

AURORA

A photograph of a middle-aged man with grey hair and a mustache, wearing a blue button-down shirt. He is smiling and holding a small, yellow book with a black and white illustration of a cat. The background is a rustic interior with a stone fireplace and wooden beams.

Casting about for life lessons: Dan Hoffman '88, '08

by Sam Bishop

Dan Hoffman holds the image of a rainbow trout that his wife, Gwen, beaded on moose hide for the cover of his book. UAF photo by Leif Van Cise. Other photos courtesy of Dan Hoffman unless otherwise noted.

**Dan Hoffman '88, '08
claims his yard looks
like hell every
summer. But he has a
good excuse. The
former Fairbanks
police chief is a fly
fisherman, and the
season of water
passes quickly in
Interior Alaska. He
has other priorities.**

The condition of Hoffman's yard doesn't matter much anyway. When standing on the deck of his hillside house north of Fairbanks, a person doesn't look at the aspen shoots trying to reclaim dominance. The astounding view gets all the attention.

"There were a few times when I was still chief, I'd wake up and look outside and I'd see some big column of smoke or a bunch of flashing red lights, I'd get on the phone to dispatch and say 'What's going on?'" Hoffman said. "They were probably like 'That Hoffman, up there on the hill with his binoculars.'"

Hoffman recently turned his observant gaze in a more inward direction. His book, "An Alaska Flyfisher's Odyssey: Seeking a Life of Drag-Free Drift in the Land of the Midnight Sun," was published in midsummer 2021.

The book explores Hoffman's observations about life through fly-fishing analogies, the most prominent of which appears in the book's title: seeking a drag-free drift.

The phrase describes the ideal manner in which an artificial fly — either a dry fly on the surface or a nymph underwater — moves naturally at the current's speed, without the attached line dragging it forward or backward. That condition best mimics a natural insect.



Hoffman fishes for rainbow trout on the upper Russian River. Photo by Glen Nielsen.

“It’s through the evaluation of all factors involved, and — perhaps most importantly — in anticipation of likely consequences — that the angler makes initial and continuous adjustments throughout the course of his fly’s journey,” Hoffman wrote.

The same method will help achieve a rewarding, drag-free life, the book’s central theme asserts.

“Some of the people who are reading this book are going to appreciate the philosophical — ‘OK, he’s dealing with

this as a metaphor for friendship, and he's dealing with this as an analogy for marriage' — and I figured some people would really get into that," Hoffman said.

"And I figured there's a lot of people who might get this book thinking, 'Oh great this is all about fishing,'" he said. "And then as they start reading, it's like, 'Well, this is BS, there's hardly anything about fishing. It's just a bunch of philosophical life crap,' and they throw it away."

So the book also portrays Interior Alaska's seasons, describes favorite waters across the state and serves as a memoir that expresses gratitude to his parents for raising him as a fisherman.

The tone is often humorous.



Clockwise from left: Hoffman, in high school at the time, holds a grayling caught on upper Montana Creek in the Susitna River valley; Hoffman and his mother, Phyllis, pause during an excursion on the Gunnison River's Lake Fork in Colorado; Hoffman and his father, Bill, take a break from fishing the Kulik River on the Alaska Peninsula.

One extended comparison between marriage and the use of a two-fly rig concludes with this apology: "Sorry, but you're going to have to head to a different type of bookstore if you're looking for a story extolling the benefits of three-fly setups."

Kelly Bostian, the former outdoors editor and managing editor of the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, supplied Hoffman with the book's forward.

Bostian, now an outdoors writer in Oklahoma, said Hoffman's book is a fine portrait of Interior Alaska. Hoffman's tales about his father also are especially touching, Bostian said.

And seeking life lessons from outdoor experiences is something many people can understand, he said.

"You can go through all the trials and tribulations of life in the space of one outing," Bostian said.



A hooked grayling's shimmering colors shine in the sun.

Getting it out there

Once Hoffman started the book, the words burst out. He began the 176-page effort in November 2020 and finished in February 2021. He had it printed by July, in part because he abandoned the traditional publishing route.

"It's a tremendous pain in the ass," he said. "Every publishing house has their own unique thing. This one wants a query letter and a two-page synopsis and three

sample chapters. This one wants five sample chapters and this and this and this.”

Then they wouldn’t respond.

“I can’t sit here and wait for six months to see if one of these people like what I did,” he concluded.

So, on a friend’s recommendation, he worked with Sweetgrass Books, a division of Farcountry Press, in Helena, Montana. He paid the company up front for its editing and design work.

The approach served his pace and his goals. “I want to get it out there, and I want it to have some use or serve some purpose,” he said.

Bostian, the former editor, said Hoffman’s rapid production rate was impressive.

“I think he’s kind of had this stuff that’s kind of gurgled along in his brain for a while,” Bostian said. “Maybe he was taking notes.”

Half the proceeds will go to the Alaska operations of Trout Unlimited, an advocacy group for fishing and wild rivers. The group opposes development of the Pebble Mine in southwestern Alaska, where Hoffman worked summers as a fishing guide during college.

“I probably personally won’t make any money, but if I can generate several thousand dollars for TU, that’s cool,” he said.



Hoffman swings a bunny leech from the mouth of the Kulik River into Nonvianuk Lake on the Alaska Peninsula just before catching a large lake trout. Photo by Chuck Babbitt.

Figuring out his rhythm

If Hoffman hadn't written a fly-fishing and philosophy book, he said, he might have written a music and philosophy book.

"Being a drummer, the way my mind sometimes works, the way I dissect situations, is, well, first and foremost there's going to be this underlying rhythm, and you've got to figure that out before you move on," he said.

As a UAF wildlife biology student during the mid-1980s, Hoffman drummed in the university's concert and symphonic bands as well as a few rock bands.

"My favorite was probably Hugh Oglethorpe and the Zulu Paperboys, which was kind of like a spoof band," Hoffman said.

Hoffman arrived at UAF after graduating from Dimond High School in Anchorage in 1983, but he'd already seen enough of Interior Alaska to know he liked it.

Until age 12, Hoffman lived in western Colorado, where his family spent their vacations hunting and fishing for food. In 1977, his father took a job managing the Sheffield House hotel on the Valdez waterfront, just as the trans-Alaska pipeline was completed. Later, they moved to Anchorage and his father managed the Alyeska Hotel in nearby Girdwood.

During high school, Hoffman spent two summers working at the Youth Conservation Corps camp on the Chena Hot Springs Road, building trails such as Chena Dome, Granite Tors and Angel Rocks.

“That’s when I really fell in love with Fairbanks and the Interior — hot dry summers, just working out in the woods,” he said.

“I highly value both the education and the overall experience I had at the university,” Hoffman said. In fact, he had expected to enter a master’s program in wildlife biology at UAF after graduating with his bachelor’s.

But then he took a hard look at what he’d be doing as a professional. He was afraid he’d end up with a seasonal-only job or one at a desk modeling wildlife populations with data collected by field technicians.

So he returned to UAF, picked up a minor in criminal justice and headed to the public safety academy in Sitka for his law enforcement certificate. The state hired him as a seasonal fish and wildlife enforcement officer on the Kenai Peninsula.

Hoffman's older brother worked as a city police officer in Kenai at the time, and Hoffman had enjoyed a few ride-alongs with him. So when he saw a recruitment ad from the Fairbanks Police Department in 1988, he applied. He started in March 1989.



*Photo caption: Hoffman works in his office on Jan. 26, 2009, a few months before retiring as chief of the Fairbanks Police Department. Photo by **Johnny Wagner '07**, Fairbanks Daily News-Miner.*

"I think they had 310 people show up for three openings. Today they can't find a frickin' warm body," he said.

Hoffman said he loved his policing career. He rose steadily through the ranks at the Fairbanks department, serving as chief from 2005 to 2009. (He earned a second degree, a master's in justice and public administration, from UAF in 2008.)

Readers of his book won't find much about policing or his police career, though.

"When I was done, I wanted to be done," he said. He now works as an independent emergency planning consultant for businesses and other organizations.

Seeking authenticity

Writing might seem an unusual hobby for a police officer, but Hoffman has enjoyed it from an early age.

"I always prided myself on the fact that I have a fairly outline-oriented mind," he said. As a police officer, he wrote constantly, albeit mostly in the "Joe Friday — just the facts" style. After he gained more experience in policing, he wrote articles for law enforcement magazines.

As chief, he also wrote occasional opinion pieces for the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner.

Bostian, the paper's former editor, said Hoffman's pieces always felt authentic, not like "somebody at city hall wrote it."

“If you read one from Dan, you knew it was from him,”
Bostian said.

Hoffman said he also wanted his book to have an
authentic Alaska character — starting right from the cover.

“Ninety-five percent of fishing books you see, it’s some
yutz holding their big fish,” he said.



Hoffman holds a grayling caught in Interior Alaska.

So he turned to his wife, Gwen, for help.

They met at the Fairbanks Police Department, where she was a dispatcher from 1984 until retiring in 2004. They married in the mid-90s and raised two children.



Gwen Hoffman shares some fishing territory with a brown bear along American Creek on the Alaska Peninsula.

Gwen Hoffman is Athabascan, a member of the Demientieff family with roots in the village of Holy Cross of the lower Yukon River. Her mother taught her to bead in the traditional style.



Photo caption: Gwen Hoffman beaded this image of a rainbow trout on moose hide for her husband's book cover. The corner adornments are made with porcupine quills. UAF photo by Leif Van Cise.

So her husband asked if she would create the image in beaded moose hide that adorns his book's cover. He found a photo of a jumping rainbow trout for her to work from.

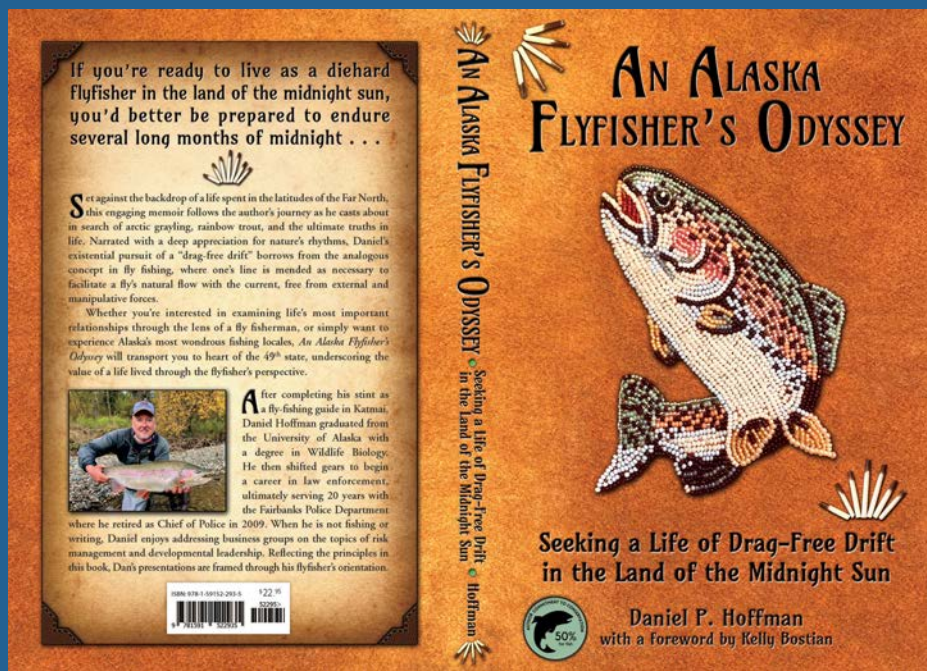
"A lot of people in the Lower 48, when they look at it, they might not instantly appreciate it," Dan Hoffman said. "But I figure anybody from Alaska, they're right away going to be like, 'Oh, that's beadwork on moose hide.'"

Hoffman also took the unusual approach of beginning the book not with a fishing story but rather with four chapters describing Interior Alaska's seasons. He started with winter.



Viewed from Hoffman's house, ice fog blankets the city of Fairbanks and the Tanana Valley during an 11 a.m. sunrise in December.

“To me it makes perfect sense, well, first of all because it was winter when I was writing it, so I look out my window and this is what I see,” he said. “But two, I’m trying to underscore that this is what it means to live your life as a fly fisherman in Alaska. The majority of your time up here is not spent out on the stream. It’s being in 20 below and little sunlight and thinking and hoping and waiting and dreaming about that spring to come.”



"An Alaska Flyfisher's Odyssey: Seeking a Life of Drag-Free Drift in the Land of the Midnight Sun" can be purchased at the UA Museum of the North, Edge of the Arctic Trading Post, Alaska Rare Coins and the Fairbanks Barnes and Noble. It may also be ordered online from Farcountry Press and Amazon.

