

## EAGLE POST 62

The newsletter of **ESWA** (Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance) apprises you of important activities in and around Eagles Nest, Holy Cross, and Ptarmigan Peak Wilderness Areas.

[www.EagleSummitWilderness.org](http://www.EagleSummitWilderness.org)



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### BEFORE WE BEGIN:

ESWA is making news - literally, in both the Summit Daily and the Vail Daily.

**SUMMIT**  
**DAILY** NEWS

Our Get Wild! column runs each Friday in the Summit Daily. Produced by our own Karn Stiegelmeier, the first issues are available [HERE](#).

There's more. The Vail Daily is sponsoring a monthly column from ESWA, in collaboration with the Walking Mountain Science Center. Check out the first two columns [HERE](#).

Thanks to both newspapers for these great opportunities to get out ESWA's message!



Interested in Noxious Weeds, and how to combat them? Join ESWA's **WeedSpotter** training the morning of **June 19** in Minturn. Contact Jim Alexander at [jimofcolorado@gmail.com](mailto:jimofcolorado@gmail.com) for details. (Some libations may follow training).



Oxeye daisy

**MAKE A DATE WITH A LLAMA!** We need your help in some of the more distant and wild Wilderness areas. Come help restore the Wilderness on a weekend backpacking trip with the Forest Service. ESWA is offering three llama supported work trips this summer:

- July 16-18: Slate Lakes in the Eagles Nest Wilderness
- July 30-Aug 1: Lake Constantine in the Holy Cross Wilderness
- Aug 27-29: Sopris/Brady Lakes in the Holy Cross Wilderness

These are fun work trips, and participants may hike and work at a rate comfortable for each person. More details and sign up information is available at [eaglesummitwilderness.org](http://eaglesummitwilderness.org) ->volunteer ->volunteer trail projects.

June 2021

Dear \*|FNAME|\*

Greetings! Our topic this month:

## **Tenkara: A Gateway to Wilderness Appreciation**

By Steve Elder

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*Do not fail to learn from  
The pure voice of an  
Ever-flowing stream  
Splashing over the rocks.*

-- Morihei Ueshiba

In 2015 I had newly discovered the tenkara approach to fly fishing, and I was eager to get into more wilderness areas to try it out. I had been in and around wilderness most of my life, but I had been largely diverted from dedicated Wilderness by mountain biking, alpine skiing, paddle boarding, and other outdoor activities that don't suit the "untrammelled" areas preserved as wilderness.



This lovely little stream in Eagle's Nest Wilderness is chock full of cutthroat trout, some of the size you might find in most lakes.

One day, I invited my 22-year-old daughter Emily on a day hike into Upper Cataract Lake in the Eagles Nest Wilderness. She readily agreed, and we had a very nice walk to the lake, which is a healthy Brook Trout fishery.

Once Emily, who had never fished before, saw the colorful fish coming up from the depths to examine and sometimes strike my fly, she was hooked. She asked to try my rod and was soon catching fish. Since then, we have both done lots more tenkara fishing (I way more than her, I admit). But the thing I want to focus on in this article is that, in the years since, we have both grown so much in our passion for and knowledge of Wilderness by exploring it with our feet, backpacks on our backs, whether fishing was a goal or not.

I've since explored several of the Wilderness Areas in Colorado, using tenkara not so much as my primary goal, but as my motivator for designing and executing trips. I love to find and explore "blue lines" and their surroundings. Emily has gone on to solo backpack through the Gore Range (which we hope will soon be known as the Nuchu Range!) via a self-designed route, and last summer she completed the Colorado Trail from end to end.

My intent in this article is to share my passion for exploring Wilderness through tenkara. My hope is simply to build a little awareness about what tenkara is, why it exists, its natural fit for Wilderness exploration, and the appreciation of the natural world it can foster. Though I'll give readers a fundamental understanding of tenkara and some favorite tips -- don't worry -- this is not a how-to article. There is plenty of information online and in books and articles about all things tenkara. Along the way, I will point readers toward some of the best of it if you wish to pursue more.



Emily with a (matching) steely blue Brook Trout in the Hunter-Fryingpan Wilderness.

See more photos of Steve's adventures with tenkara [HERE](#).

### **What is tenkara and why does it exist?**

Tenkara is a method of fly fishing that involves only a rod, a line, and a fly. No reel. It's a technique of fixed-line fishing that was developed hundreds of years ago in the mountains of Japan by commercial fishermen to catch the native fish of the high streams there. It was designed to be effective, simple, and

inexpensive....attributes tenkara still holds today.

Kendall Bakich, an aquatic biologist with Colorado Parks and Wildlife, who covers the western drainages of Eagle's Nest Wilderness, Holy Cross Wilderness, and several others, says: "What I like about tenkara is the simplicity. I spend enough time with complicated equipment as a fish biologist. And it gets you out to the most beautiful places in the state."

There are a number of theories about how it became known as tenkara; many of them are beautiful stories. I like the way that one of my inspirations, Daniel Galhardo -- who is widely credited for popularizing tenkara in the United States through his Boulder-based company tenkara USA -- describes the word in his seminal book *tenkara*:

*According to Mr. Yoshikazu Fujioka, "Some say it's because tenkara means, 'from the sky,' suggestive of the way the flies fall into the water from above...Still others say it's derived from a game called ken-ken, in which children hop around on one leg inside a circle drawn on the ground as tenkara fishermen hop from rock to rock in the streams....I prefer this theory, because the playfulness appeals to me."*

To me too! The opportunity to "play in the Wilderness," with minimal impact, is at the heart of my love for tenkara. While Wilderness most certainly has intrinsic value distinct from direct connection with or benefit to humans, the appreciation of those values is enhanced by our interactions with nature. The more fulfilling those experiences are for us, the better.

If you are interested in learning more about the history, practice, and culture of tenkara, I recommend Daniel's website and book. Simply go to [tenkarausa.com](http://tenkarausa.com).

### **What makes tenkara so fitting for Wilderness?**

Light weight, compact, simple, effective, affordable, and fun! Everything we Wilderness wanderers look for in equipment. That's not an accident -- tenkara was designed by practical travelers of the backcountry.

Since the rod needs no guides to hold the line along its length, Tenkara rods are telescoping. Though when extended they are

typically longer than their Western counterparts (11' - 14' is typical for tenkara), they are generally lighter, and collapse to about 18" or even less. Just the right size for your pack, and to be able to move through thickly covered and rough terrain.

The line can be easily removed, spooled, and later replaced on the rod. Or, if the fisher is on the move and will fish again soon, the line can just be wound either on the rod or using line holders.

The flies are simple and inexpensive. The theory of tenkara emphasizes the presentation of the fly on the water over "matching the hatch" (which involves trying to select a fly that the fisher thinks the fish might be more likely to feed on). This is another tenkara adaptation to the Wilderness. In most Wilderness waters -- and particularly streams -- food is relatively scarce. Wilderness fish are likely to eat anything they find in the water that looks like food. Therefore, tenkara fishers need to take very few flies with them, and they change flies relatively infrequently, usually only when we have evidence that they've presented the fly well to a fish and the fish has passed it up. As Daniel Galhardo says, "It's the fly on the water that catches the fish!"

The cast is simple, accurate, and easily learned. It also has relatively little "backcast" to get tangled in trees and brush. [Here](#) is a 30-second video of Susan Skrupa's cast, followed by an in-depth, and rather humorous, discussion of the difference between the tenkara cast and one with a rod and reel.

### **How do I access tenkara?**

I walked into my local mountaineering shop one day, saw a tenkara USA display, and was intrigued enough to follow tenkara down a rabbit hole. My local fly shop also carries tenkara gear and supports the tradition; many others do as well. Much of the gear is sold online.

If you want to learn about tenkara, the richest way is to find yourself a *sensei*. In Japanese, a sensei is "someone who has gone before you." A teacher. My #1 sensei has been Dennis, whom I met in 2016 when he was speaking at a Denver tenkara conference -- yes, there are such things -- sponsored by [Zen tenkara](#), another fine Colorado company. In his presentation "Find Your Own Blue Line," Dennis shared pictures of remote

streams and also ones that were “right under your nose along the road,” where he had found solitude and lots of fish. Every one of them was “Muddy Creek. The adventure is in finding them yourself!”

Dennis reminded the audience that in Colorado alone there are more than 40 Wilderness Areas and more than 50 Wilderness Study Areas. Plenty of blue lines to find and explore. He showed us his ultralight backpack, gear, and tenkara rod, and he told stories from the trail. I said to myself, “That’s what I want to do!” I connected with him after his presentation, and we learned that we lived 15 minutes away from each other. We have since made indelible memories together in the backcountry throughout Colorado. Dennis has been so generous with his knowledge and inspiration that I have endeavored to try to pass some of that on to others.

If you don’t have a sensei in your life, there are online communities eager to help you, and many of them organize formal gatherings and informal outings where you can meet people. Facebook has a plethora of groups, including, for example, one focused on headwaters, another focused on the Appalachians, and, of course, a Colorado tenkara group.

All you need to get started is a rod, a line and a fly. My favorite set-up for learning tenkara is a 12’ rod, a fly line about the length of the rod, and a light monofilament tippet 3’- 4’ long.



My sensei, about to meet a healthy cutthroat in the Sangre De Cristo Wilderness.

The only other thing you will need to catch fish are some flies. A traditional Japanese tenkara fly is called a *kebari*, which basically means “artificial fly.” Kebaris are remarkable in their simple design, and they are distinctive in their “reverse hackle,” in which the feather fibers around the head of the hook face forward, giving them lots of attractive motion in the water. [Here’s](#) a beautiful picture of a simple kebari tied by Brent Auger of

Dragontail Tenkara out of Idaho.

In Japan, most tenkara fishers use one favorite pattern of kebari. It's a good idea to start with a basic pattern -- black, browns and greys -- in about a size 12 or 14 hook. As you fish more, you will develop your own favorites. Any fly will do. I know tenkara fishers who fish about every kind of fly there is. Keep it simple and "Fish Your Own Fish," as we say.

You should be able to get set up in a high-quality way with a rod, line, and flies for under \$150. If that's too much, there is a lot of good used gear available online that will be even more affordable.

### **Finding Fish in the Wilderness**

What fish are you likely to find in our Wilderness and where did they come from? I've done a lot of reading on the latter subject, including one of my favorites: *"An Entirely Synthetic Fish: How Rainbow Trout Beguiled America and Overran the World,"* by Anders Halverson. The story of "Fish Culture" in this country is a fascinating one of species adaptation, survival, and human interaction.

But to get this right for Colorado, I called Jon Ewert, CPW's aquatic biologist who covers the east slope of the Eagles Nest Wilderness. "You have to understand," Ewert says, "the only trout native to Colorado is the cutthroat." And it just so happens that wilderness, Ewert explains, is a last and saving place for the vestige of the species.

As far back as the mid-1800s, the degradation of the cutthroat trout in the West began to be evident. Fortunately, early in the 20th century, the earliest conservationists working for the Colorado Department of Game and Fish realized what was happening and began propagating cutthroats from a little cabin on the spawning grounds of Trappers Lake, in what is now the Flat Tops Wilderness. Trappers Lake is sometimes called "The Cradle of the Wilderness," thanks in large part to wilderness champion Arthur Carhart, who was working there during the 1918 flu pandemic, as described in an [ESWA newsletter](#).

"Trappers held the most robust population of cutthroats left standing," says Ewert. At the same time, Fish Culture in the U.S.

was booming, driven particularly by Easterners who brought West trainloads of hatchery-raised Brook Trout by the milk-can-full. Brook Trout, native to the Eastern U.S., are attractive, resilient, and prolific fish. (They are actually a char, not a trout.) Brookies began to provide stiff competition to the more delicate cutthroat.

Other introduced species like the Brown Trout (of European origin) and the prodigious Rainbow Trout provided additional threats to the cutthroat, including the compromise of hybridization with its distant relative the Rainbow.

Long story short: the remote, protected headwaters, much of which are now protected by Wilderness designations, became a refuge for Colorado's only native trout species. "You could stock cutthroat in the mainstem of the Colorado River all day long where there are 4,000 adult fish per mile [Rainbows and Browns] and you would never see them," Ewert points out.

In the upper reaches of Wilderness, above natural barriers, you are likely to find cutthroat trout in our Wilderness lakes and streams. "In the Wilderness, the native fish are often protected by natural barriers. There are opportunities to take advantage of some of those barriers to create blocks for those invasive fishes in order to restore or expand populations of cutthroats," says Bakich.

Interestingly, because of their history of isolation, cutthroats have evolved into various subspecies by watershed. In the Colorado River basin, the native species is the Colorado River Cutthroat. The South Platte's native is the Greenback cutthroat. The Rio Grande cutthroat is specific to that river basin. The Arkansas River's original inhabitant, the Yellowfin cutthroat, is thought to be extinct. But Ewert reminded me that you never know! In recent years, Colorado biologists have discovered a subspecies endemic to the San Juan River headwaters. They are currently working to propagate it in the face of challenges such as the 416 Fire of 2018.

An [ESWA newsletter](#) article describes efforts to preserve cutthroats in the Eagle's Nest Wilderness using the latest eDNA techniques.

In addition to cutthroats in the Wilderness, you are likely to find

Brookies up high, sometimes co-existing with cutthroats, and Brown and Rainbow trout are common, particularly at lower elevations. Grayling and Golden Trout, two interesting and unique species, can also be found in some high mountain lakes in Colorado.



Hunting for Grayling in the Collegiats at 12,600'.

Many Wilderness fish are now part of wild, self-sustaining populations -- what Bakich and Ewert would call "conservation populations." Where these fish populations need help, CPW works hard in partnership with the Wilderness managers (usually the U.S. Forest Service in Colorado) to strategically

supplement waters with stocked fish. This is quite an endeavor at high altitudes -- either stocking by plane or by carrying in fry on pack animals.

### **Some thoughts on Fishing and Wilderness Stewardship**

If you are still with me, I feel I should address Wilderness stewardship in the context of fishing. I hope it goes without saying that all fishers anywhere in the state should have a current Colorado fishing license. These fees are extremely important to the preservation and management of natural resources. (And it's the law.)

I highly recommend fishers always use barbless hooks. They have no little snag-barb at the point of the hook. Barbless hooks are much easier to remove from the fish as well as from any clothing or human body parts they might encounter. In my experience, they also hook fish more cleanly because they are sharper. Many Western flies are still tied on barbed hooks, so that is what you will commonly find in fly shops -- I don't know why. When I buy flies with barbed hooks, I just mash down the barbs with forceps before I use them.

I also try to practice Leave No Trace fishing practices, trying not to leave line or hooks in the water, trees, or bushes. A nice thing about tenkara is that your line, when snagged, is usually within reach of retrieval even when it breaks off. Monofilament fishing

lines degrade faster than fluorocarbon ones (and are cheaper), but they still take a *long* time to break down in the wild.

Bakich reminded me that bringing clean equipment into the Wilderness is important. “Threat of invasions includes what you can bring in on your equipment,” she said. “Always bring clean equipment! Chytrid fungus, for example, is a big one we are dealing with that is a killer of the endangered [boreal toad](#). You can pick up the fungus about anywhere that is wet and transport it into the Wilderness.”

Finally, there are lots of perspectives on the catch and release of fish. Personally, I respect all of them as long as they are within applicable “bag limits” and other laws of the area. I always practice careful catch and release practices, keeping the fish as wet as possible throughout the process. Some people I know only fish for food in the backcountry. Occasionally, I will keep a fish for dinner in the backcountry (particularly Brookies!), but I never carry them out. The current Leave No Trace recommendation is to pack out fish entrails, bury them, or dispose of them in very deep or moving water. I prefer to pack out or bury entrails. Leave. No. Trace.

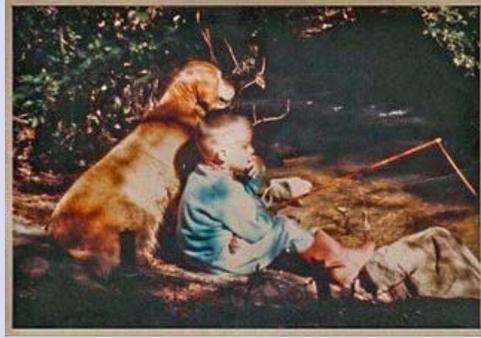
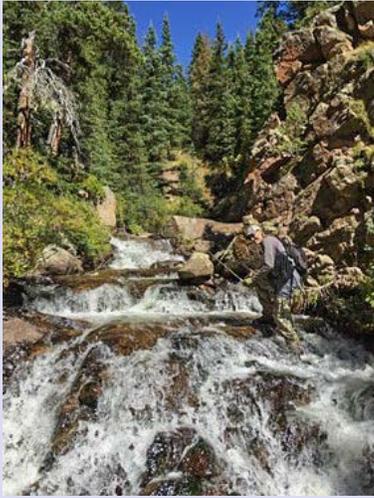
### **Go Explore!**

Grab a rod and a backpack, and go follow a Wilderness blue line! Bakich, a fellow tenkara adventurer, says, “Some of the highest concentrations of lakes that have fish are in the Wilderness. You can easily connect some spectacular trips to lakes, even in different drainages.”

I leave you with this:

*“Most anglers like to believe that in casting their line and watching it for a strike, they are experiencing a primal moment, a moment of expectation, a moment of life and death, a moment that is central to their being.”*

-- Anders Halverson in *An Entirely Synthetic Fish*



### **ABOUT STEVE ELDER:**

**Steve** is a board member of ESWA. He lives in Colorado Springs with his wife, Jane. Contact him at [steve.elder8@gmail.com](mailto:steve.elder8@gmail.com) or follow him outdoors on Instagram [@steve\\_elder8](https://www.instagram.com/steve_elder8).

Follow us



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**Join us! Next Planning Meeting**

**Thursday, June 10** at 5:30 PM, probably via [Zoom](#). Questions? Send us an [email](#).

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Please [register](#) your City Market Value Card, linking it to ESWA, which will send rebates to us without compromising your earned fuel points. Please note that each card holder may only sign up for one tax exempt organization. **THANKS!**

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... and help ESWA "Keep Wilderness Wild!"

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A huge thanks to [ARAPAHOE BASIN SKI AREA](#). For more than two decades, A-Basin staff have donated generously to their **Employee Environmental Fund**, of which ESWA has been a steady beneficiary. Last year, more than 150



employees donated, led by A-Basin Director **Alan Henceroth**. Our enduring THANKS to them.

And our sincere thanks to these foundations for their generous financial support of ESWA's work:

- **The National Forest Foundation** for their continuing support of our Noxious Weed Program, awarding ESWA funds to help ESWA hire contractors in coordination with the USFS to treat noxious weed outbreaks in our Wilderness Area.
- The **Schuette Family** and **The Summit Foundation** for donations and grants that helped turn the Beau Schutte boardwalk into a reality.
- **The National Wilderness Steward Foundation** for their continuing support of our trail projects and other on-the-ground efforts.

AND LAST BUT NOT LEAST, thanks to the 148 incredible individuals who became members and donated almost \$15,000 in 2020, including on Colorado Gives Day! Check out other [monthly eNewsletters](#)



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# More Wilderness Adventures with Tenkara

Ten more pics from Wilderness around Colorado

1. A stealthy approach in the Collegiates.



2. I found three species of trout in this little stream in Holy Cross Wilderness.



3. A large cutthroat on the line in the Holy Cross Wilderness. An FAQ about tenkara is, "But does it work for lakes?" YES! The question is usually about reach (i.e., can you reach the fish given that you don't have a long line on a reel?), and fish size (i.e., can you land larger fish on tenkara?). With proper technique, neither of those things is usually an issue, and I've found that the light weight and simplicity of tenkara gear more than outweigh the occasional limitations of not having a reel when you are carrying it into high alpine lakes.



4. The author sneaking up on a large school of cutthroat in the shadow of the Holy Cross.



5. In one morning, this young man and his brother learned to catch fish on tenkara near Mount Evans Wilderness. Simplicity!



6. My second daughter, Kit, in a Colorado Wilderness Study Area, fishing for the first time ever. She fooled 'em!



7. Three "cruising" cutthroats in a lake in the Hunter-Fryingpan Wilderness. Stealth!



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8. When you hop over this little trickle in Eagles Nest Wilderness, you are likely passing over at least one colorful cutthroat trout. While I was exploring here for a few minutes, a family stopped to see what I was doing and were amazed at the number of fish they could find.



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9. You meet some impressive friends fishing in the Wilderness!



10. A Brown Trout in lower La Garita Wilderness.

