

Interior Alaska Gold & Grayling

Paul Bucceri squats down near the creek's edge. He splashes icy water on his hands and arms while gently shaking a steel pan in a circular fashion. Gradually, the Kinston, North Carolina native separates the dark, heavy minerals from the lighter-colored sand until he only has about a teaspoonful of material. It was then something caught Paul's eye, something yellow. It was a small flake of gold, not much bigger than an aphid. As he picks it out of the pan to admire it, Paul turns his head downstream, catching only a glimpse of the large purple-finned fish devouring a helpless stonefly; a fish Paul soon would try to catch for dinner.

Ever since Paul took a job near Fairbanks, Alaska, he looked forward to this kind of adventure. "Who would ever believe that you could drive to a nearby spot like this, have no one around, and have such a good time," he exclaims. Recreational activities that attract Bucceri to the Chatanika River valley include gold panning and sport fishing. Today, he earned a rare day off during the middle of the week. Although there are some clouds, the weather is quite pleasant for late June.

Paul's journey begins on the Steese Highway near Fort Wainwright and heads north 11 miles to the community of Fox. From there it bears northeast past Fort Knox, the largest gold mine in North America. This partially gravel road parallels the river for about 30 miles with one private and two public campgrounds along the route. A leisurely 25-river mile float trip from the BLM Cripple Creek campground to the Upper Chatanika State Recreational Site entices many rafters and paddlers. The float trip is mostly Class I and II water, and can be traversed in a single day. Along the way, several narrow feeder creeks drain into the Chatanika River from the northwest, depositing flood gold as they have for centuries.

These creeks continually erode the 570-million-year-old surrounding geologic structure known as Birch Creek Schist. High muscovite content separates Birch Creek Schist from other metamorphic structures in Alaska. According to James A. Madonna, retired University of Alaska Fairbanks professor, molten magma deep within the earth pushed upward forming the Yukon-Tanana Uplands about 90 million years ago. The magma carried gold and other associated minerals such as stibnite, the ore of antimony. Metallic minerals pushed into cracks and fissures within the schist and all the way toward the surface.

Over thousands of years, the hills were eroded, exposing the cooled magma, called a pluton, and liberating the valuable minerals like gold. Gold is highly resistant to chemical weathering and gets left behind while other minerals are dissolved during the erosional process and carried away, Madonna says. The eroded highlands may not have held commercial gold deposits, but the sorting action from centuries of running water concentrated the heavy minerals in various parts of the Chatanika River valley.

For panning, Madonna recommends a gold pan, a shovel or trowel to dig gravel, and somewhere to put the gold, like a vial or film canister. Most places within the Steese Highway right-of-way are open to recreational gold panning although many existing mining claims were patented before road construction. These areas are private property, Madonna cautions. Prospective panners should check in Fairbanks with the Alaska Division of Mining and BLM regarding the land status where they plan to explore.

Before outfitting for this expedition, panners should also pack sport fishing gear. The Chatanika River holds arctic grayling, whitefish, northern pike, sheefish and the occasional burbot. King and chum salmon also return between July and September every year, making the 1,000-mile-plus journey from Bristol Bay up the Yukon River to their spawning grounds.

Grayling are the primary sport fish in Alaska's Interior, Northern pike and whitefish are

secondary species. Fish native to the Chatanika do not over winter there, but rather winter in the Tanana River into which the Chatanika empties. The Tanana is a glacial-fed river running chocolate-milk brown in the summer. However in the winter, when the mountain glaciers freeze, it runs low and clear allowing these species to survive. As winter loosens its icy grip during late April and early May, fish migrate upstream. Some fish will not reach their summer feeding grounds until mid-July.

Before the king and chum salmon's arrival, grayling and whitefish primarily feed on stoneflies, caddis flies, mayflies, dragonfly nymphs, mosquito larvae, leeches and freshwater crustaceans. These fish's diets are driven by the geologic make-up of the Chatanika River and its hydrology. The river's shallow meandering channel allows for algae and aquatic plant growth, providing shelter and food for many herbaceous aquatic insect species. Shallow gravels and decomposing Birch Creek Schist make up most of the river's channel. Although the water isn't swift, it's shallow enough to dissolve needed oxygen for stoneflies and mayflies to thrive. Anglers should carry an assortment of basic flies replicating these insects such as the Hare's Ear, Copper John, Adams, Griffith's Gnat and Elk-Hair Caddis. Green and yellow are predominate artificial fly colors.

As Paul swats mosquitoes during the late evening, he selects a Griffith's Gnat to tie on his leader. The UAF fly-fishing instructor suggested a 5-weight fly rod, reel and line works quite well for Chatanika River grayling and whitefish. For salmon and pike, he would want heavier fly tackle, a 7-or-8-weight. That same instructor also told Bucceri to use a rod and a leader both about nine feet in length. For today, Paul chose a Cortland CL, six-weight, four-piece rod married with an eight-foot, gray furred leader with a three-pound tippet.

Paul remembers to earlier in the day. He worked his way up the Chatanika River from its confluence at Kokomo Creek to the bridge at the Upper Chatanika Campground managed by the Alaska State Parks Division. He must have caught nearly a score of fish that morning, most on a Blue-Winged-Olive Parachute. Most of the fish were under 10 inches in length, but quite feisty.

Kelly returns his focus to the Griffith's Gnat. He follows his instructor's advice and soon hooks into a beautiful 10-inch grayling. It's not long enough to keep as 12 inches is the minimum size. A dozen grayling later, Bucceri lands his dinner. According to local residents, grayling don't freeze well, and are best prepared over a campfire. Paul puts the cleaned fish in aluminum foil and places it over hot coals, as he reflects on his full but relaxing day.

Submitted by Shann Paul Jones—November 2004