

# **Interior Alaska Fly-fishing**

## **A Tanana River Drainage Primer**

A transcript of the presentation at:

### **The Fairbanks Outdoor Show**

*Fairbanks, Alaska*

April 21-22, 2001

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REPRINTED 2004 AS UAF FLY-FISHING BULLETIN #1

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# Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank the Alaska Outdoor Council for giving me the opportunity to make this presentation at the Fairbanks Outdoor Show. Specifically to Jesse Vander Zander.

Second, I would like to thank the Alaska Department of Fish & Game's Sport Fish Division

Third, I would like to thank Dr. Jay Jones, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Department of Biology and Wildlife for his insights on Interior Alaska entomology.

## Preface

Since the release of Robert Redford's film *A River Runs Through It*, there has been an explosion in fly-fishing's popularity in the United States. Novice anglers must sort through a plethora of information regarding tackle and techniques. Unfortunately, manufacturers and retailers have clouded the issue by offering so many choices in tackle that many beginners end up buying either the wrong equipment for the fly-fishing they will be doing, too many gadgets which are essentially useless or equipment which is overpriced for the performance it delivers.

So, what is going to be discussed in this short presentation which will be the basic information necessary for beginning and more experienced fly-fishers to pursue grayling and stocked salmonids in the Tanana River Drainage, Alaska? Topics include selected Interior Alaska sport-fish, fly-fishing waters of the Tanana Drainage; tackle nomenclature, selection and recommendations; knots; fly casting myths and facts; salmonid supper; fly selection; etiquette; acquiring fly-fishing; and, finally a summary of the author's recommendations.

As important as what items will be covered, is mentioning what won't. This presentation does not cover Interior anadromous salmon, pike or sheefish fly-fishing. Additionally, the author doesn't address equipment which would be the same as that used in other types of Interior angling such as boat, float tubes, waders, rain gear, etc. Water interpretation, although essential to fly-fishing, can not be covered within the time constraints of this presentation.

The two areas where manufacturers, publishers, writers and retailers confuse beginner fly-fishers, I believe, are fly rods and flies. No matter what a rod builder or professional caster may claim a beginner does not need a \$300 fly rod to catch grayling. It is simply a waste of money. On the other end of the spectrum; however, a beginner should be prepared to pay a few bucks for a quality rod that will permit smooth casting. Simply put, cheap rods don't cast well, and this will either frustrate the novice to the point of quitting or lead to the development of poor casting habits.

Today, the novice angler can start fly-fishing with good-quality tackle for an investment of about \$200, not counting flies. A quality fly rod which will cast and land all Interior Alaska grayling and stocked salmonids can be purchased for about \$90. A good fly line costs about \$35, a reel, \$30. The rest of the beginner's \$45 will be invested in leaders and accessories. If cared for properly this investment of equipment will last for years. For example, there are fly rods, lines and reels I have used since 1982. After the initial investment, annual equipment expenditures shouldn't exceed \$50 not including flies.

The second area where anglers can get confused is in fly selection. Every, tackle shop owner, outdoor writer, guide or speaker has their “secret” fly guaranteed to catch fish when nothing else works. In my opinion, guided by over 25 of experience, Interior Alaska fly-fishers instead of concentrating on acquiring certain fly patterns, should instead assemble a cross-section of flies which cover most fly-fishing situations. There are 18 pattern types. Anglers would be wise to have between one and three patterns from each type. These types and some examples are outlined below in the section, [A General Discussion of Fly Selection](#).

# **Introduction**

## ***About Arctic Grayling and other Salmonoids***

For the purpose of this paper, *Salmonoids* refers to the following species stocked by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Sport Fish Division: arctic char, lake trout, rainbow trout coho (silver) salmon and king salmon. Arctic grayling are treated separately because they are generally the only salmonoids found in Interior Alaska rivers and streams

### **Arctic Grayling**

Grayling are often found at the junctions of small streams and larger rivers. They are visual hunters; consequently, unlike many fish species, which have activity thresholds in the early morning and again at dusk, grayling are most active in the middle of the day. They often swim in the stream, just below the surface, rising to take food in the surface film.

Arctic grayling are spring spawners, reproducing just after winter ice leaves. (Broughton 147).

The grayling is the “sunshine and dry fly’ fish; the warmer and the sunnier, the better the fishing, especially in fast, broken rivers. (Broughton, 161).

### **Arctic Char**

The arctic char is found throughout cold waters of the Northern Hemisphere. They are similar to trout in appearance. The flanks of the fish are often bright orange or red.

The species feeds on smaller fish, scuds and to a lesser extent, insects.

### **Lake Trout**

Lake trout is the largest member of the freshwater trout family in North America. In reality a lake trout is a char found in deep, cold lakes although they are sometimes found in streams with feed these Interior lakes.

## ***Tanana River Drainage Waters***

The Tanana River Drainage extends from Tanana and Manley Hot Springs on the western boundary to west, northeast to Livengood, then southeast to the Canadian border. Drainage's southeastern point is the headwaters of the Tanana River, and then it runs northwest to the Denali Highway and includes Cantwell and Lake Minchumina.

### **Clearwater Rivers and Streams**

There are numerous freestone streams and rivers, which offer fine arctic grayling fly-fishing opportunities. These include the Chatanika, Chena, Salcha, Richardson Clearwater, Goodpaster Tok and Delta Clearwater Rivers; Piledriver and Badger Sloughs; and Five-mile Clearwater Creek. Good to excellent grayling fishing in these waters can be had between mid-May until the first frost. Some waters offer good fishing as early as this time of year. Many waters offer good fishing in September or October if sportsmen would tear themselves away from moose or grouse hunting.

Rainbow trout are stocked in the Piledriver Slough. The Tok River and its tributaries have fishable populations of Arctic Char.

### **Seasonal Waters**

There are some Interior waters that provide a very narrow of opportunity for fly-fishing. One type of water is glacial-fed streams and rivers. The Tanana River upstream from the Richardson Highway Bridge near Big Delta is one such place. Usually this river can be fished for arctic grayling in March and April when the river is relatively clear prior to the annual glacial runoff. After the glacial runoff starts, the grayling seek clearer water. The water can be fished again nearer to winter when the glacial runoff ceases.

### **Stocked Lakes**

The Alaska Department of Fish & Game, Division of Sport Fish has maintained a lake stocking program in Interior Alaska since statehood. There are over 90 lakes stocked by ADF&G. These lake range in size from the Weigh Station Pits on the Richardson Highway at two acres to Harding Lake near Salcha which is 2,500 acres. The majority of these lakes are located along or near the Richardson, Steese and Alaska Highways within 120 miles of Fairbanks. Species stocked within a lake varies, and include arctic char, arctic grayling, lake trout, rainbow trout, coho (silver) salmon and king salmon. In most years, the ice begins to go out on these lakes on May 1<sup>st</sup>.

For more information regarding the ADF&G Interior lake stocking program, ask for *Information Leaflet No. 98-01 Fishing Guide to Stocked Lakes in the Tanana Valley* available at the ADF&G Building at 1300 College Road in Fairbanks.

# **Fly-fishing Simplified**

Flyfishing is not that much different from other types of fishing. Fly-fishers are casting a hook that generally has bits of feather, fur, foam, yarn, or other similar material attached using thread, commonly referred to as a fly. Traditionally, a fly was meant to represent some type of insect that fish feed upon. It should be noted here that a fly doesn't just have to imitate an insect. Some anglers, who snootily consider themselves 'purists' believe that the only real fly-fishing is when a dry fly is used. In fact, flies can represent the different stages of an aquatic or other insect; a minnow, a smolt, scud, or other food that fish feed on. In fact, fly patterns have been designed for reasons other than strict resemblance to a real-life form of salmonid food. Edward Hewitt, as inventive angler as any who had ever lived, first tied the Bivisible to meet a need that is at some time felt by every fly man. "So I can see it," he said (Brooks, 241).

## ***The Line, Rod, Reel Triangle***

Anglers talk of a well-balanced outfit. This merely means a sensible match-up of line, rod and reel for easy casting and fishing. Fly-fishing demands this balance. A mismatched outfit will doom the novice and create the greatest obstacle to mastering a surprisingly easy sport

### **Step #1 — Develop a fishing plan**

This step is critical. Tackle selection should be based on the type of fishing. The type of fishing determines the fly patterns. Why bring up fly patterns in this section? Because the flies are an integral part of the line, rod, reel triangle. The follow are a few general guidelines for selecting fly fishing tackle

***Fly size and type governs the choice of line weight, which in turn determines rod weight.*** Both of these components are discussed in detail later in this paper. For now by way of a simple example: to cast big lake trout flies (sizes 8 or larger) a heavier line, like an 8-weight is needed. Once a line weight is selected, a corresponding rod weight is selected by default. In this simple example, an 8-weight because the line weight and rod weight must match.

It is important to keep these other caveats in mind. These are discussed later:

- 1) Fly size, line weight, and fishing situations determine leader strength;
- 2) Species and fishing situations determine amount of backing which limits reel size;
- 3) and, fish type and situations determine the choice of floating, sinking or sinking-tip line.

### **Step #2 — Choosing a Fly Line and Backing**

Most anglers are familiar with monofilament, the fishing line that you find on spinning or bait casting reels. This line is made to withstand a certain amount of force before breaking, and is rated in 'pound test', or the amount of pounds that the line can hold without breaking. Fly line is different, it is rated by weight. The most popular line weights are 5 to 8 weight. If a fly line is a 5 weight, that means that the first 30 feet of line weighs 5 grains. The first 30 feet of a 2-weight line will weigh 2 grains; the first 30 feet of a 12-weight line (which is anadromous salmon size line), will weigh 12 grains. In fly-fishing you cast the line not the lure. Fly lines

come in sizes ranging from 1 to 15 with the smaller numbered lines being very thin (lighter) and the larger numbered lines thick (heavier). The heavier the line the bigger the fly it will cast. Therefore, fly rods are made to match a particular line weight.

After the line size is selected, next you will decide which taper is best for the fishing conditions. Because of the propensity to satisfy the fly fisherman's every desire, there is an almost infinite selection of taper. Fly lines basically come in level, double, weight forward, and shooting tapers. These are described as follows. Level lines have very limited application in fly-fishing. Double taper lines typically have a tapering section 6 to 10 feet long on each end of the line with a level section (the belly) in between them. The long taper keeps the fly farther away from the heavier belly section and thus allows a delicate presentation. They are also the easiest to roll cast. This would be the taper of choice for restrictive conditions requiring rolls casts and delicate presentations. A double tapered line can also be the most economical line because it has two usable ends. It is recommended that they be reversed on the reel several times a season to prevent the coiled end from taking a set and becoming unusable. The disadvantages to double tapered lines are that they are more difficult to cast long distances and do not cast well against the wind. This taper would not be a choice for open water or wind-resistant flies. Weight forward lines are by far the most popular lines and with good reason. The weight of a fly line is measured in the first 30 feet. Unlike the double tapers that gradually distribute this weight, the weight forward concentrate the weight more towards the end of the line. It then tapers down to a thin running line that allows easier long distance casts. The more forward the weight is placed, the more "shooting" power it has but at the expense of a delicate presentation. Getting long roll cast with a weight forward line is difficult. Once the running line gets past the tip-top of the rod, there is not enough energy in the thin running line to turn over the fat belly section.

Fly lines are either Floating or Sinking, which come in various densities. The more dense the line the faster its sink rate. This is important when fishing deeper waters. Fly lines also come in a combination float/sink lines known as sinking-tips. The body of the line floats whereas the tip sinks. An alternative is to buy a floating line then attach a section of sinking tip. These lines require more skill to cast.

### **Step #3— Selecting a Fly Rod**

A fly rod is rated differently than a spinning or bait casting rod. Whereas as a spinning rod will generally be rated for the weight of the lure it is casting (ie. 1/8 to 1/4oz.), a fly rod is rated by how the amount of a given line weight it can efficiently cast out. For example, a 5-wt. fly rod is designed to efficiently load 30 feet or more of 5-wt. line with an 8 to 15 foot leader attached, for a total of 45 feet. Now, with today's high modulus graphite and stiffer rods, a good caster should be able to easily cast even greater distances than that, but we are talking generalities here.

Construction: In the beginning fly rods were made of bamboo strips glued together in the shape of a hexagon. Production was labor intensive and quality variable upon the craftsman and materials available. The introduction of fiberglass quickly replaced bamboo. Production methods were more predictable, quality more uniform, and prices more affordable. Today though, only the very low-end rods embody full fiberglass construction. Space age technology has enabled us to produce stronger and lighter rods by introducing graphite to their construction. The quality of today's graphite fly rod is unparalleled. Manufacturers have been able to produce

just about any action imaginable. Prices range from \$80 to several hundred dollars.  
Specifications:

A five, six or seven weight is a good all around rod and the recommended choice for the beginner. It is capable of casting dry flies, wet flies as well as weighted nymphs.

## **Step #4 — Selecting a Fly Reel**

Reels are sold by the size of line and rod weight they are designed for balance. The rod, the line, and the reel all have to match. Any given model reel will state a weight range that it is rated for (e.g., 2/3, 4/, or 7). Unlike other types of fishing, we don't cast line off the fly reel and rarely, except for strong fish or regular fish on extremely light tackle, will you play it from the reel. For the most part, the reel is used only to store the fly line while not fishing. Line is "stripped out" from the reel and let to lie by your feet. Within several false casts it is taken up and becomes air borne. The line is then retrieved by holding it loosely against the handle of your rod with the fingers of the rod-hand while pulling the line back in through these fingers with your other hand. To play a fish, line is allowed to slip through the fingers of the rod hand while maintaining a mentally calibrated grip with the other hand. The amount of grip you apply with the control hand serves as a "manual drag". If you catch a particularly large or strong fish, you may end up releasing all the loose line where you are back "on the reel". Then you will use the reel and its internal drag to fight fish while reeling in the line.

### ***Leaders—The Often Overlooked Link***

Fly lines are quite thick and are not appropriate for tying a fly to. To solve this problem, a fly angler will tie what is called a 'leader' to the fly line. Although similar in some respects to monofilament, a leader generally tapers to a fine, thin diameter at the end where the fly is attached. This allows for very natural drifts and actions of the fly in imitating a real insect.

In no other area of fly-fishing is the leader more critical to success than trout fishing. When trout fishing, the leader is as important (or more) important than the fly selection. In much of trout fishing, the leader is designed not to manipulate the fly, but to allow the fly to drift naturally in the water current. This is an important factor to understand when pursuing grayling, char and trout. If the leader pulls the fly while it drifts, the fly will swim unnaturally, and most fish will ignore the offering. Instead a leader is needed with a special taper. Leader can be hand-tied; however, tackle manufacturers make tapered dry fly and nymph leaders that are really better than can be hand tied. There is a great advantage of using knotless leaders in areas with a great deal of underwater vegetation. Commercial knotless continuously tapered leaders do not snag on aquatic plant life as easily as their hand-tied counterparts (Kreh, 215)

Lengths- common lengths are 7 1/2, 9, and 12 feet and taper down to a few thousandths of an inch. A general guideline is to select a leader at least the length of the rod. If the water is clear and the fish spooky add length. If it is windy or you are having casting problems, shorten it. Tippet sizes are referred to by "X" designations ranging from 0X (largest) to 8X (smallest).

Factors in determining leaders and tippets. These are gross generalities:

- 1) **Fly size**—The smaller the fly, the longer the leader and finer the tippet
- 2) **Water clarity**—The clearer the water, the longer the leader and finer the tippet

- 3) **Water character – rough versus smooth**—The smoother the water, the longer the leader and finer the tippet
- 4) **Wind conditions**—The windier the conditions, the shorter the leader and thicker the tippet
- 5) **Light conditions**—The brighter the light, the longer the leader and finer the tippet. Near dawn and dusk, short leader leaders and more stout can be used.
- 6) **Fish behavior (aggressive, feeding, selective, etc.)** —The more selective the fish, the longer the leader and finer the tippet. Short leaders and stout tippets don't spook more aggressive fish.
- 7) **Fish characteristics (spooky, gullible, size, etc.)** —The spookier the fish, the longer the leader and finer the tippet. Short leaders and stout tippets don't spook more gullible fish. Bigger fish require thicker tippets just by their sheer size.

## ***Eight Elite Knots***

**Reel Knot** — Is used to attach the backing to the reel (Figure ?);

**Albright Knot** — Is used to attach the fly-line to the backing (Figure ?);

**Nail Knot** — Is used to attach the fly-line to an end loop (Figure ?);

**End Loop** — Is the link between the fly line and the leader (Figure ?);

**Interlocking Loops** — Is used to attach end loop to the leader, and is sometimes used to link leaders and tippets (Figure ?);

**Barrel or Blood Knot** — Is used to attach tippet to leaders, and to build knotted leaders (Figure ?);

**Surgeon's Knot** — Is used to attach tippet to leaders. It is most often used with knotless leaders

**Improved Clinch Knot** — Is used to attach the fly to the tippet (Figure ?);

## ***Accessories***

### ***Forceps***

These are very handy for extracting hooks. More importantly they are used to pick up flies from the fly box. Forceps are also handy for holding a fly steady while trying to put the tippet through the hook eye, and tying the clinch knot.

### ***Fly Boxes***

Select one that is compact and fits well into a pocket of your vest. The ones with coil clips ripple foam hold the fly upright and prevent crushing the feathers. However, a simple, divided, plastic box with a lid will suffice for fly storage.

### ***Hat and Sunglasses***

One with a broad bill all around its circumference provides the most protection. It prevents sunburn as well. It sheds off rain and most importantly, it protects from the hooks of misguided flies. A secondary consideration is a hat with a dark brim. This helps cut down sun and water glare, enabling the angler to better see fish.

### ***Leader Wallet***

Necessary to carry extra leaders and pre-made tippets.

### ***Spools of Tippet Material***

As you change flies the tippet section of your leader gets shorter. In fact every time a new fly is tied, one to two inches of tippet is used. Eventually it has to be replaced. Also if conditions require you use a smaller fly, you can add a smaller diameter tippet. Carrying two-pound though six-pound tippet is recommended is highly recommended

### ***Clippers***

Clippers are used to change flies, and clip monofilament line.

### ***Floatant***

Floatant makes flies float. There are three types: floatant used before the trip, floatant used during fishing, and floatant used after the fly is soaked.

### ***Split Shot***

Split shot is used to make the fly sink and travel underwater either at the same speed as the water, or to make the fly act like a swimming immature underwater aquatic insect (nymph).

### ***Hook Hone***

Hook hones are used to sharpen hooks. Fly hooks should be sharpened when they are first tied on, and after every fish that is caught.

### ***Fishing Vest or Tackle Bag***

The boon and bane of every fly fisherman. It's your tackle box on your back and the tendency is to carry with you everything under sun. After several hours your shoulders ache under the burden of all the weight. I weighed vest...9 lbs. 2oz! So I decided to remove all the unnecessary junk. Final weight...8lbs! Hey need that stuff! The most important feature to look for in a vest is the collar. Look for one distributes the weight to the shoulders and is padded to prevent chaffing. Vests are offered in two lengths - standard and the "shorty" which sets higher above the waistline to keep it out and above the water level. They all have pockets in number and configurations. Which manufacture to go with is a matter of personal choice.

## ***Fly Casting Myths & Facts***

Casting a fly rod requires no more coordination than swinging a golf club, baseball bat, or tennis racket. Watching many anglers struggle with casting only makes it appear that way. Fly-fishing is not difficult. Unfortunately, this myth seems to be the main reason why people are

reluctant to give it a try. With the appropriate equipment and proper instructions, novices should be able to cast the line reasonably well within a few hours.

When spin fishing, a lure is cast attached to a very thin line with a spinning rod. The lure has weight and this loads the rod to propel it towards the target. The fishing line is just along for the ride. When fly-fishing, you cast a fly line attached to a leader and fly with a fly rod. The fly is almost weightless. The leader it is attached to, which is usually around 9 feet long, is very similar to standard spinning line. This is attached to a fly line, which is usually about 90 feet long. The fly line is made of a flexible plastic and is much larger in diameter than spinning line and much heavier. When fly casting, the fly line provides the weight to load the rod and propel itself towards the target, with the leader and fly just along for the ride. It is very important to understand that you are casting the line, not the fly. The line and the rod have to be matched to each other in order to work properly. This point was highlighted earlier. The whole purpose of all of this, besides the grace and beauty of it, is to cast almost weightless flies and present them in the most delicate manner. Because it is not the same as casting a more heavily weighted lure with a spinning rod, it often takes several 'false' casts to load the rod with the desired length of line which will allow the angler to drop the fly where desired. In order to do this, sometimes it is necessary to cast the line a few times in the air, back and forth with the fly remaining in the air. This is what is termed 'false casting' and basically what is happening is that the rod is loading up with the weight of the fly line, and more line can then be fed out to increase the length of line that is in the air, until the desired length has been reached and the angler can then set the fly down onto the water at the distance desired.

All this being said, casting is often overrated. All casting results if putting the fly in position to be taken by the fish.

## ***Grayling & Salmonid Supper***

In most water, the important kinds of salmonid supper are aquatic insects, terrestrial insects, baitfish and invertebrates. Their relative importance varies from water to water and during the course of the season. The practical angler discovers, by observation, which kind of food the fish may be feeding on at a given time.

### **Aquatic Insects**

There are four types of aquatic insects found in most waters that are important food sources for Interior stocked salmonoids and arctic grayling. These are mayflies, caddisflies, stoneflies and midges.

#### ***Mayflies (Ephemeroptera)***

Mayflies are the best-known aquatic insects to fly-fishers. Many species may be present in a given water. Each species becomes significant at a particular time of year. The life cycle of the mayfly includes three stages: nymph, dun and spinner. The mayfly nymph commonly lives on the bottom of streams for about one season. These nymphs are available for fish as food when they are crawling around on the stream or lake bottom; however, when they swim up from the bottom to hatch into a dun form, they are the most vulnerable. This is commonly called "the hatch" (Woods, 68).

During the hatch, the nymph swims to the surface, breaks through the surface film, splits its exoskeleton, and emerges as a winged dun. The dun sits on the water surface until its wings dry and harden enough to take flight. The dun is very vulnerable to rising fish at this time. After mating over the water, the dun dies and its body falls to the water. This is called a spinner, and it is also an important fish food.

### ***Caddisflies (Trichoptera)***

In Interior Alaska, caddisflies are more important than mayflies as they are hardier. Unlike mayflies, caddisflies have no nymph form, they are larvae and pupae in their immature form. After the larva pupates, it rises to the surface. During this rise, many are taken for fish. Unlike the mayfly, the caddis pops out of the surface film quickly, skitters on the surface and flies away.

Caddisflies mate and lay their eggs over the water subjecting the flies to hungry fish. Fish often feed on these free-drifting flies in streams.

### ***Stoneflies (Plecoptera)***

Stoneflies are an important fish food throughout western North America. The life cycle of the stonefly is similar to the mayfly. Fish often feed on stonefly nymphs which are trying to migrate to shore to hatch and mate. However, unlike mayflies, stoneflies are terrible flyers. That is why the hatch is on shore. After mating, stoneflies hover over the water to lay their eggs, then they die. Just like caddisflies, fish like to prey on egg-laying stoneflies.

### ***Midges (Diptera)***

Midges are probably more important than most anglers realize, especially in Alaska because the order *Diptera* includes mosquitoes. Midges also include many of the smaller insects. This is probably why most anglers don't like to fish them; however, there are some places in Interior Alaska such as Piledriver Slough where midges are a significant fish food.

### ***Terrestrial Insects & Other Aquatic Insects***

Fish are opportunistic. They'll feed on any insect that falls into the water such as ants, beetles, grasshoppers, bees, and hornets. Anglers can do quite well by fishing terrestrial imitations underneath over-hanging trees.

Damselfly and dragonfly nymphs are predacious and particularly important. These are rather large insects, and favor aquatic vegetation where they hide and hunt prey.

### **Baitfish & Invertebrates**

A portion of a fish's diet consists of baitfish and invertebrates. Baitfish imitations include salmon smolt, minnows, sculpins and darters. Scuds are often found in weed beds in lakes and sloughs. Fish will actively dislodge them from the bottom and chase them down in the current. Salmon and other fish eggs are important food for arctic grayling in Interior streams and rivers.

## ***A General Discussion of Fly Selection***

. There have been thousands of fly patterns developed since Dame Juliana Berners' original 12 flies outlined in *A Treatise on Fysshinge with an Angle* in 1496. There are thousands

of patterns of flies available, some designed to catch fishermen rather than fish! Each area will have its own favorites although there are, of course, many flies that are effective anywhere in the world that salmonoids are pursued.

## **Fly Parts**

That being said, most flies have a head, wings hackle, wings, body and tail (Figure ???) all wrapped about a hook. A note regarding hooks: barbless hooks are more effective as they penetrate further into fish's mouth.

## **Shade**

The color of the fly pattern is important. It's often vital to use a dry fly imitation close in color to the prevailing hatching insects. For Interior Alaska, the flies do not have to match color exactly, but they have to be close. By way of example, on the Delta Clearwater a tan-colored caddis may be hatching on a July afternoon. The angler using a tan, cream, yellow or even white caddis will probably do well. However, those fly-fishers using a black or olive may not.

## **Shape and Size**

This may be the two most important factors in selecting a fly. When trout or grayling are feeding on insects, it's important to know if they're aquatic insects or terrestrials. While all fish are opportunistic, when a heavy hatch occurs trout will often key on a specific insect to the disregard of all others. This means you must duplicate, to some extent, the shape of the insect. If trout are feeding on size 20 hatching mosquitoes, most of the time a well-presented mosquito of the same size is best. Day in and day out the best procedure is to offer a fly roughly the shape and size of the hatching insects or predominate bait (Kreh, 66).

For stream-run Interior arctic grayling, one would think that the most effective fly would be a small black and white one, size 16, 18 and 20, but a medium to medium-big fly is the most successful. In waters 18 to 36 inches deep, the grayling seem to like to rise to the surface as often as possible (Broughton, 161-2).

## **Weight**

The sink rate of an underwater fly is critical to fishing success, yet it is often disregarded. If the fly is at the wrong depth in the water column, the proper fly selection and the perfect cast will be in vain. It's important to remember that fish don't see well below their level (Figure ???). Moreover, fish that are not bottom feeders will rarely descend in the water column to take a fly. They will rise to it, but almost never drop down to get it. This, of course, means that sink rate is critical. The fly should ride in the water column either at the cruise level of the fish or higher

## **Fly Selection**

Of course conversations between angler at streamside commonly start with, "what fly are you using".

*"It is my belief, as it will be of any angler who has considered the point, that there is no such thing as a 'grayling fly'. There are ones that will catch grayling, but these are precisely those which*

*will bring their cousins, the trout and char, to the fisherman's basket" (Broughton, 98).*

Interior arctic grayling and stocked salmonoids are not selective in the sense of "matching the hatch". Some anglers might even claim that these are some of the most naïve and gullible fish on the planet. This is not a well-reasoned view. Interior fish are selective in terms of whether or not they are taking wet or dry flies. Many anglers who frequent the upper Chena River have also noted that the grayling are becoming size and shape selective.

As mentioned above, there have been thousands of fly patterns developed since Dame Juliana Berners' original 12 flies outlined in *A Treatise on Fysshinge with an Angle* in 1496. Tanana Drainage fly-fishers instead of trying to find the "exactly right" pattern, should instead focus on building a versatile arsenal of flies which include the five basic fly categories: dry flies, wet flies, nymphs, baitfish imitations and other invertebrates. There are 18 different pattern types within these five categories. Anglers would benefit by selecting one or two patterns from each pattern type.

## **Surface Aquatic Insect Imitations – Dry Flies**

The best known and classic form of fly-fishing is dry fly fishing. The fisherman uses an artificial fly (made from thread, fur, feather, tinsel etc) tied to imitate a real fly, which he casts so that it will float on the water, pass over a feeding trout which will rise and take it. These flies were developed to imitate the stage of aquatic life when the winged insect emerges on the surface. The first mention of a fly specifically designed to float appeared in 1836, and by 1850 many British anglers were fishing dry flies regularly.

An Englishman, Frederick Halford, did the most to popularize dry fly fishing. Unfortunately, he encouraged the belief that dry fly fishing was the only proper method of fly angling. Halford and his followers believed that a gentleman would use only dry flies, he would cast his fly only to a visible, feeding fish, and only in an upstream direction. Halford's flies traveled to America at the request of a New York Angler named Theodore Gordon. Gordon modified these patterns for Eastern American waters and Gordon's "Catskill" style of fly is still in use today (Lee, 4).

There are three criteria which make a good dry fly for Interior Alaska fly-fishing:

- 1) Be very visible in rough water;
- 2) Can take repeated strikes from rising fish and still retain its shape

### ***The Standard Dry Fly***

The standard dry fly was designed to imitate mayflies. This is the most popular of all dry fly designs. There are thousands of patterns, but you can't go wrong with the Adams. The Adams, with its neutral color, buggy-looking barred wings, and mixed color, doesn't look much like anything in nature but can pass for numerous caddis flies, mayflies and midges. The traditional Adams is perhaps the most versatile dry fly ever conceived. The enormous popularity of this pattern over many decades stands as a tribute to the fly's originator. Len Halladay (Talleur (2), 185). The Adams should be carried in sizes 12 through 18 (Geirach, 22). For Interior grayling fishing, a better choice might be an Irresistible because of the spun-deer hair body that yields better floatation, durability. Another alternative would be to substitute hair-wing versions of Standard Dry Fly patterns.

The main difference between a standard and a hair-winged dry fly is the composition of the wing. Lee Wulff is credited with originating the hair wing around 1930, the idea having been to fashion a more rugged and conspicuous wing type that would hold up and be visible in heavy stream currents (Talleur (1), 34).

### ***Midges***

It is not unusual for stocked lake fish or grayling in sloughs to feed at the surface on very small Diptera during the summer. This is one of the few occasions when long leaders and very small dry flies are needed in Alaska. The mosquito is the most common midge pattern used in the Interior. They are even tied on hooks as large as size 10. In addition to the Mosquito, the Griffith's Gnat is another effective pattern.

### ***Parachutes***

Parachute was designed to imitate mayflies, but unlike the standard dry fly the hook rides under the water surface. This unique design features a hackle that is wrapped horizontally instead of vertically. Because the barbs lie horizontally, they are more easily supported by the water and are less likely to penetrate the surface film than standard dry flies. The silhouette is less cluttered as less hackle is required for floatation. Parachutes can also be used to imitate spent flies or spinners (Talleur (1), 41). A black fly is one of the oldest and best of all colors, especially in the smaller sizes. This recent variation of the black gnat represents many food particles in a grayling's stomach that are distinctly black in color such as beetles, gnats and ants. Parachutes are be tied in many color schemes, sizes 12-18.

### ***Down-Winged Dry Flies***

A down-winged dry fly is also a must. The down wings imitate caddis and stone flies. The most versatile pattern is the Elk Hair Caddis. Pennsylvanian Al Troth devised this fly after migrating to Dillion, Montana. This fly is sold under various names and there are many variations, such as the Stimulator, but the basic fly has a dubbed body a palmered or collared hackle, and a single down wing of antelope, deer or elk hair. Pale yellow to tan is the best body color. The best sizes are 12 to 18 (Gierach, 22).

### ***The Humpy***

The Humpy is probably the best-known dry fly pattern in the west. Credit is given to California Jack Horner for the basic Humpy style and many variations that have come along. Its name originated in the Jackson Hole area of Wyoming. The Humpy is designed to float in big rough water where the Traditional upright-winged dry fly would be pulled under after a few feet of drift. It enables the angler to reach spots that are impossible to reach with standard flies (Surette, 78). The best sizes are 10 to 16.

### ***Terrestrials***

These flies represent land-based insects that find their way into the water. Patterns representing these unfortunate victims include:

Perhaps the main appeal of dry fly fishing is that everything can be seen. The angler casts to a rising fish, he can see his fly on the surface and he will see the trout rise and take his fly. But - and this is a big but - the majority of trout feed underwater. This leads us on to wet flies, nymphs, baitfish and invertebrate imitations.

## **Subsurface Aquatic Insect Imitations**

There are two classes of flies in this categories: wet flies and nymphs. All of these flies are fished either below the surface or in the water surface film.

### ***Wet Flies***

Early fly-fishing was exclusively wet fly fishing, and it was with the wet fly that the first attempts were made to represent the stream organism on which fish feed. The flies described in Breners' and Cotton's writings resemble a number of wet flies still in use, and the general style of wet fly construction has not changed in over 500 years. The typical wet fly (Figure ???) has a tail of soft feather fibers, a body of fur with perhaps a contrasting ribbing, a wing of more feather

fibers, and a “hackle” or rooster neck feather, wound on edge and slated toward the tail of the fly. Many theories account for the effectiveness of wet flies, Fish may mistake them for immature stream insects, drowned land insects, or even small baitfish. Whatever the reason, wet flies still work (Lee, 3).

### **Traditional Winged Wet Flies**

The essential element of the winged wet fly is the wing itself. In a properly tied fly, the wing is what catches the eye. When the fly swims in the water, the wing is what catches the fish’s eye; it is a key characteristic. The wet fly owes its attraction to the great numbers of aquatic and terrestrial insects, living and drowned, that find their way into graylings’ stomach. The traditional wet is most often tied with a tinsel, yarn or tightly wound fur body (Hughes (2), 38). For most Interior fly-fishing, traditional wet flies should be carried in sizes 12-14.

The quintessential winged wet fly is the coachman. Tom Bosworth, the Coachman of George IV, William IV and Queen Victoria for English Royal Family was the originator of this fly in the 1830’s. Variations of this basic pattern include the Fan Wing Coachman, the Royal Coachman and, the most important pattern for grayling anglers, the Lead Wing Coachman.

Some traditional winged wet flies are not meant to look like food but rather to attract by color or flash. They are called “attractor” or “flash” flies. The grayling, seeing them moving or floating through the water get aggressive and hits them because he wants them out of the pool or simply wants to mouth this strange-looking object to find out what it is. Even though the attractor is not tied to look like a natural, there is enough of the color, shape and size to cause the grayling to mistake it for one or another phase of a natural or a terrestrial fly. Such bright flies often pay off in the heavy runoff of spring, when waters are clear, although high (Brooks, 160). The best known of these is the Professor.

### **Soft-Hackle Flies**

Another excellent subsurface pattern is the classic soft-hackle wet fly. This is an old English pattern and like the Hare’s Ear is a nondescript fly with lots of action. The standard soft-hackle has a floss body (olives and yellows are the most useful colors) and a spare, soft collar hackle (Gierach, 23). The essential element of the soft-hackled fly is its hackle. The body is subsidiary. Soft hackles have slender silk, floss or herl bodies. Soft hackles lack wings, though they sometimes have slight turns of fur propped up right behind the wings of the hackle. This fur thorax causes the hackle fibers from collapsing against the hook, where they would lose their lifelike qualities. Properly slight, the body serves as an undercolor to a hackle which thrives in the currents, opening and closing over the body (Hughes (2), 39). An angler would be wise to carry a Partridge and Yellow, Partridge and Green or a Partridge and Orange in sizes 12 to 16

### **Flymphs (Wingless Wet Flies)**

The flymph has a loosely dubbed fur body whose fibers quiver in the current and causes the fly to look alive. The fibrous fur body entrains bubbles of air when the fly is popped beneath the surface. The air gives the fly a sheen nearly impossible to attain any other way. Because of this sheen, flymphs do a remarkable job of imitating caddis pupae approaching the surface for emergence, and also caddis adults diving down to the bottom to lay its eggs. The hackle is important and is far from lifeless, but it should not dominate the body of the fly. The hackle and body colors should be in harmony (Hughes (2), 75). An angler would be wise to stock up on tan, brown, cream, gray and light green flymphs in sizes 12 to 16.

## *Nymphs*

Nymphs are the underwater forms of many of the flies that trout eat. The eggs laid by flies in the river or lake hatch and the result is a nymph that makes its way to the surface where it hatches into a fly. Nymph fishing uses imitations of the different immature aquatic insects that are fished under the water's surface. To many fishermen, nymph fishing is much more challenging than dry fly fishing, primarily because the action takes place below the surface and you can see much less of what is happening. Most nymphs have a tail of soft feather fibers, a fur body to represent the abdomen of the insect, an enlarged forward portion to suggest the "thorax" of the natural nymph, and a collar of soft hackle to suggest legs.

G.E.M. Skues, a British angler, pioneered nymph fishing in 1910. Skues caught the wrath of Halford and others who thought submerged fly fishing "ungentlemanly".

Nymphs fishing success does not correlate to the "big lure equals big fish" axiom. The average immature aquatic insect is much smaller than most people perceive. Most successful nymph fishermen carry row after row of size 14 and 16 nymphs in their fly boxes. These nymphs are either slightly weighted or bead head-style nymphs. The four most common colors among natural nymphs, larvae and crustaceans found in streams are gray, green, tan and brown.

### **Generic Fuzzy (Searching) Nymphs**

The focus of the generic fuzzy nymph is its body. Generic nymphs will serve you well at times when fish are feeding subsurface but no hatch is happening. The bodies are dubbed with fur in these four common colors.

One most versatile nymph patterns is the Gold Ribbed Hare's Ear. This English pattern has gone through many changes in its long and illustrious history. The key to the success of the fly is in its dubbing that includes soft under-fur and bristly guard hairs of the European hare's mask. This versatile pattern is dressed in colors from light tan to dark brown. The rough dubbing pulsates at the slightest twitch. Although it doesn't look like much in the hand, it is very lifelike in the water. Hare's Ears are deadly for arctic grayling in sizes 12 to 16 (Gierach, 21).

### **Imitative Nymphs**

These nymphs are designed to be more of an exact imitation. Unlike searching nymphs, imitative nymphs generally are not dubbed. The effective colors and sizes are the same as the generic fuzzy nymphs. The Pheasant Tail is effective in the Tanana River Drainage.

### **Floating Nymphs**

These are flies look like a nymph, but either floats on the surface or in the water film. In the Lower 48, these are often called emergers. They are designed to imitate nymphs which have swam from the bottom and are just about to take flight. Most floating nymphs are gray, green, tan or brown. However, the Salcha Pink, which doesn't imitate any insect, is one of the most effective floating nymphs locally.

### ***Baitfish Imitations***

Strictly speaking, bucktails, feather streamers, muddlers and wooly buggers are not flies but lures. They are designed to imitate small fish rather than stream insects. Nevertheless they are fished with fly rods. Some streamers are just elongated versions of famous wet flies. In other cases a bucktail may be designed to represent a particular baitfish. Most fly anglers use

these imitations because they are good flies for beginner to use, they are effective in high water, on average they take bigger fish

### **Bucktails & Streamers**

The Mickey Finn is probably the bucktail that all anglers know with its flash of red and yellow spiced with the glitter of tinsel. This fly is originally from Canada and was made popular by John Alden Knight, of Solunar Tables fame in the 1930's. A very durable fly that will take just about anything that swims. It is certainly as versatile as any fly ever tied on a hook (Surette, 29).

The Grey Ghost is one of the most popular streamers nationwide. Mrs. Carrie Stevens of Upper Dan Maine first tied it. First fished in 1924, it took a brook trout of seven near Rangeley, Maine which took second place in the *Field & Stream* contest (Surette, 36). Herb Welsh of Oquossoc, Maine first tied a similar fly, the Black Ghost, in 1927. This fly originally tied with four white saddle hackles for the wing. The modern version substitutes white marabou feathers for the saddle hackles. All three flies are most effective in sizes 10 and 12. They can also be tied as a marabou streamer or a married wet fly

### **Muddler**

Professional fly tier, Don Gapen of Anoka, Minnesota, originated this pattern for the Nipigon River in Ontario, Canada to copy a fresh water sculpin. This has been the most popular since the end of the Second World War. This fly is extremely versatile, fished mostly on the bottom, but can be successfully used on the top. It imitates many kinds of fish food (Surette, 87). The muddler can also be dressed with marabou replacing the mottled turkey wings with the most effective color being yellow. The gold-bodied version is a favorite in clear water. The Muddler Minnow may just be the most effective all-around fly pattern ever developed (Talleur (2), 199).

### **Wooly Bugger**

If experienced anglers were limited to a singular underwater fly, almost all would choose the Wooly Bugger. A variation of the Wooly Worm—one with a marabou tail, it imitates no fish food but resembles lots of fish food. It can be unweighted, lightly weighted, tied with bead-heads, or others head. The basic dressing is a marabou tail and a chenille body, over which is palmered streamer hackle. There are all black models and all chartreuse ones. Other combinations are tan and brown, and yellow and black (Kreh, 232).

### ***Invertebrate Imitations***

#### **Egg Patterns**

Glo-Bugs were developed by the Bug Shop of Anderson, California, and are unquestionably among the most deadly patterns ever used for rainbow trout and grayling in the Interior. This pattern is usually fished on the dead drift as it bounces along the bottom. There are scores of color variations and styles that may be effective on a particular stream on a particular day. One down side of the Glo-Bug is a tendency for the fish to take the Egg rather deep in the mouth, throat or gills, which may result in higher mortality in released fish (Alaska Flyfishers, 32).

#### **Scud and Shrimp Patterns**

The Gammarus or scud, is very common to many Interior lakes is a major food item for rainbow and grayling. A good way to fish this imitation is to cast along weedbeds, allow the fly to sink, then retrieve slowly with occasional jerks. Colors may be varied to match the natural variations found in different lakes (Alaska Flyfishers, 45).

### **Worm Patterns**

The Wooly Worm is one of the hardest fished flies in Alaska, as it is in the rest of the world. It is good in lakes, streams and rivers for all fish. The color combinations are almost infinite. This fly, like the muddler, is fished both wet and dry.

# Conclusions

## *Some Thoughts on Etiquette*

“Good manners” means different in different situations. One thing it almost always means is to avoid doing anything to avoid doing anything to avoid another angler’s fishing water. To me this applies not only to the water an angler is casting into at the moment, but also the water he or she may be casting into in the next half-hour. If you don’t know if your presence will disturb someone, ask! If you are fishing and moving quickly and come upon another angler, please go around. Additionally, fly-fishers, particularly novices, need to be aware of their backcast and the possibility of hooking and unsuspecting by-stander.

One last word on combat fishing.

## *The Value of Local Knowledge & Journals*

Get educated! There have been more books written about fly-fishing than all the other types of fishing combined. A wealth of knowledge resides on the shelves in both the Noel Wein in Fairbanks and Rasmusson Library at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Search out other fly fishers. By way of clubs in Fairbanks, there is the Midnight Sun Fly Casters and Trout Unlimited. These folks are eager to help beginning fly-fishers get started.

Visit a Fly Shop. They are staffed with people who are knowledgeable in the sport. Department stores or a national sporting goods chains may not be able to provide services fly shops can. You are likely to be confronted with a clerk that doesn't know a ferrule from a locking ring. Another point about fly shops, these guys are small businessmen who may not always have the competitive price advantage the national chains have. However, they generally carry only first line quality products and that included in their price, as is their expertise and personal assistance. This is an invaluable service that can only be sustained if you support them with your business. In order words it’s rude to go into a fly shop, spend an hour talking to the people there, and then buy you gear at Cabela’s. If the fly shop doesn’t have what you want, most owners are more than happy to order it in for you. There are advantages to this such as: you won’t pay as much in shipping and you warranty lies with the local fly shop, not some huge catalog store in the Lower 48.

I have kept record of my outdoor experiences since 1975. Besides being a record to reflect upon during the dark Interior winters, these journals have provided me a wealth of valuable information. Generally, I keep track of where and when I fished, water and weather conditions, with whom I fished, and what tackle was used. This information has proved invaluable for planning fishing trips. However, the most important information gleaned from these records is which patterns caught fish.

For example I have caught 46 percent of all my fish on dry flies, 25 percent on wet flies, 11 percent on nymphs, 10 percent each on invertebrates, and 8 percent baitfish imitations. This is a deviation from most “experts” who claim they anglers catch 80 percent of their fish on nymphs. I have two plausible explanations. First, I primarily fish for arctic grayling in rivers and streams. As stated earlier, grayling like to hit dry flies. I’ve had a lot of success with dry flies, so I stick with them. The second reason is personal preference. Up to a few years ago, I

didn't feel confident in my nymph-fishing skills. Even now, nymphs are my least favorite fly type to fish. I'd much rather fish streamers.

Within the five fly categories, I have analyzed which patterns have worked for me. For example, the most effective dry fly I use is the Elk Hair Caddis. Forty-three percent of the fish I have caught on dry flies have been taken with some color variation of this basic pattern. In fact, **nearly 19 percent of all many hundreds of fish I have caught have been on an Elk Hair Caddis.** The first brook trout I caught as a boy growing up in Pennsylvania was on a #14 brown Elk Hair caddis on Tom's Run, a tributary of the Clarion River. In fact, that was one the first fish I caught on a dry fly. Up until that time I had only caught brown and rainbow trout on streamers like the Yellow Maribou and wet flies like the Royal Coachman.

As far as other dry fly patterns are concerned, to a lesser extent, I have had notable success with the Humpy (13 percent), the McMurry Ant, a terrestrial insect imitation (11 percent), and the Mosquito, a midge (nine percent).

Among wet flies, I have found success with the Hare's Ear (18 percent of all fish caught on wet flies), Professor (16 percent), Attractors (11 percent), the March Brown (10 percent) and Coachman Wets and Flymphs (nine percent each).

With nymphs I've had the most success with the Gold-Ribbed Hare's Ear (28 percent of all fish caught on nymphs), the Pink Salcha (24 percent) and the Prince Nymph (14 percent). The only instance where bead-heads have proven to be an important factor for me is with my invertebrate patterns. I have caught two fish on a bead-head salmon egg imitation for every one on a regular egg or Glo-Bug.

Many baitfish imitations have worked for me. These include the Woolly Bugger (22 percent fish caught on baitfish imitations), the Muddler (19 percent), the Yellow Marabou (13 percent), and the Mickey Finn (12 percent).

# **Appendix**

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## ***About the Author***

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