



FLYFISHING the TAYLOR HIGHWAY

It's not a place where you can plan to catch big fish, but then again, it's a place where you don't really care. This is the place where you start to remember how it's supposed to feel to cast a fly rod, preferably one made of fiberglass or bamboo, and where you'll thrive even if (*especially* if) you forget such impediments as split shot and strike indicators.

I'm talking about Alaska's Taylor Highway—in ecological terms, the Fortymile River Valley. Once the venue for a gold rush every bit as wild and lucrative as the Klondike, this region of 6,000-some square miles has remained as distinctly Alaskan as it gets: home to innocent wildlife, mosquitoes of Devonian proportions, and only about as many people as live on my block in midtown Anchorage. Between the Taylor's dusty stretches of gravel, panoramic views of hills once populated by mammoths and mastodons, and blue lines on the map that, dare I say, haven't been fished beyond a mile or so from where they near the road system, this is the place to unwind, unplug,

and generally purge whatever it is that you need to get out of your system. Use whatever excuse you need.

Among the Taylor's other loveable accolades, it's noticeably devoid of information on fishing it. This is a large reason why my wife, Emmie, and I were so keen to explore it in the first place. Beyond seeing what was out there to begin with, the lack of reconnaissance suggested it was probably something special. We planned a multiday outing around the 4th of July and that was that.

By way of preparation, I spent the night shifts of my summer job spinning as many grayling dry flies as I thought I could use. I got the most practice tying Klinkhammers, Elk Hair Caddises, and Usuals (an Eastern U.S. pattern tied with orange thread and snowshoe hare's foot to imitate Sulphur mayflies). I also threw in some Serendipity-style patterns for any subsurface operations and rustled up a handful of smoothly tapered 5X leaders that turned over nicely on

A dandy, sequined grayling taken on a Usual fly (still visible in the fish's mouth) in gin-clear water. © Joe Jackson

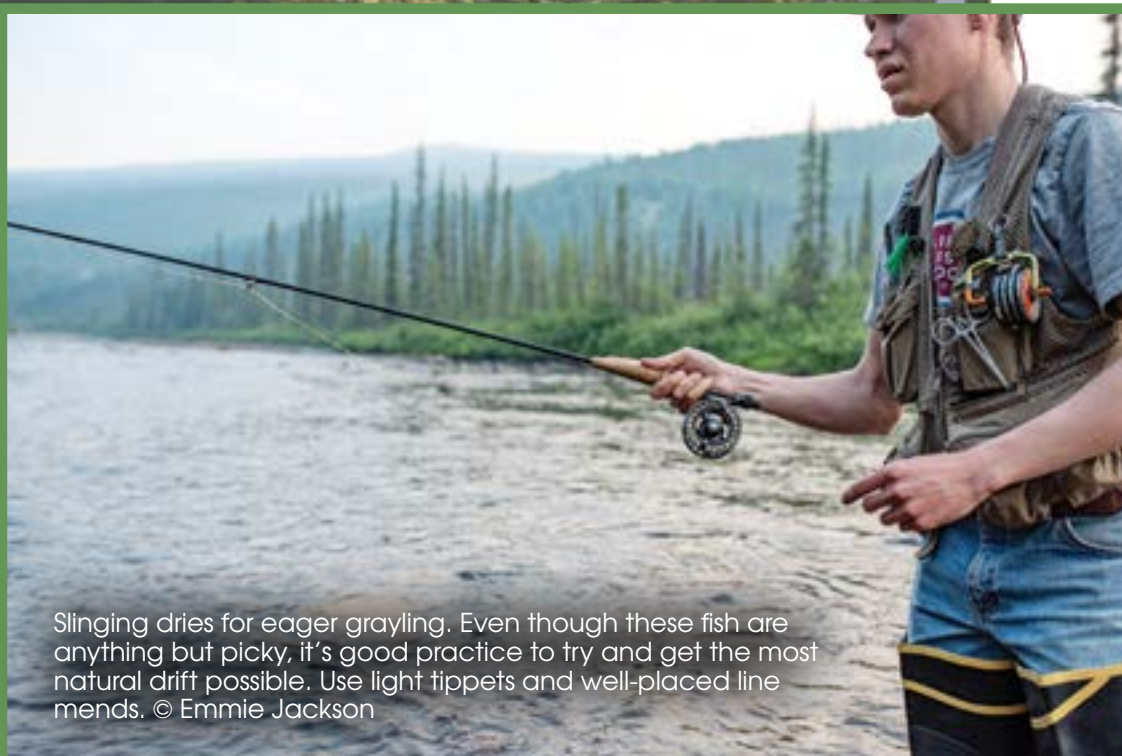


my 4-weight fiberglass. The camping bit was slightly more involved. Our kit included your basic sleeping bags, sleeping pads, rainproof tent, a Coleman propane stove with fuel and a coffee percolator, drinking water, topographical maps, and considerable quantities of mosquito repellent. We've had our share of hairy experiences on lonely roads, so as far as the truck went, we included a full-sized spare tire (in addition to the donut slung in the undercarriage), a bag of tire plugs, a portable air compressor, and an extra ten gallons of gasoline. We never ended up using any of it—how you hope it goes—but no one knows the meaning of “better safe than sorry” like Alaskan outdoors folk.

Depending on your timing, various streams along the Taylor can be far more in-season than others. Grayling have the habit of overwintering in larger creeks and rivers (such as the Fortymile, the Mosquito Fork, the Walker Fork, and O'Brien Creek, all of which you'll hear mentioned later), and once breakup happens, they start slowly making their way to spawning locales. These may be offshoot sloughs of where they spent the winter, or they may be the lower sections of their summer streams. Either way, I'd suggest just waiting for summer to come along and targeting them once their spring migration and reproductive events are over. The road will be more reliably passable, anyway. Grayling are the game in this neck of

the woods, so get used to some lovely and forgiving fish. I guess if you want some variety you could plunk for burbot in a spot like the Fortymile Bridge, but like I said, this is a trip you could (and should) make without having to use any lead.

Now let's assume you're riding along with Emmie and me as we depart Fast Eddie's in Tok. We've had some breakfast and now we're ready to roll. You might hear some Taylor Swift leaking out of the speakers, but just ignore that. Near Tetlin Junction (something like fourteen miles from Tok), the Taylor Highway begins. I guess the road started out as sections of trading and fishing routes for indigenous Alaskans,



Slinging dries for eager grayling. Even though these fish are anything but picky, it's good practice to try and get the most natural drift possible. Use light tippet and well-placed line mends. © Emmie Jackson

then these became slightly more worn once gold was discovered around Chicken, Jack Wade, and Steele Creek in the late 1880s. Finally, some people in the Alaska Road Commission decided to build the proper highway in 1953, and Ike Taylor, a former president of the commission, got his name tacked onto the project. Immediately past its starting point, the highway runs through some veritable sand-dune country. These dunes were deposited by windstorms about 10,000 years ago. Proceed a little further and the dunes disappear, taken over by exposed metamorphic rock that's said to be some of the oldest in Alaska—600 million years old, if you want a figure. Later on, these rocks give way to more rocks, some of which are granites laid down during the Jurassic Period when dinosaurs were stomping around the Last Frontier. I know, I know—this is a fishing story, but geology is one of those subjects that, not unlike angling, can be tremendously enlightening for the few that choose to care about it.

The Fortymile caribou herd runs through here in the fall (along with a circus of rifle-toting hunters hoping to blast one or two), but in July it can seem pretty lonely aside from the occasional ptarmigan tottering down the road. We pass a few rogue travelers in SUVs by the time we make our first stop at Logging Cabin Creek. It was a nice stream to look at and imagine fish living in, but nothing was buying our wares except the mosquitoes.

Our next stop wasn't for moving water, but for what appeared to be a traveler in distress. It was a middle-aged guy standing next to a middle-aged Chevy with its hood up, and we pulled aside to see what was up.

"Think my alternator's shot," the guy said. Alright, not so much a traveler in distress as a dude slightly unamused at the trajectory of his day.

As we finagled the truck into position and hooked up to the Chevy via jumper cables, we proceeded to get an earful from this gent that called himself Billdozer. He had a couple of tiny dogs yipping by his side as



Also known as the Pedro Dredge, the F.E. Company Dredge #4 is a veritable gold-mining museum in Chicken. It was built in 1938. Today you can take tours inside the dredge, as well as appreciate the fowl-themed metal art outside. © Joe Jackson

he showed us photos of genuine gold nuggets that he'd dredged up over the last several years from his claim outside of Chicken, and he informed us several times that he practiced yoga twice daily. Billdozer, if you're reading this, it was a pleasure. Once his truck was all juiced up, he thanked us and off we went.

Ten miles or so down the road, where the sun-blached asphalt gives way to gravel, one of two settlements on the entire highway appeared: Chicken. The story is well known by now, but the town got its name back in the mining days when the postmaster decided they needed an official designator. The ambitious residents wanted to call it "Ptarmigan," but seeing as how no one within shouting distance could spell the word, they settled on "Chicken" instead. It's hard not to smile at their simplicity, if not their flexibility. Emmie and I got some ice cream and history lessons upon our stop here, along with a finger-puppet chicken that, to this day, makes Emmie blush with embarrassment.

Beyond Chicken the road significantly narrows and becomes more winding, with switchbacks and steep pitches requiring total



Planning our next move with an assortment of resources. Gunnar Pedersen's Highway Angler is a good starting point, but topographical maps and good ol' boot leather will fill in a lot of gaps. © Emmie Jackson



driver attention and decent brakes. I've found this entire stretch to Eagle to be reminiscent of South Dakota's Black Hills, but maybe that's just the high-plains boy in me. Regardless, it's a cool road. At Mile 82, you'll come to a bridge crossing the Walker Fork and, not far beyond that, a BLM campground of the same name that I highly recommend you stop at for the night. When we pulled in, the dutiful campground manager was weed-whacking every campsite, and we found the firewood coffers stocked with expertly split and dried logs. Beyond that, this is the best place from which to access the Walker Fork, which, assuming you've got a fly rod or two in the backseat, is the main reason you came.

The Walker Fork is one of the blue lines where you'll want to spend some time. This grayling pantheon is as stellar of a fishery as I've ever seen. While it may not cough up the near twenty-inches that come out of the Delta Clearwater, it can be every bit as productive as, say, the Chena or the Chatanika (provided you get away from the bridge). The added bonus is that the company you'll have is far more likely to be a caribou or a moose than it is another person. Grayling will be localized to the best holes, which I found to be located up tight against cutbanks and right below dashing riffles where the boulders get larger and the water gets sluggishly deeper. Don't discount the riffles themselves, though, because sometimes grayling will hold right up tight to or even in them. Fish these runs

Searching for that grayling honey-hole of the Walker Fork. Be sure to layer the bug spray generously here. © Emmie Jackson



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carefully with steady, natural drifts, and cherish each grayling that rises to the surface. In the wondrous state of Alaska, fishing can become all too stressful given the limited-time offers of summer and salmon runs (along with a pervasive desire to catch “the big ones”). This is the place to let all that go. This is the place to recall just what fishing is all about.

P.S.—If you have a tendency to leave your rigged-up fly rod sticking out of your back window, make sure you remember that it’s there before you attempt to close said window. Do not do as I did, which was snap the tip section of my brand-new fiberglass rod at the end of the first day. It’ll save you some heartache.

After a pleasant night (albeit one spent grieving a certain fly rod) within the soundscape of the Taylor, Emmie and I consult our maps and notes and devise our next move. There are some public gold-panning opportunities available along Jack Wade Creek (there’s a map you can pick up from the campground that shows you exactly where), and beyond that, there are several streams that either cross or run adjacent to the highway. Since we’re not sure which will be the most productive or prettiest or combination of both, we take the easiest route we can: we stop at each one.

O’Brien Creek is another gem that you’ll want to wander thoroughly. It dumps into the Fortymile not far upstream from the bridge, and proceeds to meander within sight of the road for several miles. Several pull-offs take you right down to the water. The hydrology features you’re looking for are the same that you’d look for anywhere else: cutbanks, pools below riffles, foam lines, current seams, pillows behind boulders, etcetera. If you’re an experienced fly angler, these types of places should scream “Fish!” in a sensation we call second nature, and if you’re still a relative neophyte, there’s no better place to learn. I’m fairly certain I say this in every fishing-related piece I write, but please respect the resource (it’s a sentiment worth repeating). Use barbless hooks and rubber-mesh nets, wet your hands when you handle fish, and let them go quickly. These grayling can seem inexhaustible, but we know that any species has its limits once humans start meddling in their affairs. Just ask the Chena River before catch-and-release regulations were implemented.

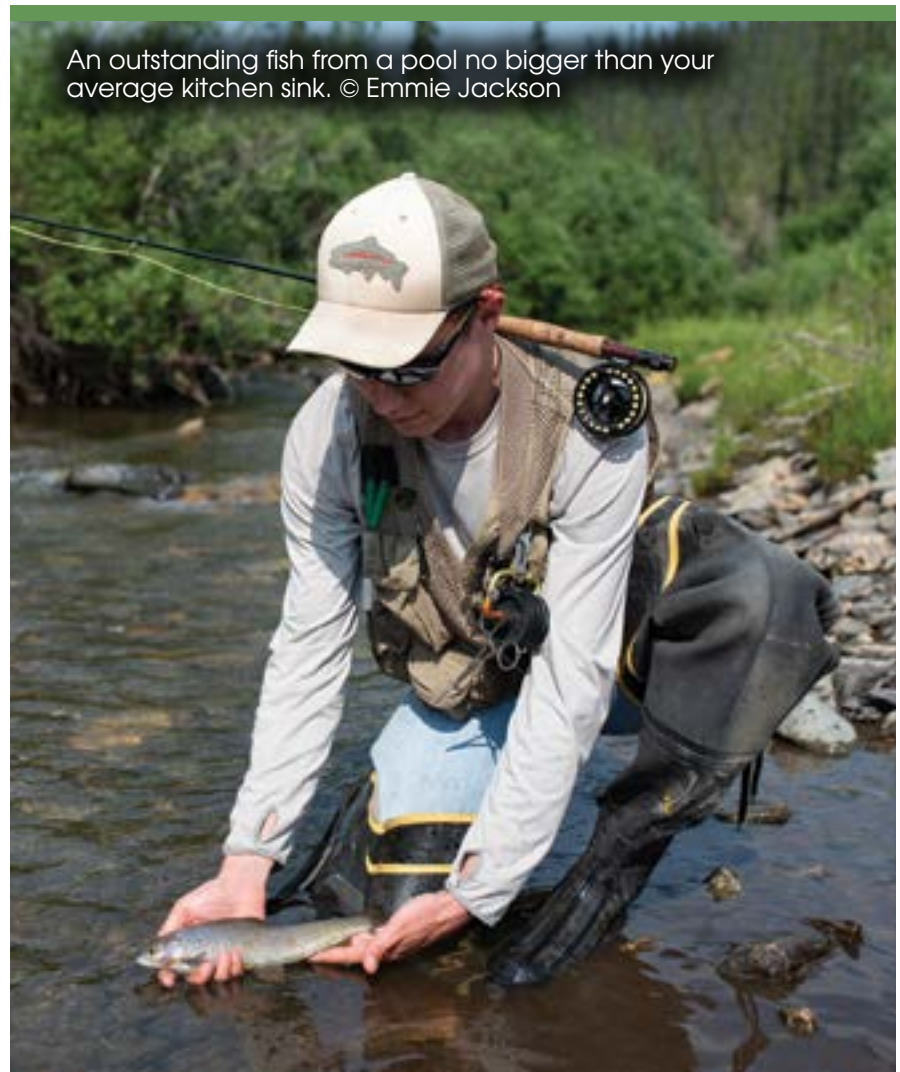
Alder Creek (MP 117.1) is another good one, along with Columbia at

124.5. In fact, I wouldn’t discount any trickle you come across. They’re all good for a chance to stretch your legs at the very least, perhaps even a nap in a hammock, and odds are better than not that they’ll contain at least some fish. Like I said, Usuals and Elk-Hair Caddises are good, along with Klinkhammers, Black Gnats, and Mosquitoes. If I suspect there are fish holding below but I can’t coax them to the surface, I’ll re-rig with a small nymph pattern like a Brassie, Serendipity, or a Pheasant Tail and run that about three- or four feet below a wool indicator.

I’ve glossed over a few streams that come much earlier in the drive. The West Fork Dennison River (MP 49) and the Mosquito Fork (64) are both rumored to be grayling factories, but I suspect these are those spring/fall staging grounds as grayling move from their summer trickles to wintering holes. Compared with the Taylor’s other streams, I’d consider the Dennison and Mosquito Fork to be *big* water. If you happen to fish them during the shoulder seasons and do exceptionally well, you’ll have to let me know.

At the end of the highway, you’ll come to Eagle. This little hamlet was once the only source of law enforcement for the entire Fortymile Valley. In those wild-west days of the gold rushes, I can imagine things got pretty rowdy. Eventually it came to serve also as a post office, federal court, and telegraph station (from which Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen sent the message that he’d succeeded in braving the Northwest Passage in 1905), but just like the ebb and flow of the gold rushes themselves, the town shrunk just as quickly. Today it’s got a few eateries, a hotel, gift shops, the site of the old historic military fort, and an amusing progression of street signs that, during the last election, sparked some local uproar. Emmie and I have made it this far, and we celebrate briefly along the banks of the mighty Yukon before heading back through the gravel dust.

There’s one stream along the Taylor that I will not tell you about. It’s a feeder of a feeder and it’s one of those streams that pleasantly surprises you in pretty much every aspect. The mosquitoes are inexplicably absent, the air is intoxicatingly fresh, and the water is clear as moonshine. You can wet-wade here, no problem, just like you can get away with nothing but a salmon-skin wallet containing a handful



An outstanding fish from a pool no bigger than your average kitchen sink. © Emmie Jackson

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If you look closely enough, you can see the gold flake. Panning along the public section of Jack Wade Creek is a nice way to fully immerse yourself in the Taylor Highway experience. © Joe Jackson



of flies. Don't underestimate the size of that pool in front of you; sure, you could jump over the run above it, and the pool itself is the size of a kitchen sink, but that doesn't mean a fifteen-inch grayling isn't sitting there totally invisible. Take a knee. Let the willowy action of the fiberglass carry a short cast—no more than ten feet in this case—and lay it out there. The fly will land more gracefully than a kingfisher, and the same fur that floated the snowshoe hare above the winter's snow will now bob the hook gently downstream.

The rise will be tragically short when it comes. They always are. If you were to blink, you'd miss it. So don't.

Let him take some line and show off just a little bit. He might even jump; his lithe, flipping shape limelighted by the sun in a scene as perfect as an old outdoor

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magazine cover. Get him in the net and look at him for a few seconds. Don't just point your eyes. Look. Fish are the prettiest in the water. Watch as his scales go from gunmetal to Forget-Me-Not blue to shimmering gold not unlike the nuggets dredged here so long ago. Look into the innocence, the roguishness, the wildness of that teardrop-shaped pupil, and then let him go. Get back on your feet and move upstream. This creek goes forever.

Always a fan of minimalism (but not always the best practitioner), Joe Jackson's life ambition is to find more streams like the ones he's hinted at here: those that require few to no gizmos and remind you what flyfishing is all about. This summer, he's excited to get back to whipping the fiberglass (newly repaired).

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