Gene Autry, Burt Lancaster, James Stewart, and many other stars of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s came to Sedona to work and play—as well as to fish. Walt Disney used to enjoy vacationing here, and while relaxing by Oak Creek, is said to have been inspired to create *Fantasia*.

Hours later, with my wife blissfully enjoying a spa treatment and me back on the water with Oak Creek all to myself, I can't think of a more enthralling fly-fishing fantasyland. ➤

Steve Larese is a freelance writer and photographer who lives in New Mexico.