

You can find some surprisingly good grayling in the small streams of the Copper River Valley.

Little Dolly Varden from the Little Tonsina.

The Hidden Gems OF THE COPPER RIVER VALLEY

STORY BY JOE JACKSON | PHOTOS BY EMMIE JACKSON

Flyfishing can start to lose a shade of its grace when you spend consecutive days muscling weighted flies and sink-tip lines into flows that seem to be devoid of king salmon. Don't get me wrong—there is an art and a beauty to that, and I spent some pleasant days this past summer listening to the ratchet of kingfishers and refining my swing on the lower Gulkana. But at about the same rate that my shoulder grew sore, I began to crave the softer joys of small streams, small flies, and small fish. Luckily, the Copper River Valley has about the same abundance of these opportunities as it does behemoth king salmon and delicious reds, you just don't really hear about them.

The next few days were spent driving slowly down the highway, waving to locals and watching what limited “outsider” traffic there was ebb and flow with the salmon runs. Most of the trickles I sought flowed right underneath the highway; concealed in plain sight, you could say, not because of their own modesty so much as their proximity to more famous waters. I donned hip boots and shed my vest of all but an aluminum box of dry flies and some coils of light tippet. It's best to go spartan on these tiny veins, and even better to fish something soft like fiberglass or bamboo. Most of the time, I'd hurry to get out of earshot from the highway, seeking the kind of solitude that comes only from small pools and rising grayling. A few times, though, I'd stop awhile and fish right next to the bridge, catching decent fish perhaps every third or fourth cast. I doubt anyone noticed me.

I first sought out the hidden gems of this country several years ago. At the time, I'd agreed to work for my girlfriend's father on the family farm near Kenny Lake. (My first day on the job, he told me that in the Bible, Jacob had to work for Rachel's father for seven years in order to marry her. I was able to marry Emmie in three.)

The Copper River Valley is as quintessential Alaska as you can get, in my opinion. I don't know if it's the looming presence of the Wrangell Mountains, the flows of glacial rivers that thunder out of totally unbroken country, or the time and tire rubber it takes to get here from an international airport. Whatever the reason, working and living there for a summer was as heavenly as it sounds. Though I wasn't a resident at the time (leaving Chitina dipnetting off-limits), I was able to enjoy some bounteous mornings on the Klutina and a few pristine floats down the Gulkana courtesy of my future brother-in-law, Alex. Time that wasn't spent mowing hay or chasing sockeyes was invested in jostling down ATV trails or reading up on which blue lines on the map were both accessible and fishable.

I started out at Squirrel Creek Pit, which is the Alaskan equivalent of a bluegill pond. It's one of the most kid-friendly places in the area, and the campground really isn't too shabby, either. Fish and Game stocks the thing with a

The East Fork Gulkana. The place can feel as remote as the moon, though the highway and rest stop are just out of frame.



The Old Town Copper Center Inn & Restaurant. Make sure you tip the dog on your way out.



The joys of Alaskan small-stream fishing are unparalleled.

couple thousand trout near the end of May each year, and the multitudes that aren't grilled over campfires remain innocent and stupid until they die off in October. In summer, the prime hours are basically when the sun is the lowest, and fishing is best done from a canoe or waders near the pencil reeds closest to the highway. I recall a day where my niece (age four at the time) and I royally "knocked 'em dead" with nothing but a handful of foam beetle patterns.

Right next door to Squirrel Creek you have the Tonsina, which I won't spend any ink on because several anglers that know more than me have already covered it.

The Little Tonsina (just down the road) sounds like it should be cute and idyllic, and it can be depending on where you access it. Down near the confluence with the Big Tonsina at mile 74.5, it's relatively easy to fish and wade, though during summer most of the grayling and Dolly Varden worth catching are higher in the watershed. Accessing these fish can be as aggravating as sorting pigs, as I would come to find out, and the "cute" and the "idyllic" turn to "hellish" and "expletive-forming" soon enough with thick brush and mosquitoes. But if you're looking for the simple pleasure of small-stream fishing, this might be one of your best bets in the entire state. All you need are a light little rod, a

wallet of flies (mosquitoes and pheasant tails are good), and a can of bear spray. Don't forget the latter because, as a kindly old Copper Center local once told me, this creek harbors some of the highest grizzly densities in the valley.

Okay—now let's say you're headed back north on the Richardson. You pass the Little and the Big Tonsinas, Squirrel Creek Pit, and now you're getting close to

the Edgerton Highway. Around mile 83 you've got Pippin Lake, which is one of the better trout lakes I've ever fished at. I'm as shameless of a wild-fish snob as I am an introvert, but even I can't deny that casting dries for Pippin Lake stockers at midnight in July is some of the most fun I've ever had. Caddisflies will be fluttering in the gloaming like sparks, and trout up to eighteen inches will be breaching with the recklessness of teenagers. You want to fish with flies that float like a cork even after being mauled: Chubby Chernobyls, Goddard Caddises, foam beetles; you get the idea. If the fish aren't rising or they start acting moody, try slow-stripping or trolling a black or olive Woolly Bugger along deep weed edges. For my hardware-oriented friends, a plain, silver Panther Martin spinner and a canoe are all you need. There's a public boat launch right along the highway.

Continuing north, you'll eventually come upon Glennallen. Hopefully it's lunch or dinnertime and you can stop at Tok Thai (which, yes, does live up to the hype it receives). I'm usually headed for the East Fork of the Gulkana if I'm headed this direction, which is another hour and a half or so. In the springtime, I'll stop at either Poplar Grove or Sourdough Creek Pit, and now you're getting close to

heard the rumors of Sourdough Creek, in particular, but I think the biggest grayling I've pulled out of there was just barely longer than my hand. Take that for what you will, because there are certainly enough reports that speak of eighteen-plus-inchers to disagree with me.

If you're up for an adventure, park at the Haggard Creek Trailhead around mile 161. Here you can stage one of the more absurd hike-in trips I've ever undertaken; one that takes you through six miles (twelve if you count the trip back) of hip-deep muskeg for some of the northernmost wild rainbow trout on the continent. The "trail" ends at the Canyon Rapids, more a checkpoint on rafting itineraries than a defined landmark. Here the Gulkana boils through Class III and IV rapids, and for the flyfisher patient enough to try and draw trout out of these cauldrons, the rewards can be spectacular. I like Clousers and Baby Fat Minnows here, and if you tire of the trout and would rather try for grayling, pretty much take your pick of dry flies and you'll be in the money. If the hike sounds off-putting, you can reach the same fish by floating down from Paxson Lake.

The East Fork Gulkana, way up from where the Denali Highway meets the Richardson to where the fork falls out



A nice grayling from a tiny stream.

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of Summit Lake, might just be one of the best grayling fisheries on the road system. This area is a beautiful expanse of open tundra and alpine, and it always makes me think of some lonely coastline in Greenland. It's a joy to fish, too, and you can stage your outings from the rest stop where tourists normally congregate to ogle at spawning sockeyes (salmon fishing is prohibited here). One of the larger grayling I've ever tangled with came from a pool within throwing distance of the outhouse, but I won't say whether it was up or downstream. My best advice here is to get out of sight of the rest stop altogether, and to fish Adams patterns until you can't get fish to rise anymore. Then swap to Euro-nymphing a Prince or a Copper John; or if you're a total purist, just pack it up and go home.

Alright, since you're wondering, let's just talk about it; food and lodging are not hard to come by in the Copper River Valley. Having spent enough time there over the last eight years for locals to deem me an "honorary resident," I like to think that I know the good from the bad from the ugly.

If you're of the camping mindset, I'd say go with a DNR site like Dry Creek or Squirrel Creek Pit. There are plenty of private campgrounds along the banks of the Klutina, as well, where you get all the hookups you could ask for and access to otherwise unattainable bank fishing. Klutina Kate's is a neat little spot

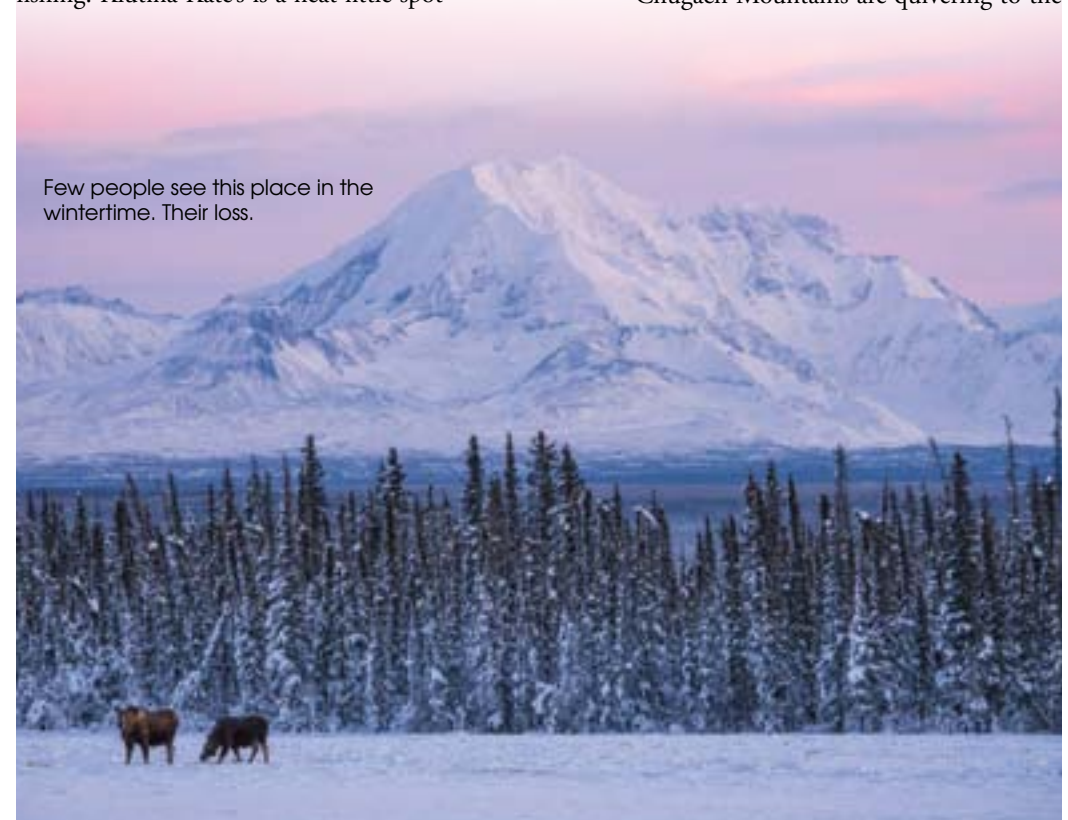
in Copper Center where you can stay in old vintage campers and buses, or you can opt for the Old Town Copper Center Inn just down the street. There are a number of B&Bs in the area, most all of which can be found on the Copper River Valley Chamber of Commerce's website (coppervalleychamber.com/lodging). The Pippin Lake B&B, owned by Scott and Gail Bruss, is particularly handy for accessing Pippin's legions of stocked trout.

You could stay at the Princess Lodge (just like you could buy your salmon from the grocery store), but why? I'm saying nothing bad about the place, but try and support the local businesses if you can. They keep this valley afloat, and they are owned by some good people.

For dining, try Tok Thai, Ernesto's, Nummy's (at the Old Town Copper Center Lodge—go for the Sanford Burger), Golden Spruce Espresso, or Grizzly Pizza. There are a handful of other places that are likely good and worth the money; I just haven't tried them. When your wife's family lives there and maintains chest freezers full of pork, beef, halibut, and Copper River reds, it's hard to justify eating out very often.

There's one stream I haven't mentioned yet.

Let's say you're driving down the Glenn, either headed out of or toward Glennallen. It's late June, maybe July, and it's a postcard-blue afternoon. The Chugach Mountains are quivering to the



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A prized grayling caught under the amused gazes of tourists.



You don't need many flies to find success on small streams. A few standard dries and nymphs will do.



Looking for dollys in a beaver slough along the Rich.

south, the Wrangells to the east. You've got a light rod in the backseat, an assortment of dry flies stuffed in a wallet that your sister-in-law made from a salmon skin. You pull off next to the derelict van by the bridge, and as you slip into hip boots you whisper the name of the stream to yourself:

"Tolsona."

It rolls off the tongue as nicely as "Tazlina," "Gulkana," and "Tonsina," but despite your inquiries into the Ahtna Athabaskan dictionary you can't find its meaning. No matter. You step into the water beneath the bridge and make a few false casts. The stream's grayling are as reliable as a good wristwatch, and it isn't long before you hook one.

Maybe that's not your daydream so much as it is mine, but it doesn't get much better than Tolsona Creek. The place is everything I've come to love about this part of Alaska: shy, bucolic, and most of all, fishy. There are grayling galore to be tempted from the gunmetal pools, along with the odd chance at little wild rainbow trout. Every single person that heads to Chitina from Anchorage has to cross this stream, has to wonder if it holds any fish, but I have yet to encounter any competition on it. Maybe that'll change someday, but I doubt it.

This valley is well touted for its runs of salmon, and for good reason. They're abundant, they're delicious, and they draw scores of anglers to the area each year, me included. But they never last. During the remainder of the year, this valley is sustained by small water and small fish—the tiny, irreplaceable heartbeats that you'd never notice until they were gone. I like the idea of fishing such places, of finding those gems hidden in plain sight and fishing them as carefully as they deserve. I like the idea of fishing for the unsung heroes that live there. More than anything, I like reverting back to a stage of simplicity that

you can't find in any other type of fishing. I'm talking about the kind where size really doesn't matter and you can fish all day not for what you're after but for the place you're in. These hidden gems always remind me why I bother to fish at all.

Being dubbed an "honorary resident" of the Copper River Valley is one of the greatest compliments that Joe Jackson has ever received. Ever since his first visit to the area in December of 2013, the place has stolen his heart. During summer, he and his wife, Emmie, will be found either on the Klutina at ungodly hours or ogling Mount Sanford from undisclosed locations, usually near water.

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