

# **Interior Fly-fishing**

## ***A Great Place to Start***

Notes from the presentation at:

### **The Fairbanks Outdoor Show**

*Fairbanks, Alaska*

April 19 - 20, 2002

Given by

**Shann Paul Jones**

*Registered Alaska Sport Fishing Guide; Lecturer of Recreation,*

*UAF Summer Sessions; and, Fly-fishing Instructor*

**UAF FLY-FISHING BULLETIN #2**

©2002

## ***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 VanderZander.

Second, I would like to thank the Alaska Department of Fish & Game's Sport Fish Division for their help with various aspects of sport fishing in Alaska.

Third, I would like to thank Dr. Jim Kruse, Entomological Curator at University of Alaska Museum for his insights on Interior Alaska entomology.

Copyright © by Shann Paul Jones

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. No part of this paper may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever with express written consent of the author.

## **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. Alaska is often presented as one of the crown jewels of fly-fishing. While most of the international focus is on the Kenai Peninsula and Bristol Bay, the Interior also offers some quality fly-fishing experiences

So, what is going to be discussed in this short presentation? It covers the basic information necessary for beginning and more experienced fly-fishers to pursue grayling and stocked fish in the Tanana River Drainage. Topics include fly-fishing tackle nomenclature, selection and recommendations; knots; salmonid supper; and, fly selection.

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. Fly casting and water interpretation, although essential to fly-fishing, can not be covered within the time constraints of this presentation.

## Introduction

The Tanana River Drainage extends from Tanana and Manley Hot Springs on the western boundary, northeast to Livengood, then southeast to the Canadian border. The 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. This is an area 45,155 square miles, which is just a little larger than the State of Ohio, and just a little smaller than the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

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; and Piledriver and Badger Sloughs. Good to excellent grayling fishing in these waters can be had between mid-May until the first frost. Some waters offer great fishing in the spring during spawning time, when other waters are too high or muddy to fish in the summer, and offer good fishing in the fall. Grayling average between 10 inches and a foot long. There are reports of larger ones, up to 20 inches, in the Upper Chena and Chatanika Rivers. In fact the fishing can be quite good within a 10-mile drive of most people who reside in the Fairbanks North Star Borough. Below are some of my field notes from the 2000 fishing season which attests to the angling quality of the local sloughs

April 23, 2000 Fishing report: Went to Badger Slough on Sunday morning at 9 a.m. (After it got above freezing) Badger is about six miles from my house. The stream is a lot like Hendricks Run near Bolivar, Pennsylvania was about 15-20 years ago, except there is a lot of grayling there during this time of year. The fish are concentrated in areas where the ice is opened up and they swim from ice edge to ice edge. I took Crayon (my Irish Setter) with me, he was on a leash which had a bungee on it. I waded about 15 yards from the bank in, knee-deep water into one of these places between two ice shelves. I had to cast directly down stream, landed three fish. I had left Crayon on the bank, so I went back to fetch him. I was going to carry him out to the ice shelf; but I only got four steps when I fell in. I was wearing chest waders so only my left arm got wet. I wrung out my wool glove and polar-fleece shirt and kept right on fishing. The only thing that got cold was my feet, after two hours standing in 34-degree water. We landed 9 grayling between 9 and 14 inches, lost 3. Most were caught on a salmon egg imitation, but some were caught on a bead head red worm.

Fishing report: Sunday, May 7, 2000 at Piledriver Slough (midway between North Pole and Eielson AFB). Cool morning about 35-45 degrees until noon, sunny. Crayon and I caught the grayling run at its very beginning. We landed 22 and lost 3 in three hours. The biggest was about 12-13 inches. Crayon saved me at least two fish as we returned them out of the swift current before they would get to a culvert. I was using a bead-head salmon egg imitation (size 12) on the dropper and an un-weighted hare's ear wet on the tippet. Floating line, double taper, 9 foot leader, three-pound tippet. I hooked a setter several times in the fur, but one was more severe. I was pulling in a modest-sized one on the egg, when Crayon snapped at it and missed. Well, I saw that he had the hare's ear in his mouth, but he didn't pull the line tight. So, I released the fish and then pried his jaws open to reveal that the fly was stuck lightly in the middle of his tongue; luckily in the middle. Since the hook wasn't buried down to the shank, I was able to

remove it with a minimum of effort and blood. After 30 minutes, I checked the dog and I could even see any mark.

Fishing report: Wednesday, May 10 night at Badger Slough (7 miles from home), slightly upstream from my last Badger Slough report. On Sunday I had noticed that the ice was gone from the shaded areas around Nordale Road (this is usually are read good spot, just slightly down stream from a major beaver dam. Plus, last year, the state did a research project where they used a suction dredge to improve grayling habitat) Apparently there was an ice dam between the two bridges that only broke this week. Well, the run was on! You could see the fish heading upstream, just like those videos of the spawning salmon in the small stream (except grayling don't spawn and die). Anyway, last night, my wonderful Irish Setter held the most perfect, conforming, long lasting, steady point. Unfortunately it was on an arctic grayling while we were fishing.

Yes, in my opinion fly-fishing is an effective training method for your pointing dog. It helps them maintain focus, and they learn to retrieve. I don't even bother with a net anymore. I just bring the dog. He lands the fish with a mouth so soft that the fish can be released (i.e., no teeth marks and the fish is still flipping rigorously). In fact, we had over 50 mallards in the stream with us, and my dog, Crayon, didn't pay them too much mind unless they got close. Then again I didn't have my shotgun, and he knows the difference between and fly rod and a shotgun. We fished for two hours (7-9 p.m.), using the same gear and flies as Sunday and we landed 21 arctic grayling and lost 8. They were hitting very lightly.

Fishing Report for Sunday, May 21, 2000: On Saturday night, the weather in Fairbanks and North Pole was looking downright ugly, but about 35 miles south, I could see breaks in the clouds. I pulled out my old Fenwick 9'6" graphite I built when I was in the Army and rigged it up for a lake fishing trip. By 6:30 Sunday morning, Crayon and I were headed to Lost Lake. We got there and started fishing by 8 a.m. We saw a Bald Eagle there. It was a beautiful partly sunny day, temps in the 40's, calm, no ice on the lake...and no fish either. By 10 a.m., we bagged it and headed for Piledriver Slough. By 10:50, we were fishing again, saw no fish, so we packed up and headed for Badger Slough. At the Nordale River Bridge, we ran into a kid who said the suckers and pike were in. We fished from noon until 1:30, the sky was breaking and I warmed up only bit. I tied on a bead head egg and a yellow maribou. The end result was 7 grayling landed on the egg and 3 long-nosed suckers landed on the yellow maribou (all foul hooked).

Fishing Report for Monday, May 22, 2000: I had the day off, but didn't start fishing until 11:30 back at the place on Badger Slough. I didn't take the dog. It was a drizzly day, about 46 degree. I was using the same rod and line, but I changed out the yellow maribou for a size 12 maribou Mickey Finn. Landed 12 grayling, 4 suckers (all in the mouth) and lost 5 fish in about and hour-and-a-half.

Sunday, May 28: Got up late (9:00 a.m.). First sunny morning in quite some time. Cool, about 45 degrees. Went to Badger Slough just downstream of Nordale River Bridge with Crayon, got there about 10 a.m., water cool & clear, a little higher than last week (these sloughs are spring-fed, so they don't fluctuate as much during periods of high rain). Fished with my 9'6" rod, double-taper line, 5 foot leader with dropper, a bead head salmon egg on lead and a March Brown nymph on the tippet. I worked mainly upstream. I tried out Joe Humphrys' nymphing

techniques I saw on one of his videos. Landed 5 grayling on the bead head, one on the march brown, one on a hare's ear and lost one grayling. Nothing big. Fished until about 1:00 p.m. There was another couple fishing there. I had to ask for their help one time when I hooked Crayon in the mouth with the march brown. Again he snapped at a fish caught on the lead fly.

Memorial Day, 2000: Got out of the house at about 8:30 and drove with Crayon the 20 miles to Piledriver Slough, where the State Fish and Game supposedly stocked 1,000 rainbows. The water was up and clear, but we didn't see any fish. We walked about a half a mile downstream and it got real wide and slow. However, I think I found another spot to jump shoot ducks. Crayon had a fine time chasing snipes up and down the shoreline and once he tried to chase after a group of duck, but he wound up going for a swim. I guess the water looked shallow to him, but it was over his head. From there we went to Bathing Beauty Pond, no bites. We left by 10:30 and headed for Badger Slough again, got there by 11:00 or so. The water was up a little more. I was using a March Brown nymph on lead and a hare's ear nymph on the tippet. In the same downstream spot, I caught four grayling on the march brown and one on a hare's ear. We move to the upstream side there was a hatch of large caddis flies. I caught a grayling on each flies then I changed my leader to a 9' and put a caddis on and caught a really nice grayling. We left at about 1:30, the weather was inching toward 60 degrees and sunny.

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 lakes 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. Most of these lakes are along or near the Richardson, Steese and Alaska Highways within 120 road 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. Stocked fish vary greatly in size from seven inch silver salmon up to 12-pound lake trout in Harding Lake. During ice-out it is not uncommon to catch rainbow trout over a foot in Quartz, Birch, Harding and Chena Lakes.

With all of these opportunities, Interior Alaska is a very fine place for the novice fly-fisher to learn the craft. Additionally, these stock lakes provide alternative opportunities for the seasoned angler when water conditions in the rivers and streams aren't good for fly-fishing.

For more information regarding the ADF&G Interior stocked lake program, ask for *Fishing Guide to Stocked Lakes in the Tanana Valley* available at the ADF&G Building at 1300 College Road in Fairbanks.

## *Fly-fishing Tackle Simplified*

Fly-fishing 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. In the beginning, fly-fishing tackle was a simple: a rod perhaps six feet long, a line of grass or horsehair, and either a crude artificial fly on an insect either tied or impaled on a hook. As time passed, anglers developed better and more specialized tackle.

### *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.

## **Fly-fishing Tackle Simplified**

Fly-fishing equipment can be broken down into six basic categories: lines, rods, reels, leaders, accessories and flies. Flies will be discussed closer to the end of this paper. Fly-fishing is just like any other sport; it is as economical or as extravagant as one makes it. Today, the novice angler can start fly-fishing with good-quality tackle for an investment of about \$200, not counting flies. A fly rod which will cast and land all Interior grayling and stocked fish can be purchased for about \$90; a fly line, \$35; a reel, \$30. The remaining \$45 is invested in leaders and accessories. If cared for properly, this equipment will last for years. There are four critical steps in fly-fishing tackle selection:

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

This step is critical. Anglers talk of a well-balanced outfit for easy casting and fishing. Tackle selection should be based on the type of fishing, which determines the fly patterns. Why bring up fly patterns in this section? Because *fly size and type governs the choice of line weight, which in turn determines rod weight*. For example: to cast big trout flies (sizes 6 or larger) a heavier line, like an 8-weight is needed. Once the line weight is selected, a balanced 8-weight-rod weight is married to the 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. 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 most popular line weights are 5 to 8-weight. In fly-fishing you cast the line not the lure. The heavier the line the bigger the fly it will cast. After the line size is selected, an angler decides which

taper is best for the fishing conditions. Interior fly-fishers should choose either double or weight-forward.

Weight forward lines are by far the most popular lines in Alaska. The weight forward concentrates the mass 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 delicacy.

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. A double tapered line can also be the most economical line because it has two usable ends. The disadvantages to double tapered lines are that they are harder to cast long distances and don't cast well against the wind. This taper is not good for lakes or wind-resistant flies.

If all of this isn't confusing enough, lines come various densities and colors. Color selection for the beginning angler makes no difference, but density does. There are floating lines, ones that sink and ones in between. A floating line is best for beginners because it can be used in streams and lakes to fish surface and sub-surface flies.

### **Step #3— Selecting a Fly Rod**

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. 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 lead to the development of poor casting habits.

A fly rod is rated differently than a spinning or bait casting rod. Whereas a spinning rod will generally be rated for the weight of the lure it is casting (e.g., 1/8 to 1/4oz.), a fly rod is rated by how the amount of a given line weight it can efficiently cast out. A 5-weight fly rod is designed to efficiently load 30 feet or more of 5-weight line with an 8 to 15-foot leader. Rod length and action are not too great a concern for most Interior fly-fishing. An eight-and-a-half foot graphite rod in a five, six or seven weight with a medium action 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 and streamers.

### **Step #4 — Selecting a Fly Reel**

Reels are sold by the size of line and rod weight they are designed for counterbalance. Any given model reel will state a weight range that it is rated for (e.g., 2/3, 4/5, or 7). 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 or in the water.

## *Leaders—The Often Overlooked Link*

Fly lines are quite thick and are not appropriate for attaching 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 starts thick then 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 imitating a real insect.

When fly-fishing, the leader is as, or more, important than fly selection. In much of fly-fishing, the leader is designed to allow the fly to drift naturally in the water current. If the leader pulls the fly while it drifts, the fly drags, and the fish ignores the offering. Leaders can be hand-tied; however, tackle manufacturers make knotless tapered dry fly and nymph leaders that are really better than can be hand tied. The advantage of using knotless leaders in areas with underwater vegetation is they don't snag on aquatic plants as easily as hand-tied ones.

Lengths- common lengths are 7 1/2, 9, and 12 feet. A general guideline is to select a leader at least the length of the rod. The tippet is the fine monofilament to which the fly is attached, **and are included in the recommended length of the leader.** 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.

## *Knots*

**Surgeon's Loop** — Is the link between the fly line and the leader;

**Interlocking Loops** — Is used to attach end loop to the leader, and to link leaders and tippets;

**Arbor Knot** — Is used to attach the backing to the reel;

**Duncan Loop** — Is used to attach the fly-line to the backing;

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

**Trilene Knot** — Is used to attach larger flies to tippets.

### *Accessories*

**Hemostats**—These are very handy for extracting hooks from fish, humans or dogs. 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**—The ones with coil clips ripple foam hold flies upright and prevent crushing the feathers. However, a simple, divided, plastic box with a lid will suffice for fly most storage.

**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 highly recommended

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

**Floatant** —Floatant makes dry 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 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.

## *Grayling & Salmonid Supper*

In most water, the important kinds of salmonid supper are aquatic insects, terrestrial insects, forage fish 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. There are four types of aquatic insects found in most waters that are important food sources for Interior stocked salmonoids and arctic grayling: mayflies, caddisflies, stoneflies and midges.

### *Mayflies (Ephemeroptera)*

Mayflies are the best-known aquatic insects to fly-fishers. With their upright wings, mayflies are the easiest insects to see floating on the water. Many species may be present in a given water. Mayflies are found in an extremely wide variety of standing and running water habitats. The greatest species diversity can be found in rocky-bottomed second and third order streams, in which first order streams are the smallest headwaters of any given drainage network.

A mayfly's life span is about two years. However, they are only beautiful for two days, their last. The rest of the time they are ugly, ten-segmented, six-legged with large pincers for a mouth. In this form they muck about rocks and silt in the water's bottom, staying out of fish's way the best they can. They are vegetarians, and may shed their skin up to 20-30 times before reaching maturity.

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. When the nymphs are mature, they grow wing cases on their back. They become particularly restless, even traveling to the surface from time-to-time for look around. The nymphs lose their normal caution during this time; and thus, lose their lives to predators. However, when they finally swim up from the bottom to hatch into a dun form, is when they are the most vulnerable. This is commonly called "the hatch".

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 female lays her eggs which fall to the bottom. The dun then dies and its body falls to the water. This is called a spinner, and it is also an important fish food although much of the fly's food value is spent.

Based on behavior and body shape, Alaska mayfly nymphs are divided into three groups: swimmers, clingers, and crawlers. Swimmers have a round, streamlined body. Clingers have a flattened body with powerful legs. Crawlers have a slightly flattened body.

### *Caddisflies (Trichoptera)*

The Trichoptera, or caddisflies, are one of the largest groups of aquatic insects. 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. This is called complete metamorphosis, similar to the way a caterpillar turns into a butterfly. After the larva pupates for about two weeks, it chews its way out of its cocoon and rises to the surface. In swift water swim to the surface and emerge from the pupal skin. Slow-water species crawl to the shallows to emerge. During this rise, in which the caddis emerge in mass numbers, many are taken by fish. Unlike the mayfly, the caddis pops out of the surface film quickly, skitters on the surface and flies away.

Mating takes place alongside the bank. 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. Adult caddis live from one to four weeks. Five main groups of the more than 1,200 species in Anglo-America are divided by each larvae form: free-living forms, saddle-case makers, purse-case makers, net spinners, and tube-case makers

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

Stoneflies are an important fish food throughout western North America. The life cycle of the stonefly is similar to the mayfly, and are primarily associated with clean and cool running waters, although a number of species have adapted to life in large oligotrophic, cold alpine and boreal lakes. As well, some species are able to survive in streams that warm up to dry up in the summer or that carry some organic enrichment. Adults live on riparian vegetation, where some species feed on algae or young leaves and buds. Life cycles range from one season to three years depending on family.

Immature Plecoptera are known as nymphs. They are found in the swifter portions on the stream: the runs, the riffles and pocket water. These nymphs cling to the stones and logs in these stretches. When fully grown they range in size from less than a half two to inches. The nymphs do not like light, and are for the most part vegetarians.

Fish often feed on stonefly nymphs which are trying to migrate to shore to hatch and mate. However, unlike mayflies, stoneflies are terrible flyers, but they are swift, elusive runners. They have two pairs of wings that are quite prominent in flight, and fly slowly with their bodies in an almost vertical position. The adults move about very little, preferring to rest along the stream. That is why they hatch 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) & Terrestrial Insects***

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.

Fish are also 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.

## **Forage fish & 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, 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. 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 years 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 fishing situations. There are over 120,000 recognized fly patterns. At 85 cents or more a fly, anglers could spend a lot of money on flies and not have a useful arsenal in their fly boxes

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 fish food. Most flies have a head, hackle, wings, body and tail all wrapped about a hook. 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.

### **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 the angler must duplicate, to some extent, the shape and shape of the insect.

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.

### **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.

## **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. The fly should ride in the water column either at the cruise level of the fish or higher.

## **Pattern Selection**

Of course conversations between anglers 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”.*

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. In fact, there are currently over 120,000 recognized fly patterns. Tanana Drainage fly-fishers instead of trying to find the “exactly right” pattern, should instead focus on building a versatile arsenal of flies.

## **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.

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

- 1) Be very visible in rough water and have a level of versatility;
- 2) Takes repeated strikes from rising fish and still retain its shape and floats; and
- 3) Be a proven fish catcher.

### ***“Must Haves” Dry Flies***

#### **Hair-bodied Dry Flies**

The Humpy is probably the best-known dry fly pattern in the west. Credit is given to Californian 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. The best sizes are 10 to 16.

#### **The Hairwing Dry Fly**

The standard dry fly was designed to imitate mayflies. This is the most popular of all dry fly designs; however, these are really too delicate for Interior Alaska fly-fishing. An 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. The most famous fly of all time is probably the Royal Coachman, a fly that

imitates no known insect but whose distinctive patch has a powerful appeal to fish. The Royal Wulff is a great attractor pattern, easy to see and floats well.

### 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 Dillon, 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.

The Elk Hair Caddis has superb floatation, excellent visibility and good durability. It's deadly during a caddis hatch, but produces equally well when fished as a searching pattern. It is ordinarily fished on the dead drift, but it can skate and skitter because of the heavy hackle. It is easy to see in fast and broken water.

The Stimulator is a relatively recent development for the Western U.S. –rivers, very good in pocket water, attractor pattern use large, and as a stonefly.

### 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.

A parachute Adams is miles ahead of the original, a nice low silhouette. Good search pattern. Also, 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 tied in many color schemes, sizes 12-18.

### Midges & Terrestrials

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. Griffith gnat uses peacock herl, which has an iridescent, just like an insect. Mostly in sizes 14-22, trim the bottom to use as an emerger pattern.

Terrestrials represent land-based insects that find their way into the water. Patterns representing these unfortunate victims include: McMurry Ant the Chernobol Ant

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.

## **Subsurface Aquatic Insect Imitations**

Wet flies, emergers and nymphs represent immature aquatic insects. Strictly speaking, forage fish and other imitations are not flies but lures. Nevertheless they are fished with fly rods. The classes of flies in this categories are: wet flies, nymphs, streamers, bucktails, wooly buggers and worms, muddlers and egg patterns. 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. Wet flies have fallen out of favor with most anglers. This is a narrow-minded view. 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. Just because a technique is too old, does not make it obsolete. The typical wet fly 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 slanted 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.

### **Down-wing Wet Flies & Attractor 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. 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". 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. The best known of these is the Professor.

## Flymphs (Wingless Wet Flies) & Soft-Hackle Flies

The flymph has a loosely dubbed fur body and fibers that 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 shine 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 harmonize. An angler would be wise to stock up on tan, brown, cream, gray and light green flymphs in sizes 12 to 16.

Another excellent subsurface pattern is the classic soft-hackle wet fly. This is an old English pattern 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. 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 hackle lack wings, though they sometimes have slight turns of fur propped up right behind the winds of the hackle. This fur thorax keeps 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. An angler would be wise to carry a Partridge and Yellow, Partridge and Green or a Partridge and Orange in sizes 12 to 16.

## *Nymphs*

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 fisherman carry row after row of size 14 and 16 nymphs in his/her 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.

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.

The Pheasant Tail and the Zug Bug are both effective nymph patterns in the Tanana River Drainage. The body shape of the Pheasant Tail generally suggests the slimmer silhouette of the class of mayfly nymphs known as swimmers.

### ***Forage Fish 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. 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

### 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.

### 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 fly 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. 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.

### 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.

### 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.