

ICE-OUT GRAYLING: *A Beginning*

The lovely dorsal;
a harbinger of spring.
© Emmie Jackson

Below: Even if you don't hook
any fish, springtime days can
be spectacular as this view of
Denali proves. © Joe Jackson

STORY BY JOE JACKSON

Call it May, call it April if we're lucky—spring is a beginning. The ice is breaking up and both you and the fish are emerging, having been cooped up since October. You're ready to get after it. All the lines have been cleaned, leaders are built, and your fly boxes are bursting with the voluminous fluff of winter's hand-tied work. The fish are hungry. None are hungrier, perhaps, than the voracious Arctic grayling. They're sick of the winter staples of expired salmon flesh and scuds; they're ready for bugs taking wing and the lustrous pastime of spawning.

The lower Chena where I've chosen to fish is stained with runoff. Shelves of ice still grip the banks, forming a series of precarious death traps to the unwary fisherman. They drip in the springtime sun. I comb through three fly boxes trying to pick out the winner. I know it'll have to be something subsurface and dark in color, and eventually I settle for a heavily weighted stonefly with a hotspot of pink on its butt.

My casting is as clunky as the steps of a newborn fawn, but I sling the rig to the head of a deep, slow-moving channel. I let it drift, striking at every hesitation in the indicator, pulling the line in every now and then to adjust the depth. I work up and down the bank, my pantomimes slowly becoming more fluid, the muscles recalling how they're supposed to behave. This persists for a few hours.

If anything, I tell myself, it's a good chance to get out of the house where the air is winter-stale and the floor is littered with the untidy detritus of fly tying. The air outside has that undeniable tang of new growth, and things that have been suppressed emerge spontaneously around me; grass, geese, and finally... grayling.

The indicator doesn't duck under when he mouths

the stonefly, it merely pauses like a blip in the system. I strike. The fish on the other end and I are equally perplexed, and after a quick tussle I bring to hand the first fish of the year: a cold, pewter-colored grayling, his empyrean dorsal making me forget the five months behind me and instead look ahead to a season of color and warmth. I stare for a pinch-me moment—fish do exist, contrary to what 40 below and five months of winter suggest and he darts back into the runoff. I pack up hoping I'll meet him again soon.

In the Interior where we don't have the luxury of springtime steelhead runs or early-bird cutthroat fishing, the "sailfish of the north" reigns supreme. Spring is a good time to get your casting arm back in shape and locate any persisting holes in your waders before the critical urgency of summer. It's also a chance to find some giant grayling as they head out of their wintering grounds and into their clear-water haunts to spawn. Chances are it won't be lights-out fishing (though rest assured, there can be spectacular exceptions), but it will be enough to wet your whistle.

Locating grayling can be easy this time of year, but actually getting to them can prove a challenge with deep or rotting snow. You might have to pack the snowshoes, and be skeptical of ice as it may be thin or patchy. Wherever I end up fishing for grayling, I tend to jump the gun a bit and show up before the ice has started going out. This isn't a bad thing, however, as it's a great time to stretch your legs and listen to the thunderous racket of ruffed grouse. If the spot you plan to fish is still iced over when you first arrive, come back in the next few days. Sooner or later the ice will go out and you'll be among the first to know, and if you do it right, the first to cast into open water which can make for some hot fishing.

One of the first fish of
the year. © Joe Jackson



Spring is a good time to find some downright titanic grayling.
© Emmie Jackson

Grayling overwinter in medium-to-large rivers such as the Gulkana, Tanana, Susitna, and the Chena, as well as in lakes. Part of the reason they are so ubiquitous in the Far North is their ability to tolerate low dissolved-oxygen levels in their wintering grounds.

In lake habitats, seek grayling at the inlets. Often these areas lose their ice before much of the rest of the lake, and grayling will stage at the mouth of the inlet. Check out the outlets, as well, as some grayling will simply drop down out of the lake into these creeks or rivers.

In river systems, focus on the mouths and lower portions of clear-water streams. In the Fairbanks/Delta area, these prime locations include the lower and middle Chena, the Delta Clearwater River (a.k.a. Clearwater Creek), and the hippodrome known as Badger Slough. In the Mat-Su Valley, such streams as Willow Creek and Montana Creek are good places to start. Keep in mind that grayling start moving toward spawning grounds before ice-out, so if

you don't find them down low, don't be afraid to search higher in the watershed. Bigger, veteran fish will leave for these spawning milieus first, and the younger spawners (around five years old) will follow suit. If you do go upstream, be wary of fine-graveled riffles, as these are potential grayling spawning grounds and should be avoided. As with trout and salmon, leave spawners alone.

Instead, focus on the deeper holes where grayling stage for spawning or further travel. Some of these holding pools may be so deep, in fact, that grayling are suspended rather than hugging the bottom. Reed Morisky has been fishing and guiding for grayling in the Tanana watershed since the early '80s, and has observed many spring schools of fish staging in holes 6- to even 15 feet deep where tributaries cut channels into the main stem river. If you can find holes like this, he attests, the grayling are usually pretty eager and good fishing can be endless. Just don't overstay your welcome.

Spring grayling are forgiving in that you rarely have to "match the hatch." Generally, anything drifting past them that resembles forage is fair game, though I've come to focus on a few tactics that produce the best results.

The biggest consideration is visibility.

The open water of spring is a bit of a mixed blessing; sure it's fishable, but much of it is turbid and high with runoff. I've come to rely on larger, darker flies as a result: stoneflies (size #8-12), black Copper Johns (#12-16), Prince Nymphs (#12-16), and leech patterns. These flies project a sharp silhouette even in murky water. If you're lucky enough to fish just slightly murky or even clear water (as is the case if you're on a spring creek), your fly options are broader. In these cases it's no mistake to try and match local bugs or select the good ol' standbys like Pheasant Tails (#14-18), Hare's Ears (#12-16), and caddis larvae (#14-18). Fish won't have seen a fly for several months, so they won't be as skeptical as, say, a late-summer fish. Nonetheless, if you can see refusals or you suspect there are fish around but you're not catching them, it can be a simple matter of decreasing your fly size.

I was fishing the Delta Clearwater last spring and casting to a dandy old grayling holding below a pod of whitefish. While the whitefish were keen to intercept my Pheasant Tail, the grayling would take one look at it and dodge away. It was a gorgeous day to be on the water—boreal owls were calling hauntingly through the spruce trees, the first returning ducks were whistling overhead, and a particularly curious beaver was swimming circles so close that I could count his whiskers. I knew it would be even better if I could catch that grayling.

In more of a Hail Mary than anything else, I switched to a tippet of 6X and downsized my fly to a size 18. The cast was placed well ahead of him, and I struggled to watch the fly as it tumbled along the sand. My only suggestion of a take was the grayling curling toward where I guessed the fly to be and the blink of his white mouth, and when I set the hook I was pleasantly surprised by the

Creeks in the spring can resemble anything from Earl Grey tea to chocolate milk. Rest assured, though, that there are good schools of grayling to be found in the murk. © Joe Jackson

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Spring grayling are worth it.
© Joe Jackson

fibrillating weight on the other end. Soon I brought to hand the first grayling of the year; all 18½ inches of pure, wild glory. He flexed his dorsal once for me and I let him slither back to his run. Spring grayling are worth it.

When fishing nymph patterns to less sagacious fish, I typically rig up with 8- to 10 feet of 8-pound-test monofilament secured to a 20-inch section of 3X or 4X tippet with a surgeon's knot. You can add split shot above the knot to get down deep, and using an indicator is helpful where you don't have the luxury of watching takes. For the extremely deep holes, I've found success in rigging up nymphs or chironomid patterns like you might do in a lake environment—suspending the fly below an indicator 10-plus feet. If you find yourself fishing a deep but fast-flowing channel, it may be better to remove the indicator and fish Euro-style to reduce drag. With this technique, you'll want to keep a high stick and a straight line through the entire drift to detect strikes.

Spring is unique, too, in that not only are grayling moving into their spawning and summer feeding grounds, but the previous year's bounty is moving out: salmon smolts. Flies like the Clouser Minnow or Deceiver are good imitations and can incite explosive strikes from aggressive grayling. Stripping these through slack-water areas can be a downright blast.

A few years ago I was casting a chartreuse Woolly Bugger to a pair of pike in Badger Slough (anyone who lives within earshot of the Fairbanks/North Pole area knows I'm giving away no secrets here). The mid-April sun was bright and I'd forgotten my sunglasses, so I was essentially casting into a blind glare where I guessed the fish to be. After a few tries with no movement I figured the pike had sidled off, and in fact I was just about to wade back to the bank and get on higher ground to find them again when I saw a wake erupt just a few feet behind my fly. I had



Grayling are ravenous after a long winter under ice. © Emmie Jackson

a sudden, disturbing image of a submarine missile launched from a U-boat right before the line jumped and started hissing off the reel as though it were attached to said missile. I was ecstatic at hooking what I thought was my first pike, but when I got the fish to hand I realized that instead it was a zealous, coal-colored grayling. He'd stalked the fly like a shark, and it's safe to say in retrospect that my heart was thumping several times faster than if I'd caught him on a nymph.

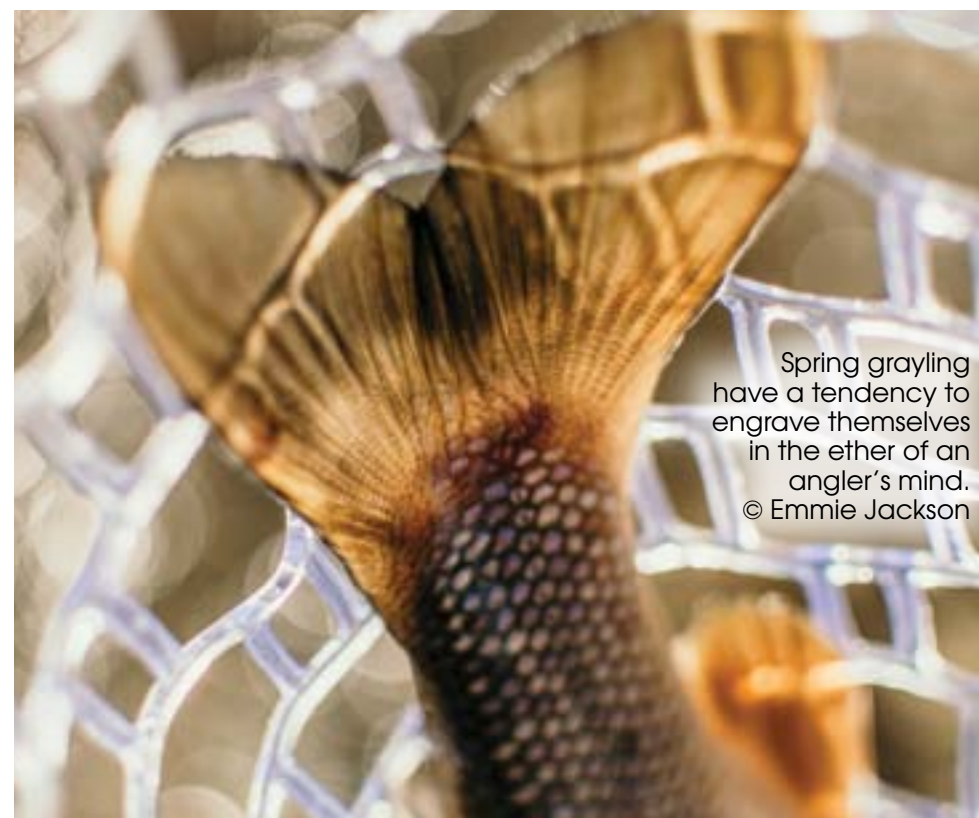
Regardless of how you fish for them, spring grayling represent a critical part of the Alaska angling open-water year: the beginning. Most of them will provide you with a cooperative audience and at least sharpen your casting and fish-fighting techniques, while a select few will wage battles of the wits so aggravating they'll make your head

spin. Some may even go on to become highlights of your year.

So go out and find them. Go out and watch the ice plow through the torrents toward the sea, go out and listen for the birds that announce a new season. Go out and congratulate yourself for making it through another winter. Forget about those 40-below days, the plumbing that froze, the frost plug that burst. That's all behind you.

The Arctic grayling is Alaska's fish—tough, regal, and abundant—and they're waiting.

Joe Jackson gets notoriously antsy during Alaska's long winters. His writing has been featured in Fish Alaska, Fur-Fish-Game, Northwest Fly Fishing, and The Drake, among others. Follow his escapades on Instagram: saveaworm_fishafly.



Spring grayling have a tendency to engrave themselves in the ether of an angler's mind.
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