




The good ol' grayling, as reliable a character in Alaska's streams as you could ever ask for.  
© Joe Jackson

Story by  
Joe Jackson



Even if you don't catch anything, it's hard to beat the views that Alaska's waters offer up.  
© Joe Jackson

# THE SUBTLE ART OF STREAM RESEARCH

There is no shortage of brilliant minds that have praised the act of preparation. Abe Lincoln took two hours to chop down a tree, but four to sharpen his axe. Meanwhile, Aristotle bellows from the grave: "Well begun is half done."

As Alaskan anglers, preparations for the fishing season are perhaps as important to us as the fishing season itself. The heralds of lure making, gear organization, and stream research (among other tasks) give us a chance to extend our tragically short season—or, at least, they help us make the most of it by entering it equipped and informed.

Among these off-season undertakings, stream research has always been my favorite and most valued. There's something about looking down upon maps like a god and being able to trace a stream with your finger that would take half an inch of boot leather to hike. I was doing just that one evening in February when the temperature outside was something obscene and the darkness was thick enough to chip with an ice pick. There, on my computer screen, was a satellite map zoomed in to the point that I could see ripples in the fabled trout haven I just knew had to exist.

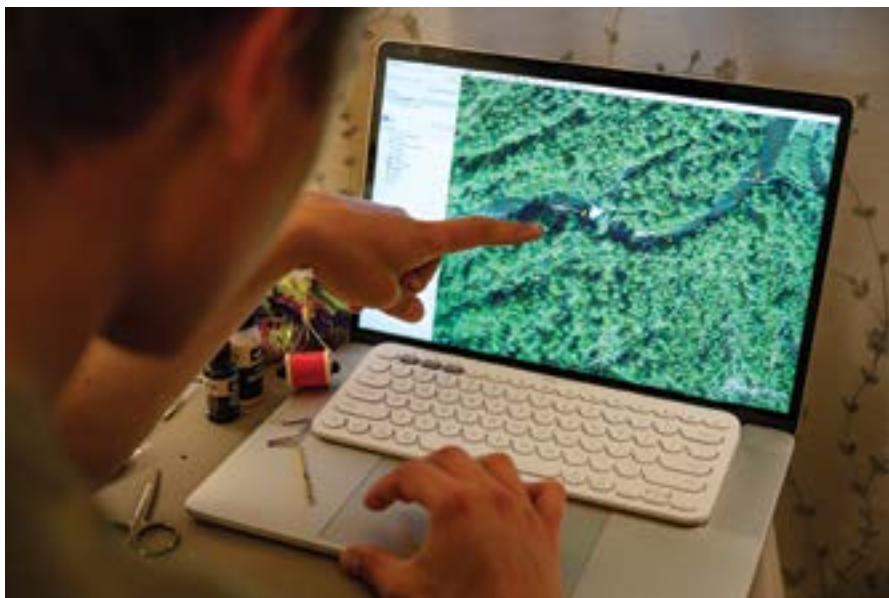
There certainly wasn't a trail to this Eden; there wasn't even a name. It was a branch of a branch of a river that other well-known streams flowed into, and as I sat there, I could practically feel the tugs of the thirty-inch rainbow that I knew I would usher from its depths.

The following August, I was cursing my way through alders bound for this place, the country my boots struggled to conquer far less forgiving than Google Earth had made it look. It was a half mile from the road to the stream, but it felt more like ten. By the time I heard the signatures of running water, I'd poked a hole in my waders, lost part of a fly rod (which I later recovered), and nearly dislocated my shoulder after I tumbled head over heels down an embankment. Good thing I was confident about what awaited me.

Just as in mathematics, good stream research works best if it follows an order of operations. What's the sense in wasting four hours combing a creek on Google Earth if you find out later that it doesn't even host a salmon run? Or worse, that it's not a clearwater stream at all as it appeared, but rather a glacial channel the color and consistency of a protein shake?

To begin the research process, therefore, it makes sense to focus on "primary sources." These include reliable books, local intelligence, and area fisheries-biologist knowledge, much of which can and should be obtained during the fishing season when the information is hot. Between these three sources, it's very unlikely that you'll acquire faulty leads or be sent on a snipe hunt. Remember that these are starting points, though; not ending points.

I should make note before we begin that my suggestions are



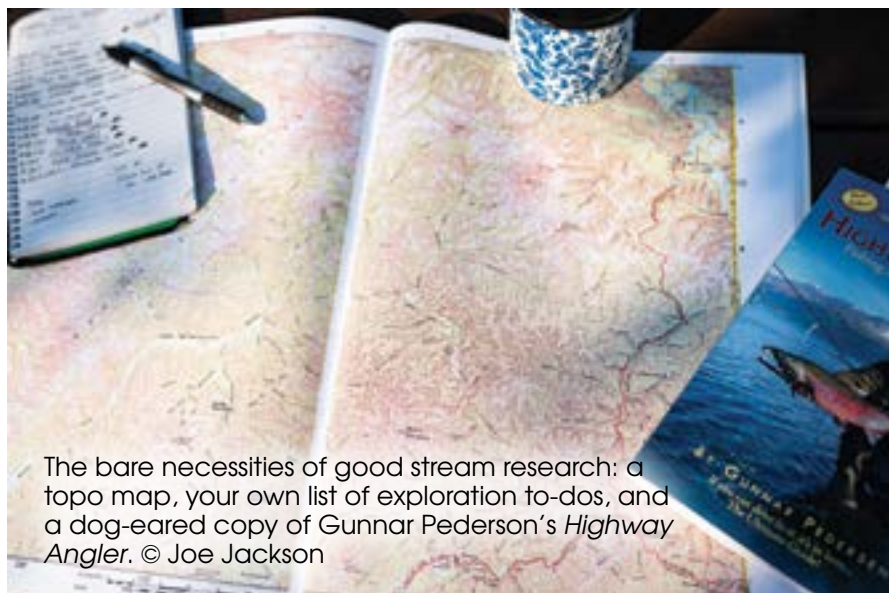
Dropping pins in Google Earth is a great way to keep track of intriguing spots on a map, or to mark successful locations for later use. © Emmie Jackson

made primarily with the road-system angler in mind. Much of what I've learned regarding stream research is applicable even to the off-grider, but since I am largely vehicle-bound myself, this is how my strategies have developed. If you're going to shell out the money and the time to fly in or float a particular watercourse, I will assume that the fishing is worth it and that your main concerns are simply logistical anyway.

So, let's begin with the books. Gunnar Pederson is perhaps the king of fishing Alaska's road system, and a few bucks spent on later editions of his *Highway Angler* will pay for themselves pretty quickly. Scott Haugen's *Flyfisher's Guide to Alaska* is another gem. Both books are ones you'll want to carry in your vehicle and populate copiously with notes.

A few hours spent skimming these tomes can give you ideas for new places to fish, or it can spark new strategies or access points on streams you're already familiar with. If I'm planning on making a drive across the state, say to Anchorage or Coldfoot, I always check for water I'll cross on the way. Sometimes you just happen to notice a stream name you haven't seen before, the stars will align and you think, "Maybe I'll just fish that today." My good buddy, Ryan Kelly, made me a believer in this sort of tactic when he brought me to a particular stream (which will remain forever nameless) that he'd found "briefly mentioned" in Pederson's book. He'd tried fishing it on a whim and, over the course of a few summers, had figured it out intimately. Today it remains one of the best streams I've ever fished, home to both my own personal-best rainbow and Ryan's (which was a 27-inch behemoth). If that's not a testament to just giving things a shot, I don't know what is.

Area fisheries biologists for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) are another excellent resource. These folks can provide indispensable knowledge on fisheries within their purview. For the scientifically minded, they can also provide hard data on fish returns, size distribution, and population trends for select fisheries. Perusing the "Sportfishing Information" section of ADF&G's website will reveal reliable information on Alaska's various drainages, including fish counts, run



The bare necessities of good stream research: a topo map, your own list of exploration to-dos, and a dog-eared copy of Gunnar Pederson's *Highway Angler*. © Joe Jackson



The results of working hard (and being on the stream before dawn). © Ryan Kelly

timing, and the department contact for each area. Take the time to meet these professionals; give them a call, send them an email, introduce yourself and find out more about what they do. Tapping these biologists for information on locations and timing is almost always useful, though remember that they have other important work to do.

Similarly, 10 minutes spent in a fly shop or a riverside bar (or even just conversing with a bystander) can go a long way if you ask the right questions. Fishermen are associated with tall tales for a reason, so be scrutinous of the information you receive. If I've learned anything from the last decade-plus as a road angler, though, it's that *almost* always there is at least a pinhead of truth within the most far-fetched of tales. I once had a guy tell me he saw a pike "*this big!*" in a local Fairbanks lake while holding his arms out as though he was going to grab a refrigerator. *Sure you did*, I thought at the time, but a 10-minute walk in the direction he pointed brought me to a finger of stagnant water where two pike (the biggest being maybe 25 inches) were chasing each other around like horny teenagers. The tale was stretched, sure, but the real spectacle was there. Don't discount



Gearing up for an exploratory creek mission. If the quarry is grayling, it's hard to go wrong with a dry fly. For trout, a leech. © Emmie Jackson

your own observations, either. Sometimes our eyes are more reliable than we deem safe to believe, and wild hunches can turn out to be windfalls on occasion.

Once you've nailed down some places (or at least some regions) to hone in on, you're ready for what I call the "Map Stage." This second step in the sequence is my personal favorite; the one where you can practically overflow with possibility and get way ahead of yourself.

Google Earth is my go-to. Use the Google Maps satellite-imagery feature if you're bound to the web, otherwise download the free version of Earth on your computer and/

or phone. I prefer the downloadable version because I can drop pins and add notes, all of which transfer directly to my phone and are thus accessible remotely (provided I've synced the two while on Wi-Fi).

Whatever version you use, satellite maps are irreplaceable in giving you a bird's-eye preview of the water you'll likely be fishing. Depending on the stream's location and the quality of the satellite imagery for that region, you won't be able to see every fishable hole, but you can often predict much of the

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watercourse's structure based on sheer curvature. Sharp bends probably indicate a dynamic stream; deep holes, log jams, a good mix of riffles and pools. Straighter courses, on the other hand, might feature long, even runs. This information can help you plan your approach. Another feature of Google Earth I've found useful is a distance-measuring tool. This can allow you to gauge stream size and determine potentially how far up or down you can fish in a given amount of time. I think the more information you can bring tucked away in your ol' noggin, the better off you're going to be. One thing to take note of, however, is the date that satellite images were taken. I've found myself looking at photos from 2011 and ended up fishing an entirely different creek than I expected.

Topographical maps are good for getting a detailed picture of the area, especially if you're going somewhere remote. You'll find that satellite imagery is spotty at best in our colossal state, leaving two-dimensional elevation maps our only real chance of visualizing certain far-flung places (even local places, in some cases). I carry a copy of the *Alaska Atlas & Gazetteer* from DeLorme in my truck, and would consider this another must-have.

I have to admit that thus far, I've mostly been focusing on moving water. Forgive me, stillwater brethren. Bathymetric maps are particularly useful for lakes and ponds, and ADF&G provides a number of these maps on their website. Where satellite and topo maps simply show the body of water, with no real dimension to what is beneath the surface, bathymetric maps show the contours of lake beds. You can see (or at least imagine) any type of stillwater structure you could want to target: drop-offs, shelves, sunken islands, potential weed flats, etc.

The final type of map I sometimes rely on is a Tax Parcel Map. Luckily, living in Alaska means that most of the water



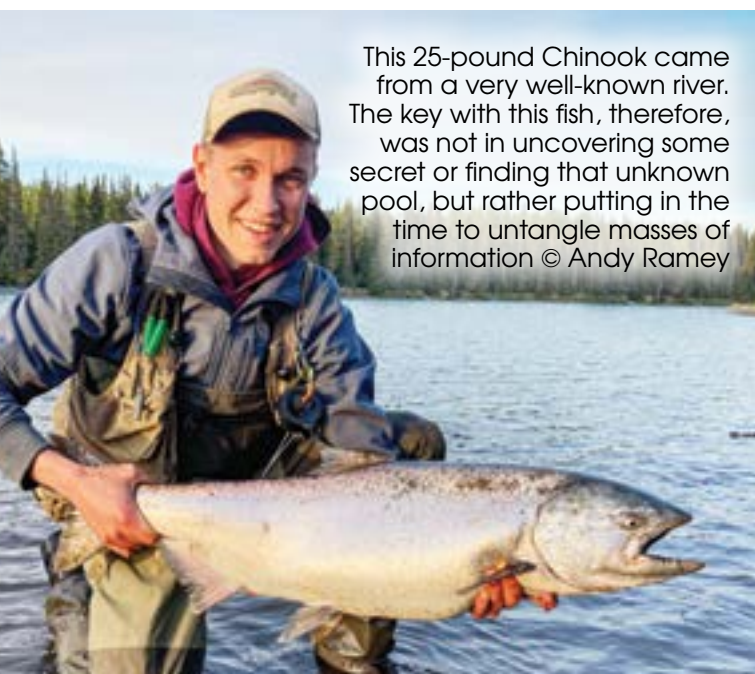
Ryan Kelly, the Rainbow King, with the trout that literally changed my life and the way I go about my fishing. The best thing you can do as an angler is abandon the collective dogma and be willing to try anything.  
© Joe Jackson

you could ever want to fish is publicly accessible. There are circumstances, however, when the only way to access a watershed is through private property. Tax Parcel Maps, usually available through the associated borough's website, show who owns the land and where the boundaries are. Often it will give you a name and address of the owner, who

you can then reach out to via phone call or good ol' fashioned snail mail. I once ran a prolific letter-writing campaign to property owners in the Fairbanks area in search of burbot spots. Most of the answers I received were predictably "no" (a few of which were accompanied by vague death threats), but I had one or two generous souls give me permission and what were essentially exclusive fishing rights. If you have private water in sight, it's worth a try.

Speaking of private property, it is important to note that landowners cannot deny your right to access navigable water. "Navigable water" is defined as any water of the state that is navigable in fact for any useful purpose including boating, hunting, fishing, and other recreational activities (AS 38.05.965(13)). This means that, if you're footbound, you can follow a stream's path even if the adjacent land is privately owned so long as you stay below the high-water mark. This does not include Native lands, however. Unless you are floating through (and in some cases even if you are floating through) you still need to buy the appropriate access permit(s).

The very last batch of resources I offer with some hesitation, and only because they've been useful for me a time or two. The first is the online Alaska Outdoor Forum, the second is Facebook. I do not condone nor recommend hopping on the Internet and blabbing to all and sundry where you're thinking about going fishing and asking for suggestions; for one thing, I hate "hotspotting" (mentioning specific stream names), and for another, do you really expect to find that hidden honey-hole by asking a bunch of strangers about it? I merely offer these up to ponder. If anything, browse either or both of these resources and see what people are saying. Behave like a fly on the wall, so to speak. Internet-goers can be utter morons, yes, but they can also be tremendously revealing in terms of run timing and general fishing quality. Who knows; maybe you figure out where a bunch of people are fishing and you find a creek or a lake or a pond to yourself that's nearby.



This 25-pound Chinook came from a very well-known river. The key with this fish, therefore, was not in uncovering some secret or finding that unknown pool, but rather putting in the time to untangle masses of information © Andy Ramey

If the aforementioned resources seem a bit mind-boggling, that's because they are. While useful in moderation, the angler's gamut of research tools can become overwhelming and even counterproductive if used the wrong way. You get so caught up in the "what if" that you forget to just give it a go. Often, it's

better to finish out the sequence the good ol' fashioned way; throw on the waders and see for yourself.

Get out there and find out what a place looks like. In many parts of Alaska, in fact, this might be the *only way* to gain true reconnaissance. For example, my wife and I recently took a drive up the Taylor Highway. I will say right now that not only is there a comprehensive lack of information regarding fishing along this road (a big reason we went in the first place), but the satellite images of the region are terrible. This, of course, reassured me of the vastness of our state (even those goldarned space cameras can't penetrate the Last Frontier), but it also made the process of exploration far more interesting. I only got to know the streams' characters by crossing them at their bridges and following their banks.

Use the books and use the satellite maps as a springboard to *decide* where to explore. Lower your expectations—better yet, get rid of them—and go see what's out there. You can pack a rod (I can't think of a time I explored fishable water *without* a rod...), but try not to come into it with too much of a plan. Let the place tell you about itself before you start assuming things.

Keep in mind as you explore that if you can get there, others can too. The areas around bridges and waterside trails will be the most heavily fished, so try and get away from these places. Go slowly; observe what's going on around you. Are there bugs hatching? Is this a salmon spawning stream? For lakegoers, I would recommend investing in either a float tube or a good canoe. Then spend time getting away from the boat launch.

Before I leave you, let's dip back to my trout heaven. I'd just gone and dislocated my shoulder (or thereabouts), and

now I could hear something through the relenting wickerwork of alders: the unmistakable, serene, *euphoric* sound of running water. I'd had a theory for a while that the quality of trout fishing I could expect was related (if not directly proportional) to the amount of energy I burned in getting to it. If that was indeed the case, I figured, I was in for a spanking good time; a thirty-inch, all-natural, never-before-seen Alaska leopard rainbow trout, to be precise.

I'd combed Google Earth for hours, maybe days, staring at this sliver of water; where it began, where it ended. I'd had the pioneer gumption to stop my truck alongside that random stretch of highway and go diving into the bear-riddled brush. I'd stomped every step on that unbroken no-man's-land through all manner of peril and discomfort and now, I was here.

The creek, it turned out, totally contrary to what was shown in pixels on that obscenely cold evening in February, was totally opaque. It was merely another channel of the main river. There was nothing to do but nod, accept my fate, turn around and climb back up the hill.

I found myself thinking of something my dad is fond of saying: "If it was easy, everyone would do it."



*Aside from spending a lot of time on the water, Joe Jackson spends a lot of time in space—or, at least, viewing things from space. He's written a bit about his fishing excursions, but rest assured, there are some things (mostly place names) that he'll take to the grave.*

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