

# A Trout Fly Fishing Primer

## Part 1 - Fishing a Fly for Trout

### Reading the Water to Find Trout:

Trout have four needs:

- Stay safe from predators
- A comfortable place to rest
- Easy access to food
- Oxygen from the water

When we present a fly, we have to make our cast based on these needs. We don't simply cast blind and hope for the best. How then do we find trout?

A fish needs to expend as little energy as possible while gathering the most food. So a trout will want to sit in slow moving water, where it doesn't have to work hard to maintain position, but next to faster water. This faster flow acts like a conveyor belt bringing food to the fish. They need only to dart out into the faster flow to eat and then slide back to their quiet resting spot to wait for the next morsel.



*1 Trout could be hiding behind any of these rocks*

Look for trout behind, in front of and beside rocks, in deeper water next to shallows, and anywhere there is a seam between fast and slow flows.

Foam lines on the water are clues as to where the main flow of the water is going. This main flow will hold the most food. Trout will sit beside this flow or underneath it, around the rocks and in the small troughs along the bottom.

Fish need to breathe and they obtain their oxygen from the water. Cold water holds more oxygen than warm water. Broken water or white water will be colder due to evaporation and will absorb more oxygen so on warm days fish will seek out cooler, more oxygenated areas of the river – the riffle or broken water.



*2 Foam lines on the water indicate main flows*

Broken or riffle water provides protection from predators as it is harder for ospreys and eagles to see the fish. This kind of water also provides some relief from a harsh overhead sun (fish don't have eyelids).



**3 White water provides oxygen, coolness and shelter**

Deeper water also provides protection from predators and makes fish feel more secure. While they may feed in shallow water, they will move to deeper water when feeling less secure. If we do not see feeding activity in the shallows, then start off by fishing the deeper water. In rivers that see a lot of fishing pressure, deep water is often the best place to start.

Fish can see us and the deeper they lie, the easier it is for them to see us. Fish in shallow water have less range of vision. If you want more information on this subject, look up "Snell's Window." Fish can be spooked when they see us, or by careless wading that creates noise and pushes waves out over the pool. Approach each new piece of water with caution.

Big fish hold in the best water for feeding and protection, pushing smaller fish to more marginal lies. Keeping in mind what trout need, use that information as a guide as to where the big fish reside.

### **What Trout Eat:**

A trout's primary diet is composed of insects, but as it grows older and bigger, it will gravitate more to eating smaller fish. Trout have also been known to eat frogs, baby birds that fall in the water – pretty well any animal protein that they can fit in their mouths.

The main insect types that trout eat are:

- Mayflies
- Caddisflies
- Stoneflies
- Chironomids
- Terrestrials (insects that live on land and fall into the water)
- Other aquatic insects (scuds, damselflies, dragonflies, crane flies etc.)

The bulk of a trout's insect diet consists of mayflies, caddisflies, stoneflies and chironomids. These insects spend most of their lives along the bottom of rivers in a stage that fly fishers refer to as "nymphs". Some crawl around the rocks seeking food, some burrow into the silt, while others are free swimming. When we are nymphing, we are attempting to imitate this stage of the lifecycle of the insect. The bulk of a trout's diet comes from insects in the nymph stage of their lives.

When approaching the river, take the time to turn over a few rocks to see what insects are living there. Some anglers will hold a small, fine mesh net in the water to see what is floating by. These two techniques should guide us as to which nymph to use.

These aquatic insects cannot mate nor lay eggs while in the nymph stage. They need to transition from the nymph to an adult stage then the insect flies away to mate, lay eggs and die. This transition is referred to as "hatching". The expression "match the hatch" comes from anglers attempting to find a dry fly that will match the insects that are hatching.

Dry flies are used to catch fish when the adults are hatching. On approaching the river, look to see what insects are in the air. Check the surface of the water to see if any insects are floating on it. Shake riverside bushes to see what type of insects may be resting there. Most of all look on the water for the dimpling of rising fish. If we see insects on the water and fish are coming up to take them, it's time to match the hatch with a dry fly. So look for trout riseforms (that ring in the water produced by a rising fish).

There is an intermediate stage where the insect leaves its home on the bottom and rises to the surface where it breaks free of its nymphal skin, pumps up its wings and flies away. Fly fishers refer to insects in this intermediate stage as "emergers".

Wet flies or emerger patterns are the type of flies used to imitate insects that are in the act of emerging and have yet to completely escape their nymphal skin. These fly patterns are usually fished in the surface film of the river, either dead drifted like a dry fly, or with an active presentation that relies on movement.

Terrestrials are land based insects that are eaten by trout on an opportunistic basis. When the wind blows terrestrials into the river or a large swarm of insects like flying ants fall into the water, trout greedily turn onto them. On windy days in August and September, look for grasshoppers to be blown into the water. Big trout love to sit along a bank and pick off these hapless bugs.



***4 A brook trout fooled by a wet fly***

When ants mate, they produce large numbers of flying ants that head off looking for new territory and to mate. If this happens near a river, large numbers will end up in the water and trout love the taste of ants.

Caterpillars falling out of trees are often sought by trout. So when out fishing, always keep an eye on the surface of the water to see what is floating by. A fish rising under an overhanging tree is often a good indication of caterpillars falling from trees. The usual aquatic insects are not the only things on the menu.

Lastly trout love to eat smaller fish, including the young of their own species. Minnows and young fish are part of the diet of every trout bigger than a few inches long. The larger the trout, the more likely it will try to feed on smaller fish. We imitate minnows and smaller fish with fly patterns called streamers. These streamers take two forms: those that imitate small fish and those that are simply bright and attractive. Trout look to pick off weak or wounded fish, so try to present a streamer as if it is a small fish in difficulty.

## **Presenting a Fly to a Trout:**

**Presentation:** This word "presentation" gets bandied about a lot in fly fishing discussions without any real definition as to what it really is. The best definition I can come up with is:

*Presenting a fly is the act of placing the fly in front of a fish in a manner that will entice it to eat the fly.*

Anything that causes the trout to refuse the fly, or worse flee from it, is considered to be a bad presentation. We can make an excellent presentation and the trout still may not eat our fly, but guaranteed the fish won't eat it if the presentation is bad.

So what constitutes a "good" versus "bad" presentation?

The first part of a good presentation is to put the fly in front of the fish and that part we covered in "*Reading the Water to Find Fish*". The second part of a good presentation is that bit about "*in a manner that will entice it to eat the fly*" which we will discuss next.

**Presenting Dry Flies:** Adult flies riding on the surface of the water tend to drift down with the current until their wings have enlarged enough to enable them to fly away. So when we are presenting a dry fly to imitate these bugs, we have to make sure that it drifts with the current just like the natural. This is the meaning of the term "dead drifting". It means to drift our fly with the current and without any extraneous movement.

The fish will not take our fly if it does not look natural. When the fly is being moved by the current pulling on the leader and line, it is what fly fishers call "dragging". For the fly to look natural we have to make sure that our line and leader is not dragging the fly. That requires us to cast and mend line to ensure a natural, drag free drift.

We usually place ourselves downstream and slightly off to one side of where we saw the trout rise. We also want to be behind the fish as then it is less likely to see us. We want the fly to drift over the fish's head, but not our fly line, so that is the reason we want to be off to the side of the fish. Cast the fly upstream of its location and let the fly drift naturally over the head of the fish. When our fly has drifted well past where the trout lies and starts to drag, then slowly lift it from the surface using a wiggle of the rod tip to break it free without noise, then cast it back upstream.

If you wish to false cast to dry the fly, don't do that over the fish, rather use a short line cast that won't reach the fish or false cast to one side. False casting over a trout can spook it.

When a trout takes an insect on the surface, it is common for it to pull away from its lie and track the insect for a short way before taking it. After eating the insect, the fish returns to its lie. The riseform that it creates then moves down with the current. So if we aim our cast at the riseform, we'll be placing our fly a few feet behind the fish. Always place the fly a few feet above where we saw the rise. Since the ring created by the rise travels with the current, use rocks, standing current patterns or other static objects to fix where the rise actually took place, then cast a few feet above that. Try to have the fly drift naturally on a line centered on the middle of the rise. We call that drifting a fly through the trout's "window".

When a trout takes our fly, we'll see a swirl where our fly is and then it won't be there. Sometimes the take can be a splashy rise and other times it can be a delicate sip. Don't make an immediate and vigorous hookset like we see on the bass TV shows. Wait an instant for the fish to turn then just lift the rod. The fish will take the fly and then turn to go back to its lie so we want that turn to begin before setting the hook. If we set too fast, we will pull the fly out of its mouth. Too slow and the fish will taste the fly, realize it's not food and spit it out. Set too hard and we break the fly off. A nice calm, deliberate lift of the rod is all it takes. If we make a hard, fast, bass style hookset and miss the fish, we will put it down for good.



*5 Caddis dry fly*

**Presenting Nymphs:** Fishing a nymph, like dry fly fishing, also requires a dead drift approach as nymphs tend to drift with the current when dislodged or when seeking new feeding territory. Since we can't see the nymph, we rely on a floating indicator (a small bobber actually) that does two things for us: it indicates when a fish has taken the fly and it shows us the speed of the fly as it drifts downstream.

We control speed of the fly the same way we do with a dry fly by positioning our cast and by mending. Usually we cast a nymph upstream in a run then let it drift down. Our indicator should drift along at the speed of the foam in the run. If it is dragging, moving faster or slower than the foam or leaving a wake like a little motorboat, then our fly is being pulled to the surface in an unnatural way. Little chance a fish will take it then. Even just that little motorboat wake can spook a fish, so don't let it happen.

First begin by using a roll cast to place our nymph and indicator upstream of us. Then as the rig drifts down toward our position, make an upstream mend to place the fly line behind the indicator. This prevents the fly line from pulling on the indicator and dragging the fly.

As the indicator approaches us, lift the rod to remove as much fly line off of the water as practical. This technique is called "high sticking". And no, it doesn't result in a two minute penalty.

As the indicator passes by us, then begin to lower the rod tip and track it downstream so as to feed line to the indicator. We have to feed line to ensure that the indicator is not being held back and dragging. We feed the line using the rod tip.

When we get to the point where we can no longer maintain a drag free drift then make a few slow lifts with the rod tip and then drop it back. This is called a Leisering Lift and imitates the rise of an emerging insect. When there are emergers around, this can often elicit a take.

When we are ready to cast back upstream, lift the line out slowly then swing the line upstream so that the leader lands well upstream of our position. Use a roll cast to then cast it upstream and into the run.

Unlike when dry fly fishing we also have to control depth since we're fishing a nymph along the bottom, down where the fish live. We do that via two ways: adding weight to the leader and positioning the indicator above the fly.

The more weight we add, the straighter the leader will hang down from the indicator. More weight will also get the fly down faster. Use as little weight as possible to get the job done. Using too much weight results in splashy casts and it is also harder to cast as well. Too much weight can also sink our indicator, rendering it useless.



**6 Mayfly nymph**

When tying on our fly, make sure we have about 8" to 10" of tippet attached to the leader. Add the weight, usually in the form of small splitshot, above this tippet-to-leader knot to prevent the weight from slipping down to the fly.

We usually position the indicator above the fly about one and a half times the depth of the water. Since that can be hard to judge, use contact with the bottom as an indication of depth. If we're hanging up on bottom almost every cast, we have positioned the indicator too high. If we never contact bottom, then it's too low. Having insufficient weight can also keep us from running the fly deep enough. Ideally we should occasionally tick bottom to be running at the right depth – the depth of the fish.

If we do snag on bottom, then pull upstream to free the fly. By pulling upstream, we pull the fly back in the direction it entered the snag, improving our chances of getting it free.

If we have to break the fly off when we can't free it, then point the rod at the snag and pull back. Never use the rod to break the fly off as we can break the rod instead.

The only sign we have when a fish takes our fly is when we see our indicator suddenly move. However, hitting bottom can cause the indicator to move as well. Typically the bottom causes the indicator to stop and then smoothly sink in line with the current direction. The take of a fish is usually more abrupt and can move the indicator to the side as well as down. Sometimes the take of a fish can resemble bottom, so always set the hook when the indicator indicates that something has touched the fly.



**7 Caddis larvae**

When we set the hook, we don't want to yank everything out of the water as then we've ruined the rest of the drift should no fish be there, plus there is always the chance of spooking a fish. Instead, lift the indicator up a foot or so above the water. If we don't feel a

fish, drop it back down to continue the drift. If we do feel a fish, then continue to lift to set the hook and fight the fish.

**Presenting Emergers:** Fishing emergers can be either very easy or very challenging – it all depends on the fish and the bugs that are emerging. We have three choices for presenting an emerger to a fish: dead drift, swinging, and an active presentation.

Dead drifting an emerger is performed just like a dry fly presentation, with the exception that the take is harder to detect. Since the fly can be under the surface film and not in it, the fish may not disturb the surface when it takes the fly. Instead look for a flash from the side of the fish, a small movement of the line, or feeling a small tug. If the fly is close enough to the surface, we may see a small bulge or swirl in the water.

Swinging a fly involves casting it quartering downstream and allowing the fly to swing across the current on a tight line. Detecting the take with this method is no problem as we will feel the tug on the line and may see the swirl as well.

An active presentation is similar to swinging the fly except that we are either pulsing the fly by tugging rhythmically on the line, or stripping the fly back towards us. Stripping or pulsing should be done in small increments as insects don't make long, fast movements through the water.

When fishing nymphs we can also imitate an emerger at the end of a drift with a Leisering Lift. As we come to the end of the drift, lift and drop the rod a couple of times. This imitates an insect rising off the bottom and swimming to the surface.



*8 Mayfly emerger*

**Presenting Streamers:** Streamers imitate small baitfish, such as minnows and the young of many species. When fishing streamers we need to think of how to present a fly that is swimming rather than drifting. This requires an active presentation for the most part. We cast across the current and either swing the fly or strip the fly back. Typically we would strip the fly in slower currents and swing in the faster water, though in practice this may vary.

One of the most important aspects of fishing streamers is the simple maxim that prey does not charge a predator. If we swing our streamer at a fish, it will flee. It will not sit there and allow itself to be hit by the fly. We want our presentation to be above the fish, but not so far above that it will be disinterested. By keeping the fly above the fish we set up an ambush of the fly by the fish.

While fish can be caught on streamers when using floating lines, intermediate or full sinking lines often do a more effective job as they fish the fly at a more or less constant depth over the length of the swing. If we do not want to use sinking fly lines, then adding sinking leaders to our floating lines can often be sufficient to get the fly down.

One of the most effective ways to fish a streamer is to make it look like it is struggling to maintain its position in the current. Make a cast that is more downstream than across and

let the fly swing in the current. If we have identified a possible trout holding spot, then let the fly dangle in the current above and in front of that spot. Keep it there for a few moments, then strip the fly in slowly. Often the fish will hit as we begin to move it.

Watch baitfish move in the current then try to have your streamer do the same thing. Look at their colours and try to find a fly that mimics their colouration and size.

Trout will strike more readily at a streamer if it appears to be a baitfish in trouble, but at times they will aggressively strike a fast moving fly. If a slow presentation isn't getting any action, make another pass through the run with a faster presentation.

Just like when using dries, nymphs and wet flies, target likely fish holding spots

We can also use streamers that don't imitate anything and that are simply attractors, using motion and their brightness to attract a strike.

The biggest fish are frequently taken on streamers so come prepared with a variety in your fly box ranging from imitations to attractors. Have

confidence in the attractors as many like the Mickey Finn have reliably caught trout for many decades.



*9 The famous Mickey Finn streamer*

We can only speculate why a trout would hit a gaudy streamer, but they do and we should always have a few available to us.

## Part 2 – Casting and Mending

### Casting

**Overhead Casting:** Overhead casting is what most people think of when the subject of fly fishing arises. Being able to cast reasonably well is very important to our success as fly fishers. If we cannot put the fly where it needs to go then our odds of catching trout are diminished.

There are a few simple techniques to use to improve and maintain our casting.

- **Straight Line Path:** For the line to go out with nice tight loops and roll out straight, we need the rod tip to move in a straight line. If the rod tip moves in an arc like a windshield wiper, then we will throw wide open, sloppy loops and the fly won't go very far. Concentrate on keeping the rod tip moving in as straight a line as possible. The easiest way to do this is to imagine that we are painting a ceiling with our rod tip.
- **Watch Your Backcast:** A very simple thing, we turn our head and watch our backcast. Poor backcasts are one of the biggest reasons why forward casts collapse and fail to achieve distance. The quickest way to improve a backcast is to watch it. Just begin your forward cast as the backcast finishes rolling out. Watching our backcast is a very simple way to get the timing right.
- **Tilt the rod:** No one wants a fly in the back of their head. Rather than cast with the rod straight up in the air, we tilt it slightly away from our bodies and that keeps the fly away from us.
- **Relaxed Grip:** Don't death grip the handle as that causes all of our forearm muscles to tense up, making it difficult to produce a good cast. Just hold the rod tight enough to maintain control and nothing more.
- **Go Slow:** Something every casting instructor says, "SLOW DOWN!" It's a common mistake to believe that a fly fishing cast is a very fast thing. It isn't. A fly fishing cast is a leisurely, low power affair.
- **Pull to a Stop:** This is a subtle thing, but we pull the forward cast to a stop, we don't push it. Pushing casts goes hand-in-hand with overpowering casts. As the backcast rolls out, simply pull the line forward and then stop. The loaded rod will then unload and send the line on its way.
- **Dealing with Wind Our Casting Side:** When the wind is blowing onto our casting arm, we have to cast on the opposite side of our body to avoid having the wind blow the hook into us and hooking ourselves
- **Dealing with Headwinds:** Keep the forward cast low and the backcast high.
- **Dealing with Tailwinds:** Keep the forward cast high and the backcast low.
- **Obstructions Behind Us:** Use a Roll Cast.

**False Casting:** False casting looks cool, but it's only useful in a few scenarios so we should never overdo it. Use a false cast to:

- dry the fly so that it will float
- change directions
- increase distance

Remember that bats are about the only thing we'll catch while false casting, so don't false cast simply for the sake of it.

**Shooting Line for Distance:** We sometimes have to cast for distance and shoot the line puddled on the water in front of us, out into the cast. This is a very common requirement

when fishing streamers and we have stripped a lot of line back in. Make a couple of false casts and slip some line on the forward stroke, then let go the line on the third forward stroke to shoot it out. When we get good at slipping line, we can slip it both on the front and on the backcast, reducing the number of false casts.

**Introducing Slack Deliberately:** Usually slack line is considered to be a bad thing. However there are times when it is necessary, such as when presenting a dry fly downstream instead of upstream as is usually the case. When we have to introduce slack to avoid a dragging fly, throw some 'S' curves into the line. We do that by first making our stop on the forward cast, then wiggling the rod tip back and forth, throwing 'S' curves into the line. Now our fly will drift downstream without the fly line dragging it.

**Roll Casting:** A roll cast doesn't use a backcast. For this reason we can use it any time there are obstructions behind us, or when casting a nymphing rig.



*10 When roll casting, place the anchor well away from you. The greater the angle change, the farther away it must be. Here I am making a large angle change so the anchor has been placed well upstream of me.*

For a fly cast to work there must be line behind the rod in order for the rod to be loaded. We usually make a backcast for this reason. Since we are not making a backcast when roll casting, we have to put line behind us in a different way. We do this by tilting the rod behind us, but still keeping the rod tip high in the air. With the rod high and tilted back, we will get a bow of line falling behind the rod and down onto the water. We call this bow of line a 'D-Loop' as the bow plus the rod looks like the letter 'D'.

The other aspect of the roll cast is to have the leader resting on the water. We call this brief resting state the 'anchor'. The combination of the D-Loop and the anchor allows us to load the rod for a forward cast. If we are missing either the anchor or the D-Loop, then we won't be able to make a roll cast.

The forward stroke of a roll cast is exactly the same as the forward cast or a normal overhead cast. Just remember to keep the rod tip tracking in a straight line. If we aim the

rod tip down or using a windshield wiper motion, we'll just drive the line onto the water in a pile.

One important aspect of roll casting is where to put the anchor. If we place the anchor in front of us, two bad things can happen: we hit ourselves with the hook or the line collides with the leader on the way out creating a tangled mess. The way to avoid this is to make sure that the anchor is placed beyond the plane of the cast. In other words we line things up as: us, the direction of the forward cast, the anchor. This means that the anchor has to be outside of the cast.

**Casting for Accuracy:** When casting to rising fish or fish holding structure, we must be accurate. To be accurate we need to line up our cast with the target, have it track straight and be lined up correctly. That last requirement can be a bit difficult if we have our casting hand well off to the side. In this photo, notice how my casting hand is in front of me rather than to the side. The rod is still canted of to the side for safety, but I'm lining up my hand with my eye.

With this alignment, I'm looking down the cast as if I was aiming down the barrel of a rifle. Finish with the rod tip being directed straight at the target. If there is some wind coming from the side, we will have to take that into account and aim a bit upwind.

Casting accuracy can often mean the difference between a strike and a fly that is ignored. Worse yet, poor accuracy can put fish down. Fortunately this is something we can practice in the yard, so put out a target and try to hit it from various distances and directions. With a bit of practice, it is not hard to become proficient.

**Casting on the Opposite Side:** When the wind is blowing on our casting shoulder, we need to be able to cast on the other side of our body to avoid having the wind blow the fly into our face. A hook in the eye can ruin our day.

Practice casting on both sides of the body. We use either our opposite hand or tilt the rod across our bodies and cast with the rod tip downwind of us. That will keep the fly line and the hook downwind of us as well – nice and safe.

It's actually not that difficult to learn to cast with our non-dominant hand. A few hours of practice in the yard should be enough to allow us to make a reasonable cast on our non-dominant side.



**11 Hand, rod and eye all lined up for an accurate cast**



**12 Learn to cast across your body or cast with your other hand**

**Loop Size:** We can control the size of our casting loops by managing how high we stop the rod and by how straight a path the rod tip follows. A straight path with a high stop produces a tight loop while an arcing path with a low stop produces an open one. Here's two examples of what tight and open loops look like.



**13** *Note the sharp point of this loop and how close the top leg of the line is to the bottom leg*



**14** *A low stopping point and an arcing delivery produced this wide open loop.*

It is important for us to be able to cast both styles of loops as both can be useful. The wide open loop produces a delicate delivery of the fly, while a tight loop handles the wind better, will cast farther and lets us cast our fly into tight spaces.

**Turnover:** This the term we use to describe the fly line turning the leader and the fly over straight. A poor cast may lay the fly line out straight, but the leader and fly can land in a heap, producing a tangled mess. Good casting ensures a good turnover. Get in the habit of watching the leader and fly turn over. If it is landing in a heap, it's time to tighten those loops and watch the backcast.

## **Mending:**

Mending line is simply the act of repositioning the fly line once it has been cast on the water. We mend to avoid having the current drag the line which in turn will drag our fly and make it look unnatural. We also mend to change the speed of the fly, either to slow it down or to speed it up.

**Basic Mend:** In most cases, we try to mend without moving our dry fly or the indicator when we are nymphing. If we were simply to reposition the fly line up or downstream, we would drag the fly or indicator. To prevent this from happening, we carry a loop of slack line under the forefinger of the hand holding the rod. As we make the mend, we let this loop go and the mending motion casts this bit of line into the mend. In essence we're shooting a couple of feet of line into the mend. By shooting this few feet of line, we're able to make the mend without moving the fly or indicator.

We normally make a basic mend at the beginning of the drift to position the line to eliminate drag as the drift proceeds. We may mend again if drag starts to develop part of the way through the drift.

**Reach Mend:** The idea behind the reach mend is to make a bigger mend. The reach mend is a basic mend with one added element – we reach with the rod to extend the range of the mend. Typically we use reach mends when the current is fairly fast or complex.

To execute a reach mend, make the forward cast as normal. When the rod stops and while the line is still in the air, we reach over with the rod in the direction we wish to mend – usually upstream.

While we can make as many basic mends as we like during a drift, we can only make one reach mend as it occurs while the line is rolling out on the forward cast.

**Mending when Fishing Dry Flies:** We normally use either a basic or a reach mend upstream when fishing dry flies. We do this to extend the drag free portion of the drift for as long as possible. The most critical aspect of dry fly mending is not to move the fly while doing so. Use the loop of line in the hand and shoot it into the mend to avoid moving the fly.

**Mending when Fishing Nymphs:** When fishing a nymph we want a drag free drift just like when dry fly fishing. Since we can't see the fly, we rely on controlling the drift of the indicator instead. After casting the line upstream, make a mend to position the line behind the indicator. If the line is in front of the indicator, it will drag the fly. This upstream mend should be made by the time the indicator is level with us.

**Mending when Fishing Wet Flies:** When swinging wet flies we normally cast quartering downstream. Insects don't swim fast through the current so we want our wet fly to swing as slow as possible. Make a mend to orient the line from running across the current to almost parallel with the current. This orientation will slow the swing of the fly.

**Mending when Fishing Streamers:** Depending on current speed and how we want to present our streamer, we may mend upstream to slow the swing or downstream to speed it up.

## Part 3 –Fighting, Handling and Reviving Fish

**Barbless Hooks:** Always use barbless hooks to reduce damage to the fish and to us.

**Setting the Hook:** When we watch the bass fishing TV shows we see the hosts making these massive hook sets as they drive the hook into the mouth of the bass, often hauling them out of the weeds in the process. This is the last thing we want to do in fly fishing.

We tend to use very low pound test tippet and a vigorous hookset will snap the fly off. We will also pull the fly out of the mouth of the fish before it has a chance to turn and close it. Simply lift the rod to set the hook. Some people prefer to move the rod tip sideways toward the bank instead. Either way, it's not a hard hookset, merely a smooth pull.

The other benefit for making a small, low power hookset – it doesn't move the fly far if we fail to hook the fish and we can continue with the drift. Also a gentle hookset and a miss is less likely to spook other fish. A gentle hookset will also do less damage to a fish

**Playing a Fish:** Once the fish is hooked, we want to land him as quickly as possible without losing it. Small fish can be played simply by drawing the line in with our free hand, allowing it to collect on the water at our feet. Once the small fish is close enough, we grab the leader and release the fish. Avoid handling small fish as much as possible for they are easily injured.

Larger fish should be played on the reel, so wind up any loose line and bring the fish tight to the reel. Some reels have drags while others simply have clickers designed to prevent over-spooling. We apply resistance to large fish by palming the rim of the spool of the reel with our free hand. We can also use the reel's drag to provide resistance, though finer control can be achieved through palming. When a big fish runs, let it go, but maintain pressure through palming or the drag. Don't let slack form in the line as that is when a fish can toss the hook.

**Landing a Fish:** It is best to net a big fish, but failing that have a friend tail it (grab the tail at the 'wrist' of the tail), or bring the fish into shallow water where it can be tipped over and tailed. Don't drag it up on the bank as that will injure it.

Fish have a protective slime on their bodies that protects them from infection and helps wounds to heal. Excessive handling results in this slime being wiped off, leaving the fish vulnerable to infection. So always release a fish as soon as is practical with the minimum of handling.

**Reviving a Fish:** The idea behind catch and release is to let the fish live to spawn and contribute to the growth of the population. In turn this provides more fishing opportunities for us in the future. All of this goes for naught if we handle a fish badly and end up killing it unintentionally.

Never release a fish until it is ready to swim away under its own power.



**15 Use a net for the larger fish to reduce stress from handling**

To revive a fish, direct it into an area of good current flow and hold it with its nose pointed into the current. Hold it there until it begins to try to swim, what some people refer to as 'kicking'.

Revive the fish in clear water, not the muddy water we've stirred up with our wading. Just hold the fish there until it is ready to go. Don't rock the fish back and forth as its gills are designed to work with the flow going one way – from front to back. Pushing the fish back and forth is sending water over its gills backwards.

It's worth spending the time to make sure the fish is ready to swim away under its own power.

**Photographing a Fish:** We all want nice pictures for our memories of the trip, but it isn't worth killing a fish for a photo. To make the photo as least damaging as possible, hold the fish in the water until the photographer is ready. Too often we hand our camera to a buddy, lift the fish out, only to find that he is struggling with the controls. Only lift the fish out when the photographer is ready to take the picture.

In this photo we can see the water dripping off of the fish as it has been just lifted into position. The front hand is not gripping the fish tightly rather it is just cradling it. Fish survival is greatly improved if the photography is done with care.

If we need multiple pictures, keep the head of the fish in the water between shots. It's also important not to squeeze the fish, as that can damage internal organs. Keep the fish level by holding the wrist of the tail in one hand and use the other hand held open wide to cradle the front of the fish.



**16 Revive a fish by holding its nose pointed into the current**



**17 Lift the fish only when the photographer is ready to take the picture**

## Part 4 – Fishing Courtesy, Ethics and Conservation

**Conservation** While it's fine to take the occasional fish for the table where allowed by law, it's important for the conservation of the fish for us to practice catch and release. There is so much angling pressure on our waterways these days that excessive harvesting would result in the extirpation of the species in that waterway.

Catch and release is more than just letting fish go, it also means letting them go in good condition. That requires the use of barbless hooks, a short fight and careful handling when landing them.

Trout are sensitive to higher temperatures as in these conditions the oxygen content of the water is lower. Fighting a fish in warm water can kill it even if we think it has been carefully revived. During the dog days of summer, it is sometimes better to fish for warm water species like smallmouth bass. If you are unsure about the temperature, government natural resources websites and local river management organizations often have monitoring stations that will provide river temperatures over the day. If nothing else, take a fishing thermometer along on the trip. It's time to consider quitting trout fishing when water temperatures get over 20°C.

**Courtesy:** Public waterways are just that – public and that means canoeists, kids paddling and throwing rocks, dogs playing and other anglers all have a right to use the water. Common sense and politeness go a long way to letting everyone use the water without conflict.

We often find that people can ruin our fishing spot unintentionally. If they are not anglers then they often have no idea the impact they are having on our fishing. Sometimes it is better to move on rather than make an issue out of it. If the circumstances seem appropriate, then politely explain why their behavior (or their kids or dogs) is making a mess of our fishing. I've found that most people are quite happy to oblige once they understand.

We are also responsible for the safety of others. Remember that we are waving a sharp hook in the air that can impale someone behind us. It is our responsibility to be aware of what is going on around us. Kids, dogs, and many adults will mindlessly walk into the path of our backcast so keep a lookout when fishing in areas that the public can access. Your fishing buddies will appreciate it too.

With other anglers, give them space and expect the same in return. However what fly anglers consider an appropriate space and what conventional anglers tolerate are two different things. Explaining the need for fly fishing space to a conventional angler is always best preceded by a smile and a, "How's the fishing?"

We are entitled to fish the water in front of us, but we shouldn't hog it. While there are no set time limits for fish a stretch of water, if there are other anglers working their way downstream be prepared to move on. After all, moving on will probably improve your fishing.

Guides are making their living working the river so giving them some space to do their job is a good idea. However, you are entitled to the water in front of you as much as anyone else, so again, a bit of common courtesy, a smile and a polite request is often enough to work things out. Butting heads on the river just ruins everyone's day.

While it's always great to talk to other anglers, they're under no obligation to divulge all of their fishing secrets to you. If they are not in the mood to talk, then leave well enough alone.

**Ethics:** As anglers using rivers and lakes, we're under a legal obligation to obey fishing regulations. Ethics is more than just obeying the regs. It means conducting ourselves with respect for others and the resource. Parking where we won't inconvenience landowners, not trespassing, trekking our garbage out or better picking up the refuse of others, is all part of the makeup of an ethical fisherman.

Respect also includes avoiding unnecessary destruction of habitat through careless wading and hiking. Try to leave the river a better place than when you arrived.

Tight lines!

Peter Charles  
Hooked4life Fly Fishing

