

THE LITTLE THINGS



Adhering to these simple, basic fly-fishing principles can produce big dividends on the water. By Steve Culton

If you're fishing nymphs and not catching fish or getting stuck on the bottom, you're not getting deep enough. Adjust the length of your leader, your indicator, or add weight until you're presenting at the right depth.



JESSICA MCGLATHLIN



They say that ten percent of the anglers catch ninety percent of the fish. If that's true, it's not because those ten percent are supernatural angling demigods. It's not because they went down to the crossroads and sold their souls. It's not because they are insanely lucky. It's because they do a lot of little things that most other anglers do not.

Even the phrase, the little things, seems so banal. But I see it play out time and time again. As a teaching guide, many clients come to me with the request, "I want to learn (insert fishing method here) so I can catch more fish." Often what they need isn't a new method, but rather a honing of their basic skill set. Take many seemingly insignificant mistakes, correct them, and it's like compounding interest. It all adds up. Then one day, you're rich.

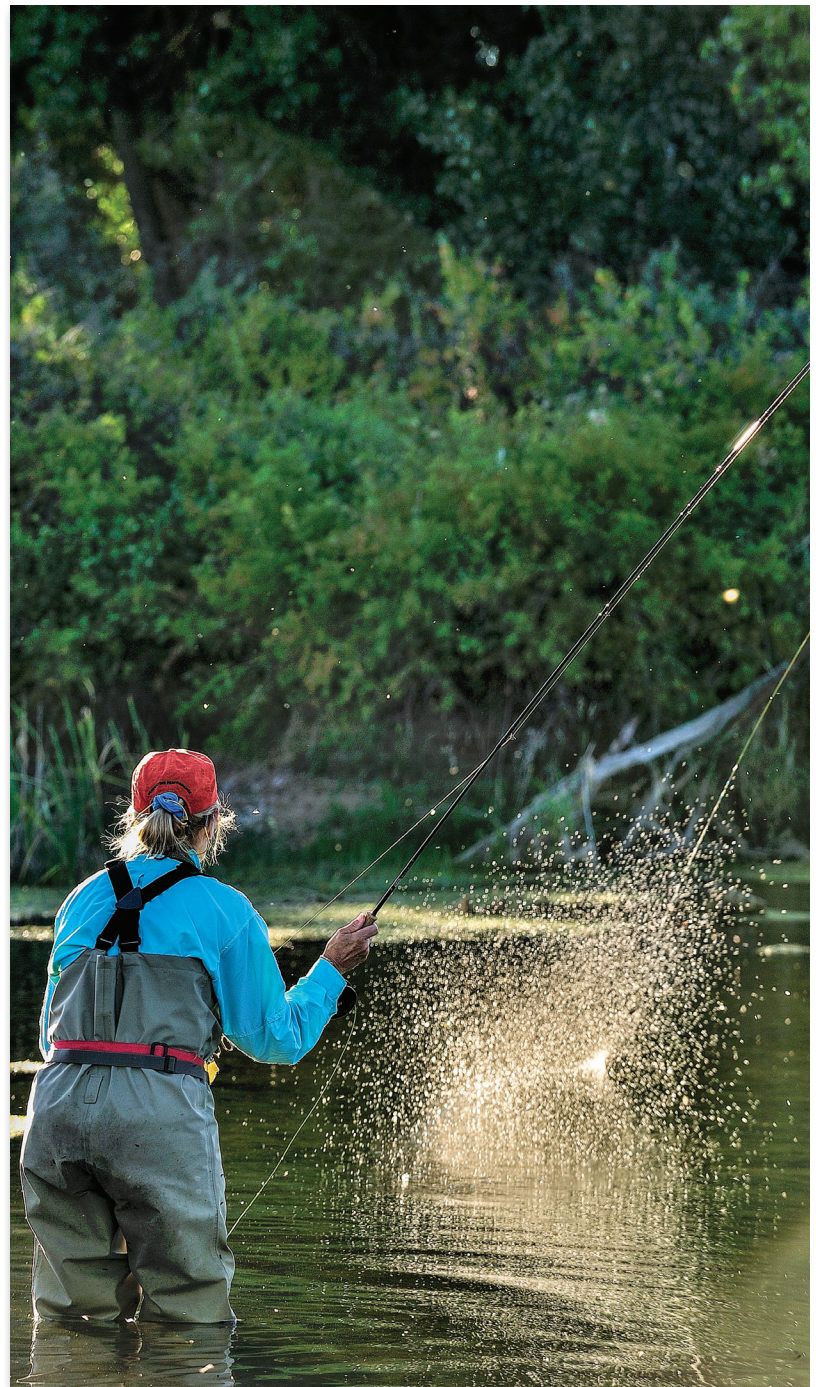
Certainly there's far more pleasure to be derived from fishing than just catching. But let's be honest. Who doesn't love the sight of a bent rod, the sound of a screaming reel, or the thrumming energy of a cantankerous fish? Here are a few little things you can do to help experience all those things more often.

A SHARP HOOK

I know what you're thinking: "Well, duh!" But do you consistently check your hook points? A sharp hook is the single most important thing in fishing. The number of striper anglers fishing with dull hooks routinely puzzles me. Stripers, of all fish, with their tough, rubbery mouths, are tough to pierce with anything less than a sharp hook. And I think the most critical moment of nymphing occurs at the hook set. Hook sets are virtually impossible with dull hooks, and any hook that is bouncing along the bottom of a river is going to dull quickly. Whether size 24 or 5/0, hooks should be sticky sharp—that is, the point should stick to your fingernail like Scotch tape when you drag it across the nail's surface. I use a mill file, available in any hardware store for a few bucks, to sharpen my saltwater hooks.

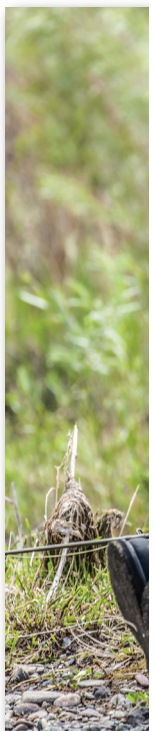
YOU GOTTA SET THE HOOK

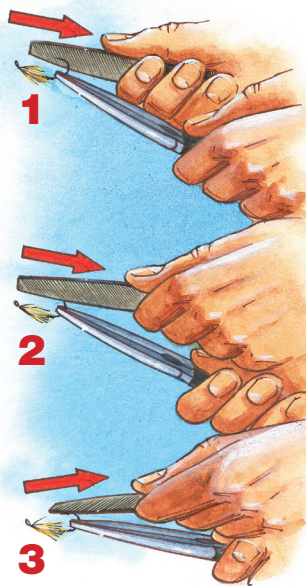
"The big ones always get off" was the lament of an angler I met one night on Block Island. It was a burden I knew all too well. Striper grandmaster Ken Abrames helped me figure it out. "You gotta set the hook," Ken taught me, as his father had taught him. Assuming a sharp hook and a stout leader (I never go below 20-pound test monofilament), the secret is holding the line tight against the rod, pointing the rod at the fish, and thrusting backward toward your gut. "If you hit him three times, sometimes you still lose him," Ken told me. "If you hit him four times, sometimes you lose him. If you hit him five times, you won't lose him." I started following Ken's advice years ago. Since then, I have not lost a single striper over 28-inches long.



MEND LIKE YOU MEAN IT

"Fly fishing is all about line control," my friend Grady Allen once told me. A floating line gives you the most control as it allows you to mend. Mending gives you tremendous power, because you're using the current to work for you, rather than against you. Unfortunately, too many anglers throw weak mends that do little to help their presentation, whether it's dead drifting a dry fly or greased line swinging a streamer. Though I recognize different current speed between the angler and the fly sometimes calls for mending only a portion of the line, overall, half a mend is not a mend. Mend from the rod tip to the line-leader junction. If you must, physically pick the line up off the water with your rod tip and place it where you want it. If you're fishing subsurface, don't worry if your mend moves your fly. You can get away with a lot more underwater movement than you can when fishing dry flies.





HOW TO SHARPEN A HOOK

1 Hold a hook between your finger and thumb or with a pair of hemostats or needle nose pliers. Stroke a mill file against one side of the hook point six times, always moving the file into the point, toward the hook bend.

2 Turn the file 180 degrees and repeat the same motion on the other side of the hook.

3 Now, sharpen the underside of the point. Remember, always move the file grain toward the hook point. Done correctly, your hook should have a triangle-shaped set of cutting edges. Test the point against your thumbnail; if it's not sticky sharp, repeat the sharpening sequence.

To keep the file from rusting, wrap it in an oily rag and store it in a zippered plastic bag until the next time you need to sharpen a hook.



STEVE CULTON



Sometimes the difference between catching and losing the fish of a lifetime comes down to following a few simple principles like burying the hook with a strong hookset (left), mending the bulk of the line to get the best presentation possible (right), and swapping out tippet sections whenever you sense an imperfection (below).

BARREY & CATHY BECK

BARREY & CATHY BECK



MOVE IT

You've found the perfect run. But there's no hatch activity and no signs of feeding fish. By all means, systematically cover the water. Just keep in mind Einstein's purported definition of insanity: "Doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results." If you're not catching, move. I see too many anglers repeatedly flogging the same fruitless water, wistfully wondering why they blanked. Go find the fish, especially if you're swinging wets or streamers. Factors like shifting tides and the migratory habits of species like steelhead are compelling reasons for sticking it out in a spot, but even those situations have limits. You can't catch what isn't there—or doesn't want to eat.

CHECK YOUR LEADER

The first thing I do after I hook a steelhead is I check the hook point. Then I check the leader. I start with the finger test and run the length of the leader between my thumb and forefinger. If I

JESSICA MOGLITHLIN



feel a rough patch, I know the leader is weaker, and I replace it. If it passes the finger test, I give it a visual. Are there any cloudy or suspicious-looking areas? If so, it gets replaced. Regardless of target species or method, be ruthless about the integrity of your leaders. A heated battle with your best fish of the year is a bad time to discover an abrasion or a wind knot.

FLIES IN THE WATER CATCH MORE FISH

I do a lot of striper fishing at night. Sometimes I can't see other anglers around me. But I can hear the repetitive "whoosh-whoosh-whoosh" of their false casting. They don't hear it from me. A roll cast to get the line out, a water haul, one back cast, and then bombs away. Over the course of an hour, my fly is going to be in the water—you know, the place where the fish live—more than theirs. Excessive false casting does nothing but waste energy. To that effect, when you're wading to a new position on a river, keep your flies in the water. On one outing last May, my only trout came as I was crossing the river, my team of wet flies dangling in the current 20 feet below me.

DOWNSIZE YOUR DRY

You get to the river and a sulphur hatch is underway. Rise rings are everywhere. You capture a natural and confirm it's a size 16. You tie on a high confidence pattern, your drifts are impeccable, and you catch. . . nothing. Try going down to a size 18 or even a size 20. Sometimes it's as simple as that.

FISH DROPPERS

Not every situation calls for multiple flies (for example, I prefer to fish a single dry). But many do, such as wet fly fishing. For hundreds of years, wet fly anglers have known that droppers

are the fastest way to find out what the fish want. That's because they give the fish a choice of size, color, species, and life stages. Also, more targets in the water means more potential hookups. Whenever possible, don't tie a dropper off the bend of another hook. Use a tag off a leader so the fly can swim freely. Besides a team of wets, you can use droppers for nymphs, streamers, dry/nymph or wet—use your imagination. If you fish for stripers, try droppers when there's a lot of small bait in the water (like grass shrimp or sand eels). That said, some fisheries do not allow multiple flies, so always check the local fishing regulations.

IMPROVE YOUR DRIFT WITH A LONG LEADER

Nothing in dry-fly fishing induces more self-loathing than when a perfect cast is followed by a sloppy mend that moves the fly in an unnatural manner, causing a refusal. The solution: use a longer leader. Most times, I keep things simple; for example, a nine-foot, 5X leader with four feet of 6X tippet. Thirteen feet gives you a lot more latitude when you're mending. It also helps you achieve a truer drift across multiple current seams.

BEFORE YOU CHANGE NYMPHS, CHANGE YOUR WEIGHT OR DEPTH

When you're nymphing under an indicator, remember this basic rule of thumb: if you're not catching and you're not occasionally getting stuck on the bottom, you're not fishing deep enough. The solution is to adjust your indicator (a good starting point is 1 1/2 times greater than the estimated depth) and/or add weight. Adding weight isn't just for getting flies deep. It's also a way to slow your drift (remember, water on the bottom moves slower

The odds of catching fish improve exponentially when you fish with a dropper. However, rather than attach a second fly to another's hook bend (shown here), attach it to a long tag off your leader so both flies swim freely.



A.J. SWENTOSKY



JESSICA MOGLIOTHUN

than on the surface). If you're still not reaching deep enough, try a longer leader. It's tempting to blame nymphing failure on fly selection, what with all those sexy UV hot spot, wiggly legged, species-specific bead-head options beckoning from fly shop bins. But consider this: Over a 45-day period last summer, I used only two different nymph patterns. One of them was a plain, brown, soft-hackled Pheasant Tail, and I caught trout every time out. I was simply putting my flies where the fish were.

FISH WHERE OTHERS DON'T

There may be safety in numbers, but there is glory in solitude. Think of it as the run less fished. By taking it, you not only get away from the crowds, you also create the opportunity to find unpressured waters that are loaded with fish. Discovering a private honey hole is one of the sweetest experiences in fly fishing. My home river, the Farmington in Connecticut, is one of the most heavily-fished waters in the northeast. But I can find solitude, and trout, whenever I want, simply because I once took the time to walk down that obscure trail and do a little exploring.

KNOW A SPOT COLD

If you're just starting out, this is one of the best exercises you can do to improve your fishing. Pick a spot you really like and learn it inside and out. Where are the fish holding in the morning, at high noon, and in the evening? What's the structure like behind that downed tree? How deep is that hole in lower flows? Does it fish better on the

incoming tide, or the outgoing? These are the kinds of questions you should be asking and answering. If you can, get into the water and wade it. What's the bottom structure like? If you were a fish, where would you find current, food, and shelter? Now, take what you've learned, and apply it to all the similar looking water you fish. You're on your way to becoming that most dangerous of machines: an angler who knows how to read water and locate fish.

FIND YOUR OWN TRUTHS

Question authority (you can start with everything I've written here). Just because someone is a published author or a well-known personality doesn't mean they're infallible. The truth is we all put our waders on one leg at a time. And we all get skunked. Next, question conventional wisdom. I was told I couldn't catch stripers on the surface in 44-degree water. I was told it's ridiculous to use a five-weight for stripers. I was told a floating line has limited use for stripers. Had I listened, I would have missed out on incalculable numbers of fish. Don't ever be afraid to break some rules (not to be confused with fishing regulations—we all need to be good citizens).

Finally, remember the words of James Leisenring, who said, "We fish for pleasure. . . I for mine, you for yours." You are the only person you need to please.

Steve Culton is an outdoor writer, guide, speaker, and fly tyer. You can see more of his work at www.currentseams.com.