

# LORD of the ALASKAN FLIES



STORY BY JOE JACKSON

Picking through the fly box. While there are few wrong answers in fly selection for the voracious Arctic grayling, there are definitely some tried-and-trues. © Emmie Jackson

“The rules!” shouted Ralph, “You’re breaking the rules!”  
“Who cares?”

-William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*

I had an epiphany this winter: I really don’t use that many flies.

The fly tyer in me likes to believe that I do, more as a means of justifying my material expenses than anything else, but the angler in me is more realistic. I like to experiment—don’t get me wrong—and have been known to try many absurd things, but at the end of the day and the end of the season, there are only a dozen patterns or so in my menagerie of boxes that get used enough to require replenishment. I think that most other anglers share this tendency to favor a few tried-and-trues over many mediocres, and this naturally begs the question: Which tried-and-trues are they?

In arranging this list (which I’m limiting to 10), I had a number of things to consider. Many flies are species-specific and their success rates are therefore relative; for sheer numbers, I’d bet my hat that the Elk-Hair Caddis has caught more Alaskan fish (mostly grayling) than many others combined. To try and keep things as fair as possible, I decided to focus on three considerations: a fly’s versatility, its longevity, and how effective it is at solving problems. Of course, I have to thank the anglers who helped me navigate the ensuing morass, either through phone calls, emails, or the written word of their books: Brad Elfers, Mike Cole, George Krumm, Shann Jones, Scott Murdock, Gabe Smith, Andy Ramey, Ryan Kelly,

George Cook, Tony Route, Cecilia “Pudge” Kleinkauf, and scores of others I’ve met on the water and but whom I’ve never learned their names. It’s a real testament to the quality of fly fishers in general that none of them got too cagey about me asking questions.

My whole vendetta to find out about Alaska’s favorite flies was exasperated by a need to learn their origins. We’ve got detailed histories for flies like the Muddler Minnow or the Quill Gordon or the Woolly Buzzer, but I was interested in the patterns developed and/or employed right here. The fascinating thing that I discovered is that most of these developments have happened within the last 40 years: Will Bauer put a unique spin on the Woolly Buzzer to get the Egg-Sucking Leech in 1984, George Cook decided to try wrapping marabou like hackle to create the Popsicle in the late ‘80s, and a not-so-little fly called the Dolly Llama entered the scene in the ‘90s. Even the development of the Intruder, arguably one of the most famous patterns in modern times, began in 1993.

Consequently, I believe we’re living in a kind of “golden age” of Alaskan fly tying, and if you’re in any kind of doubt about that, just compare a copy of *Fly Patterns of Alaska* by the Alaska Flyfishers from 1983 to the current online fly catalog of Alaska Fly Fishing Goods. The discrepancies in both volume and styles of flies these days are truly mind-boggling—though they make it slightly more difficult to locate the cream of the crop.

To start with, it made the most sense to me to organize fly patterns based on certain problems they solve and unique traits they have. This part was a bit like phylogenetics, the branch of biology that examines

evolutionary history and constructs what are essentially complex family trees. You can trace many living organisms to older, ancestral organisms, based on features that appear in the fossil record and distinguish these species from one another. Salmon and trout, for example, began with a species called *Eosalmo driftwoodensis*, which lived in the middle Eocene (roughly 50 million years ago) and possessed a unique trait called a basihyal tooth plate. The first split in *Driftwoodensis*’s family—which would eventually give us the diversity of all five Pacific salmon species and variations of trout—occurred between 15- and 20 million years ago.

Similarly, I think most flies can be traced to an “ancestral” fly (though there are definitely some that take quantum leaps and seem to transcend the slow graduality of evolution).

Take the Intruder. Ed Ward, Jerry French, and Scott Howell originated the first version of this fly, which featured a large profile and a picketing of “buggy” hackle on a long-shanked hook, in 1993. It didn’t take long to realize that the long-shanked hook was terrible for landing fish, and they soon employed a technique known as articulation. Articulation wasn’t new in 1993—the Waddington shank had been developed in the ‘50s by some die-hard British salmon anglers—but the way it was employed in the Intruder pattern started a revolution whose waves we’re still riding today. It’s as versatile as they come, it’s not gone out of style (and probably never will), and the hundreds of variants it has inspired prove that its design did a fine job of solving problems. I rank it #2 on Alaska’s top ten list.



An orange & pink spin on the popular Intruder fly. This pattern has been tweaked perhaps more than any other, but its principles remain foundational to articulated fly tying. © Joe Jackson



The king, the state bird, the great equalizer; the Dolly Llama. In its relatively short lifespan, this fly has accounted for some heavyweight fish. © Alaska Fly Fishing Goods

Aside from articulation and being intrusive enough to compel fish to strike, the Last Frontier has other unique problems that its flies need to solve. For one thing, our resident species feed on salmon eggs and flesh so voraciously in autumn that other imitations can fall by the wayside, and for another, swinging action in flies may not be as important as jiggling action. I, for one, spend a lot more time stripping flies than I do merely swinging them, and vertical movement through the water column seems to be a determining factor in my success more often than not.

For this reason, I have to crown Alaska’s #1 Lord of the Flies right here and now: congratulations, Dolly Llama. You cast like a wet gym sock and scare the bejesus out of me as you sear through the air on a backcast, but you do good

work. I was fascinated to learn that this fly, which Alaska Fly Fishing Goods owner Brad Elfers calls “the state bird,” was developed right here in the Mat-Su Valley. These days there are dozens of variations of it—some that supposedly cast better, others with more movement—but the hallmark double-bunny-strip design remains a keystone trait from which other creations have emerged. Versatility (you can catch anything from grayling to kings on this), longevity (it’ll be the go-to for my future grandkids, I’m sure), and effective problem-solving—I won’t reveal the originator’s name in print, but he deserves perpetually free beers.

I’m torn between numbers 3 and 4. Will Bauer perfected the Egg-Sucking Leech in the ‘80s, while George Cook was hot on his heels



Yet another example of anadromous life that fell for an Intruder-variant. © Emmie Jackson



Call it the Popsicle or the Alaskabout (or both), George Cook's revolutionary pattern flat-out catches fish.  
© Alaska Fly Fishing Goods

The mighty Egg-Sucking Leech, the fly nearly every angler in Alaska turns to at some point or another.  
© Alaska Fly Fishing Goods

with the Popsicle (both were prominent guides in Bristol Bay at the time). Both of their flies maintain cult followings across Alaska (and elsewhere), and both flies have the potential to clean up a river when fished in the right hands. For sheer versatility, though, I think I have to give the E.S.L the bronze medal. It can be fished as a streamer or on a dead drift, and it can be fished for grayling, pike, kings, and everything in between. Also, I can't overlook the fact that Tony Route gave it the title of Alaska's top fly even before I was born. Sliced bread has warranted more improvements in that time.

I have to give the Popsicle its due, however. Originally called the Alaskabout Series when Cook first developed it, this fly really impresses me for its sheer simplicity. In my view, the Popsicle is the stepladder upon which later advancements like the Intruder itself stand. Cook's real genius with this fly came in emulating hardware like plugs, Krocodiles, and Pixies. The resulting color combinations made the Popsicle one of the first flies to solve a critical and ubiquitous problem in our state of glaciers and volcanoes: water turbidity. With some rivers and streams being the clarity and consistency of a protein shake, it can seem impossible that a fish would ever see your fly. Yet every summer, I'm surprised (almost to the point of shouting) by the Popsicle's sheer productivity against all odds. You can tie it dark for the sake of a silhouette, or you can go the more flamboyant route and tie it in shades found only in radioactive sludge.

Now for the elephant in the room. If we're being honest, the bead probably deserves a spot in Alaska's top-ten list (maybe even #1 during certain autumn months), but I'll appease the purists (myself included) by giving #5 to the Glo-Bug instead. I won't indulge the whole "beads-aren't-a-fly-and-neither-are-Glo-Bugs" debate, because in my opinion, they're no less a "fly" than a Popsicle is, or an Intruder is, and there are cases where imitating Pacific salmon eggs is more of an artform than matching Green Drakes on the Henry's Fork. The Glo-Bug was popularized by The Bug Shop in Anderson, California (which marketed the first yarn for effectively tying these things, as well), and as best I can tell, the fly was originated in the late '60s or early '70s. Alaska's variation is the Iliamna Pinkie, which is chenille-based and far easier to tie. Like 'em or hate 'em, egg imitations are an Alaskan must-have.

Let's even things out with a classic, purist's dream: the Elk-Hair Caddis coming in hot at #6. Developed in 1957 by the late Al Troth for Pennsylvania streams, the Elk-Hair has become the pattern by which all other caddis imitations are judged. It's particularly effective in Alaska because of its toughness. Tied right, these flies can withstand dozens of sandpapered grayling mouths and still float like corks, and when you've only got so many summer hours to enjoy, every second that you're not retying or reapplying floatant is precious. Elk-Hairs are also dynamite for trout (they're my particular favorite in lakes) and can even be skated to entice Dolly Varden and small salmon.

At #7, the Thunder Creek is another one of those gems that hasn't changed much since

it was developed by Ken Fulsher in 1962. As everyone knows (or should), the statewide salmon hatch in the spring and early summer is to Alaska what the giant stoneflies are to the western United States; a bonanza for trophy-sized fish and anglers alike, provided they've got the flies to imitate them. Juvenile salmon come in a variety of sizes depending on what stream they were reared in, how old they are, and what species they are, but they can be effectively imitated with just a few baitfish-style patterns. Chief among these are the Clouser, the Epoxy Minnow, and the Thunder Creek, though I've come to favor a modified Thunder Creek for a few reasons. One, it's easier to cast without the impediment of dumbbell eyes, and two, most other anglers I've talked to swear that a sparser imitation is usually more effective. Back in the day, Alaskan tyers got pretty creative in their smolt imitations (Morrison's Secret and Son of a Salmon, I'm lookin' at you), but the Thunder Creek is one of those absurdly simple exceptions that'll both outfish the competition and take half the time to tie. A worthy fly in anyone's book.

Flesh flies are more a category than a particular pattern. They can be as simple as a white bunny strip lashed around an octopus hook, a white Woolly Bugger or the similar Battle Creek Special, or they can feature articulation and composite loops and the whole nine yards (Ryan Sorsdahl of Bigfoot Custom Fly once tied me an impressive example of the latter which he calls the Trash Can). Some, like Mark Hieronymus's Twofer combine the effectiveness of flesh imitations and beads. While it's difficult to pin down the ancestral flesh fly, I think we all use enough of our own variations that it doesn't even matter. Collectively, they take the title of #8.

At long last we come to mouse patterns, perhaps the most entertaining of pursuits. At certain times on certain streams, mouse patterns are the #1 fly to have, but on our list here and now they come in at #9. They tend to work best when water temperatures are warm or warming, and though some anglers see "mousing" as a rare spectacle, small rodents make up a significant part of a trout's diet here in the North. One guide out of Kamchatka claims that he's never cleaned a trout that didn't have a mouse, vole, shrew, or lemming in its stomach, and there's a popular photo from the Togiak Wildlife Refuge of a trout and no less than 19 small rodents that



The author's flesh variation, called "The Janitor". It really cleans 'em up.  
© Joe Jackson

In a state where smolt "hatches" are regular and intense, having a durable, sparse, and castable fly is key. The Thunder Creek fits all of those needs and more.  
© Alaska Fly Fishing Goods

Like it or hate it, this little globule is no stranger to fish mouths.  
© Alaska Fly Fishing Goods

Perhaps the king of dry flies, the Elk-Hair Caddis can be fished to represent a multitude of insect species.  
© Alaska Fly Fishing Goods

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Mr. Hankey waiting for summer. © Joe Jackson



The staple grayling fly, THE GRHE. © Joe Jackson

were removed from its gut. I think if we are to give credit to the most popular mouse fly from which other versions have stemmed, we've got to recognize the Morrish Mouse as developed by Ken Morrish. I've heard stories from Bristol Bay streams where these flies literally fall apart from the dozens of trout mouths that attack them. Mouse patterns often trigger aggressive takes and result in deep-hooked fish, though, which is why articulated mice are becoming the more popular option. Brad Elfers tells me that guides in Kamchatka will search through clients' fly boxes and remove any mice that aren't articulated, in fact, which is why I dub Mr. Hankey, Jeff Hickman's new-age mouse fly, as the king of the rodents. It's also got one of the best names I've ever heard of for a fly (though Mike Cole's Mr. Bodangles and Liquid Wrench are close runner-ups).

I will close the door on this list by filling the #10 slot with a nymph: the Gold-Ribbed Hare's Ear. I've seen the fly credited to G.E.M Skues, James Ogden, and Fredrick Halford (all Englishmen) in years ranging from 1850 to 1910, but whatever the actual case is, the GRHE is classic. This fly has accounted for more 18-plus-inch grayling than most other patterns combined for me, and has also become my spring go-to for finicky trout. Scott Murdock ties a variation with qiviut and partridge that features a hot-spot of pink yarn on the butt, and this pattern is, without exception, the first fly I knot on when the ice melts. There are a million variations of the GRHE, so take your pick.

Whew. We did it, folks. Alaska's top ten flies.

I realize that this list is probably different than your list, and your brother's, and your dog's, but there it is all the same.

In doing all of the research for this article, it was only natural that I came across obscure and personal patterns of other anglers. Many of us prefer to create our own flies. This reality makes classifying them all into a neat list difficult, to say the least, but I've tried to do so by always reverting back to the ancestral fly. For example, patterns like the Starlite & Hareball Leeches are lumped under the title of Egg-Sucking Leeches, while the myriad of mouse flies out there today are represented by the Morrish and the Mr. Hankey. I

understand that these are generalizations; but to adequately cover each and every pattern in this gargantuan state, it would take volumes. I will say that most of these individually-tweaked flies, such as Scott Murdock's version of the Elk-Hair or Shann Jones's spin on the Salcha Pink, work better than the conventional pattern anyway, and I would encourage anyone consulting this fly list (or any fly list, for that matter) to use it as a starting point rather than an ending point. Come up with something yourself. We know our waters and our fish and our circumstances better than anyone, and this rule is ultimately what has given us the popular patterns of our generation; the Dolly, the Intruder, the Popsicle. All of them are immortal examples of innovators who recognize the challenges put up by their quarry and rise to meet them, and all of them are reminders that the true lord of the Alaskan flies—more consistently than any other—is the one that you fish with confidence, because it has proven itself again and again for sheer versatility, longevity, and ability to solve problems where, when, and how you fish it. There are, after all, no rules for flies in the Last Frontier....

Or maybe there are, but as the boys say on William Golding's island: "Who cares?"

In list form, here they are:

1. Dolly Llama
2. Intruder
3. Egg-Sucking Leech
4. Popsicle
5. Glo-Bug/Iliamna Pinkie
6. Elk-Hair Caddis
7. Thunder Creek
8. Flesh fly
9. Morrish Mouse/Mr. Hankey
10. Gold-Ribbed Hare's Ear

And I would be remiss if I didn't include the honorable mentions:

- Mr. Bodangles
- Liquid Wrench
- Classic Woolly Bugger
- Sculpin-style patterns
- Murdock's Pink-Butt
- Gurgler
- Rockstar
- Muddler Minnow
- Prince Nymph

Now take your pick and start fishin'.

*Joe Jackson obsesses himself with flies not so much to find the magic bullet, but because he's fascinated by the levels of innovation that go on in the flyfishing world. To file complaints about his top-ten Alaskan list, or to tell him about your lineup of never-before-seen coho flies, cast him an email at [jdjacksonwriter@gmail.com](mailto:jdjacksonwriter@gmail.com). (Seriously, if you consider yourself an innovative or unconventional tyer, please get in touch).*



A healthy rainbow that took a sculpin-style articulated pattern by Bigfoot Custom Fly. This one was especially cool because she refused a bead, of all things, right before the fly change. © Joe Jackson



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