

SO MANY STREAMS, SO LITTLE TIME:

Flyfishing the Dalton

Story by Joe Jackson

When you drive north out of Fairbanks, and the grocers and department stores get replaced by unbroken boreal forest, you can start to feel like you're driving into a time warp. The trees get thicker, the wilds get wilder, and simultaneously, things start to feel older. If you go far enough it feels like you've left civilization behind and may never get back, which, as far as I'm concerned, is as good a reason as any to go in the first place.

I'm speaking, of course, about Alaska's Dalton Highway. Call it the Haul Road, call it the Kamikaze Trail (as the truckers of yesteryear did), the Dalton is the king of quintessential Alaskan roads; complete with all of the frost heaves, moose-sized potholes, lack of service stations, view of mountains, intersections with flowing water, and traffic jams of muskox that any expeditioner could ask for. It's a winding yarn of asphalt and gravel well-defined by maps, yet the infrequency of commoner travel gives it a perpetually mysterious and even ominous aura. We know that the road leads 414 miles from its juncture with the Elliott to its terminus in Deadhorse, but few can say (for sure) what one is likely to encounter along the way. Snow in July? A bent axle? It's not the kind of road you travel for a day trip or a joy ride; it's a thoroughfare that means business and demands that you consider your intentions and double check the spare tire (or buy a second one altogether) before embarking.

By the same token, because it is travelled far less than Alaska's other road systems, save for the Peterbilts, the Dalton can feel distinctly Sunday at times. Maybe even quaint. A traveler (moreover, an angler) can stop and go to their heart's content, spending a few hours here, maybe a few days there, tracing a path

Headed back from one of the Galbraith inlets in search of lake trout. The wind howled the whole time. © Emmie Jackson

across one of the greatest expanses on the globe and crossing literally hundreds of blue lines along the way that range in size from sleepy Prospect Creek to the authoritarian flows of the Sagavanirktok River. Perhaps the paramount beauty of this road is that you could spend a lifetime haunting its streams and still barely scratch the surface.

Being that the Dalton Highway is so rich in its angling opportunities, it possesses the danger of becoming overwhelming. Too much water and not enough time. The way I look at it, you can either approach this issue as a fox or as a hedgehog. A Greek poet called Archilochus put it this way: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." I doubt if he meant for it to pertain to fishing, but it does, and it makes for some sound advice about how you spend your time. You can either go into it with a plan to fish a few streams devotedly, or you can stop at every trickle and make quick casts before heading on to the next one. You can cheat the system a bit and do both, but like it or not, there will be a limit to how far you can go, how much time you can spend, and how much of these streams you can see. You'll never fish all the water you want to.



The wildest fish on Earth? This fellow ate an Elk-Hair Caddis on the Sag. © Emmie Jackson

So there I am. It's a beautiful day in late July and I'm watching that dusty light of evening slant through the gravel dust. My wife, Emmie, and I are heading back up the Haul Road, and it's already got the feeling of visiting an old friend. We've made sure the gas tank is full, we filled the thermoses with good, black coffee, and something nondescript is chattering through the radio. There are places to fish on the Elliott leading out of Fairbanks, but I don't bother stopping. We can fish those anytime.

It helps to have a plan starting out on the Dalton, but I'll just as soon abandon it so I can stop at multiple creeks without feeling guilty. Essential bring-alongs include high-proof bug spray (and head nets for the punk insects that ignore it), at least two spare tires, basic auto-repair equipment (tire plugs, jumper cables, extra wiper fluid, a portable air compressor, tow ropes, etc.), flares, extra gas cans, a surplus of blankets and cold-weather gear, a first-aid kit, and emergency rations. The only two spots on the entire highway for any kind of service are Coldfoot and Deadhorse, and the last time I was in either place gasoline was \$5.69 a gallon and there was a line of cars a hundred yards long waiting for tire patches on account of the same nasty pothole. My recommendation is to plan ahead and act like you don't have the option of stopping anywhere; that you'll have to brave a roundtrip of the entire 414-mile length without access to anything except what you bring with you. The Haul Road, in my experience, is a place for which it's impossible to overprepare.

Aside from a spare tire or extra gas, I think the next-worst thing to

Driving through the Brooks Range feels like being on another planet. © Emmie Jackson



Wiseman, Alaska: one of the most charming little bush-towns you'll ever come across. © Emmie Jackson



forget would be a fly rod. I use a five-weight which proves quite versatile in handling the variety of stream sizes, but a smaller rod in three- to four-weight would be a joy to fish. A larger eight-weight comes in handy for casting streamers at lake trout, char, Dolly Varden, and pike. As for exploring the streams, you can get away most of the time with hip boots, though chest waders make navigating some of the brush-choked creeks way easier. Just hop in the water and off you go.

The first worthwhile stream you'll pass on the Dalton is Hess Creek at mile 23.8. In July of 2019, this area was engulfed in the largest wildfire in the U.S at the time—a blaze that raged over 145,000 acres. In the interest of honesty, I have not spent much time on this stream for the simple fact that I'm usually in a hurry to get to other creeks further along the highway. Given that it's a direct tributary of the Yukon and features relatively clear water, though, it certainly warrants a stop—especially in the fall.

At mile 55.5 you'll cross the mighty Yukon, and at mile 60 you'll find the Hot Spot Cafe. This little haunt is a good place to stop for burgers and/or pie, as well as some up-to-the-minute fishing reports from local streams. The Ray River begins paralleling the highway from mile 69 to 75 or so, and its primary draw is the odd chance for pike and sheefish.

Another feature of the Dalton that I love is that not all of its streams are named or even marked. It can be tough to stop and spend time checking these out when there are several more creeks further along with proven fishing quality, but then again, the draw of fishing the uncharted can hold its own appeal. I wouldn't spend much time fighting the bush for small trickles or stagnant puddles, but I just know there are some gems waiting to be found by those willing to explore. One such stream is No Name Creek at milepost 79.1 and 80.5. I guess the fact that it's called "No Name" means it has been named by someone, but to me that's a technicality. It still carries the air of the unmapped, as well as offering some



Some muskox doing vehicle inspections up near Happy Valley. © Joe Jackson

surprisingly good grayling action depending on water clarity.

While not a fishing stop, Finger Mountain (mile 97.5) provides an exceptional view as well as a good excuse to stretch your legs. These granite tors were once unglaciated hills of bedrock, but through millions of years of frost shattering they've been contorted and exposed. Don't spend too much time ogling at the rocks; the best fishing is yet to come.

For me, Fish Creek (mile 114) often marks the beginning of my Dalton fishing excursions because it's the first stream on the road that's north of the Arctic Circle. I like wild fish as much as the next angler, and there is something profoundly pleasing about catching wild Arctic grayling in the true Arctic. Sort of like catching wild Gila trout in the Gila Wilderness, or Yellowstone cutts in the headwaters of the Yellowstone River—only better. The grayling in the Arctic probably look just about the same as fish south of the Circle, but they feel prettier. The blues are as bright as forget-me-nots, the golds shimmer like nuggets mined in Coldfoot, and the silvers are like the far-off escarpments of the Brooks Range under a warm sun. These fish are a lot more handsome than they need to be, and there's something special about that.

Given that Fish Creek can be difficult to access at times, the South and North Forks of Bonanza Creek might prove more reliable in getting that first genuine Arctic grayling. You can access the South Fork at mile 125, while the North Fork passes under the highway around 125.7. Both are relatively slow moving, but drifted or skated dry flies can turn up some dandy fish.

Just down the road, Prospect Creek (mile 135.1) is the site of the lowest temperature ever recorded in the United States—80 degrees below zero on January 23rd, 1971. I don't care who you are, that's just plain cold. Even in the summertime this place seems demanding, what with the impenetrable brush and resident Luftwaffe of mosquitoes. The creek, however, can prove to be well worth the trouble with an abundance of decent-sized grayling (10-16 inches). And if

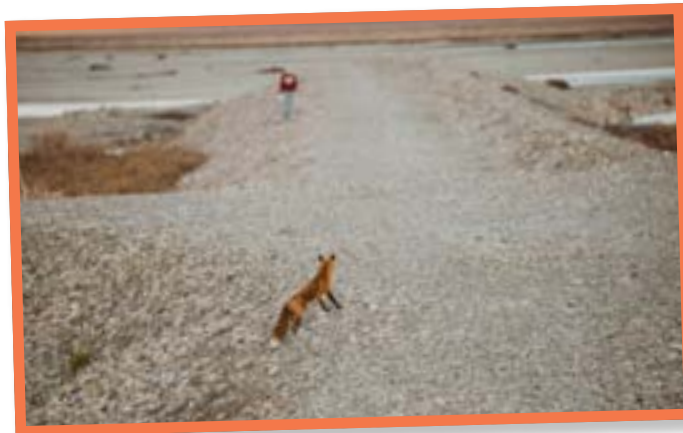
The Brooks Range feels like it might just go on forever. © Joe Jackson



With bountiful freshwater rivers, streams and lakes, Alaska's Interior and Arctic provide ample opportunities for fishing enthusiasts. Easily accessible options offer the chance to catch Arctic grayling, rainbow trout, salmon, pike and more. Summer or winter, wet your next line in Fairbanks.

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A local red fox inquiring about the fishing. © Emmie Jackson

you're looking for pike, this might be one of your best bets on the entire roadway.

You might not even have time to get up to the speed limit before the next stop arrives. The Middle Jim River can be accessed at miles 135.8, 140.1, and 141, and any of these points lead to good grayling fishing. I particularly like the third road crossing of the Jim (headed towards Coldfoot), and there's a productive run just upstream of the bridge. The Jim is one of the real diamonds of the Dalton—some even call it one of the best roadside grayling fisheries in the state. Anglers could easily devote an entire trip to just fishing this river for the simple fact that it's not uncommon to strike that magic 20-incher here (or 100-fish days, for that matter). Being that the Jim is crossed by the highway three times, it also makes for an easy waterway to float with a raft or canoe. It's a tantalizing combination of riffles, pools, deep runs, cutbanks, and logjams, all of which are conducive to any type of flyfishing you could ask for. During the height of summer, the fish are quite agreeable to high-floating Humpy and hopper patterns, and the few picky individuals you find can be fooled with mosquito patterns run on light tippets.

All this talk of jackpot grayling fishing begs the question of reliable flies. Fortunately on the Dalton, the growing season is heartbreakingly short and grayling don't last long if they're picky. Any nymph or wet fly will work, though I've come to throw dry flies almost exclusively on the Dalton. Maybe it's the purist in me that likes fishing the surface for wild fish in wild places, or maybe it's just because I know of few more enjoyable things in life than casting a #14 Humpy to the narrow chutes below overhanging spruce boughs and watching fat grayling breach underneath it.

Sleepy Marion Creek just outside of Coldfoot. © Emmie Jackson

Local favorites include the Adams (the Parachute and Irresistible variations are good), Goddard and Elk-Hair Caddises, mosquito patterns, and Humpies. Grasshopper patterns are also fun to throw. Pheasant Tails, Hare's Ears, and Caddis Larva nymphs are effective if you're of the subsurface mindset, and good streamers include Woolly Buggers, Muddler Minnows, and Clousers. All of these patterns and more will serve you well the entire length of the highway.

Not far past the Jim you'll come to one of only two sojourns on the Dalton that offer gasoline and automotive repair services, among other things: Coldfoot. Named for the miners that set out zealously in search of gold in the early 1900s but ultimately got "cold feet" when met with the daunting landscape and prospect of winter, Coldfoot is now a sleepy little hamlet with some 15 year-round residents, and being there in the summer and fall feels like watching a large, docile animal stir itself from a long nap. Last fall, Emmie and I had some time to kill there, being that we'd popped two tires and had to wait for the shop to open at eight in the morning (I'll be the first to admit it: we didn't prepare well enough. We've since adjusted our "Haul Road Kit" to include two full-sized spares and a portable air compressor). I would recommend any traveling angler build in some similarly functionless time to bum around town, because there are some fascinating locals to talk to and a downright immaculate Visitor Center to check out. That and Slate Creek, which wiggles right through town, can be a fun place to tangle with grayling and Marion Creek Campground, just on the outskirts of town, is just one of a few campgrounds on the entire roadway. (Any other camping you do will have to be done in pullouts or down completely unmaintained side roads).

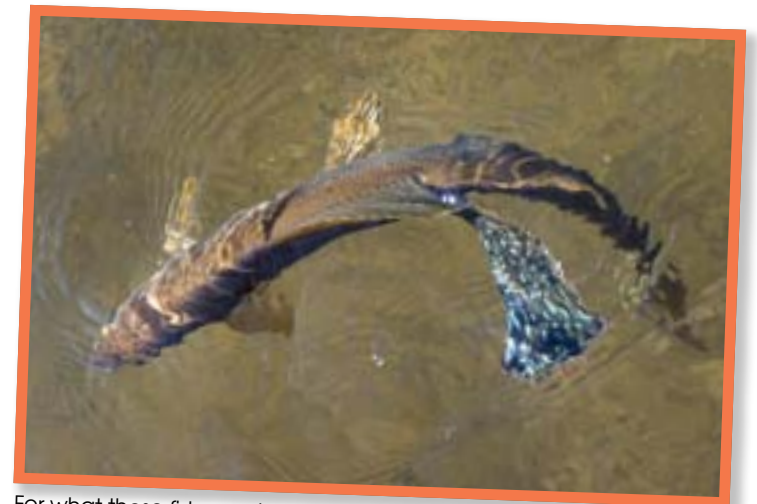
During the fall, the Middle Fork of the Koyukuk River can be a productive grayling fishery, but I've found that the water has to be lower and clearer than normal to have any success. For me, the next major stop after Coldfoot has to be Galbraith Lake at mile 274. The lake always seems like a cherry on top after the spectacular views of the Brooks Range that you get climbing through Atigun Pass. For some reason I always feel like an astronaut after crossing the Continental Divide. You can hike to Galbraith from the highway itself, but I tend to head for the campground which is tucked at the end of a rollicking gravel road. From here you can follow one of the creeks to its terminus in the lake, and the inlet zone makes for a productive lake trout spot. Given the wind that

always seems to haunt Galbraith, as well as the depths to which you'll need to get your fly, I like throwing sink-tip lines with Clousers, Deceivers, and Thunder Creek smolt patterns. In the evenings you can watch grayling surface for hundreds of yards up and down the shoreline, and casting to these riseforms can land you some impressive fish.

I'm told that the Kuparuk River at mile 289 is a favored fishing stop for many of the Dalton's truckers, but I have yet to catch a grayling here. Maybe that's a reflection of my angling quality, or maybe I've just hit it wrong. Either way, I plan on stopping there again someday soon.

One of the most famously touted rivers along the whole Dalton is the Sagavanirktok. Just saying the name sounds good and fishy, but there are plenty of stories of 10-pound Dolly Varden that make it a place worth visiting. I have yet to hit the run just right (which begins in early to mid-August), but I'm told it's nothing short of amazing. There are various access points to the river between mileposts 309 and 414, but I've found greater success on the upper portions (309-334). Even if you miss the run of anadromous dollies, this area gives you a good chance of seeing wild muskox and peregrine falcons, both of which are worth a drive in and of themselves. You can also chase fat and abundant grayling, with 20-inchers being relatively common. Last fall I was fishing a deep, fast run for dollies when several grayling attacked my strike indicator. A quick change of tackle and tactic and I caught a few fish past 16 inches that were a rich shade of umber. I subsequently forgot about the dollies and fished dry flies all night.

Basically, all of this is to say that the Dalton is as close to perfect as a highway can get. And no, I don't mean maintenance-wise (in that case, the Dalton is far from it with its tire-popping gravel and potholes big enough to swallow a Prius). What I mean is that it's a road without pretensions that passes through some of the most beautiful country in the world. Some of the landscapes are so stunning that you feel slightly guilty that a road can lead there at all. The other thing is that the Dalton is still so raw that it discourages the kind of traffic that has ruined other highways; it's still owned by the truckers that keep this state alive and if you're in any kind of doubt as to who has the right-of-way, just wait until one of those big eighteen-wheelers kicks a rock through your radiator.



For what these fish may lack in size they make up for in appearance. © Joe Jackson

Whether you approach the highway as the fox or as the hedgehog, as a planner or a "seat-of-your-pantser," I think it's a road that might just steal a piece of your heart. In our state of widespread angling commercialization, with flashy salmon and trout printed in bright colors, the Dalton and its streams are like tiny heartbeats beneath the surface—noticed only by a few, yet vital to the survival of wilderness as we know it.

My suggestions should not be taken as scripture—there are several streams (both named and unnamed) that haven't been mentioned merely because I haven't fished them. As I've said, you could literally spend a lifetime exploring the Dalton and still have unfished water waiting for you somewhere. The whole point is to explore it. Explore what interests you. Explore for no reason and stop where you feel like it. Satisfy your curiosity, even if you don't catch any fish. On a road as special as the Dalton Highway, I highly doubt you'll regret it.

And if you run into a guy named Clutch in the town of Wiseman, tell him I said hi.

Joe Jackson has been known to waste a lot of time (and gas) on the Dalton, and his truck bears a few souvenir cracks in the windshield, but he doesn't regret it one bit.

Jim Crossing #3, absolutely chock-full of grayling. © Emmie Jackson