

There is a lot to learn in this game of fly fishing. From the athletic task of learning to cast to the science behind insects and fish behavior, fly fishing covers the gamut in terms of the types of people that it attracts. When you add to this equation, the attempts to implement the more advanced tactics and tricks that can be picked by reading or watching others, the whole thing can seem rather daunting. I've been doing this for over thirty years and I can tell you with some certainty that there is no end to what you can learn to help bridge the gap between where you are and where you want to be. All it depends on is how far you want to take it and how much time you are willing to invest.

There is one thing that no matter your level of experience, if practiced will increase your success rate. All it requires is a little bit of self discipline. But we'll get back to that in a minute. One of the most frequently asked questions of professionals is, "What is more important; presentation or fly selection?" or, to step it up a level, one may ask, "What is the most important component of fly fishing?"

In the attempt to bridge the aforementioned gap, picking the brains of those in the know and perhaps getting a practical demonstration may accelerate the process but the truth is it is tough to put that kind of import on one area alone. The individuals knowledge of his or hers quarry will more than likely be the greatest factor in their success. In other words, I have fished with anglers that are not technically sound in their casting, but are successful because of their knowledge and understanding of the fish that they are angling. This is particularly common among those that have come from a fishing background and transitioned from spin fishing to fly. With this background, they have only to figure out what they need to do with a fly rod to achieve a similar presentation that they once did with conventional tackle. To contrast this, I have also observed those that can cast a ton but have little understandings of the many "whys" and are therefore less than successful. Having little or no knowledge of fish behavior makes the curve much steeper and it is easier to focus on a simpler component, like the cast and spend less than enough time on the science.

So between the novice and the expert are where most of us are and our success comes through a mixture of skill and chance. Skill should only increase through experience and practice but chance can be manipulated and it is as easy as showing your fly to more fish. I realize that statement sounds academic but most anglers, novice through intermediate do not practice this.

Anyone that has fished with me or those that I have guided will tell you that I preach the practice of covering water ad nauseum but I truly believe that among the most important components, it ranks at the top regardless of what you are angling.

For me, it started many years ago when I read an article by Art Lee. Although I can't recall all of the details of the paper, I did retain one important piece. Art explained that when reading water for the purpose of covering it, break it down into smaller, more manageable pieces and then visualize a grid square over the piece that you are about to work on. The size of the grid squares will depend on how large the river is. For example; smallish pocket water may need only one foot squares where a larger run may require two or even three foot squares to work efficiently. Once the grid square is in the minds eye, the idea then is to cover each

square until the run is complete. If you have worked it diligently, than you should have presented your fly to the majority of fish in that piece of water and by doing so increased your chance. I have been using this

method for many years and together, with some other practices that I've picked up; I like to think that every piece of water that I fish gets it due diligence and the chance of picking up more fish are far higher than casting to the same lie repeatedly. Further to that, I can think of no situations were these practices don't make sense or cannot be applied. From dry flies to nymphing; beginning with a plan in mind and executing it will increase your success rate and before long, it will become second nature to the point were you won't even think about it, you'll just do it.

THE CAST AND STEP

This is probably the easiest and yet most effective way to cover water. Although it is most effectual while swinging flies for Steelhead or Salmon, it's also a great way to cover vast stretches of river for trout or Smallmouth Bass with streamers. For Salmon or Steelhead, you need only to establish a starting point at the top (up stream) end of the run. Identifying the most productive looking water and eliminating the least will help when you are unfamiliar with a run and make your time casting more productive. So starting with a short cast, begin working the water directly in front of you. My standard rule is to start at a 45 degree angle down stream and allow the fly to swing to a stop below you.



It is worth mentioning that depending on the water temperature you may wish to speed up or slow the swing down. It may take some experimenting with mending either up or down stream to get it right but it will come with some work. Also, if you're using a sinking tip, you may have to fool around a little with mending to establish the correct depth. Keep in mind, the colder the water, the less inclined the fish are to move far to pick up a fly.

The steps that follow are simple; after each cast, extend the length of the line by one foot and repeat the process. Continue to extend each cast until you have reached a comfortable and more importantly, manageable length of line, or on a small river, it may mean that you have reached the far bank. That length will depend on the individual's ability but the key is to stay within your means. If the length is too great, it may compromise the presentation and be far less effective.

After you have established this length of line, it is important to maintain that length and I will tell you why in a moment, but for now let's look at the next step. Depending on how quickly you want to work a given piece will determine how many casts you make from each position. Typically, any more than two is redundant as the idea is to show your fly to as many fish as possible and eliminate those that aren't taking. From here, it is simply a matter of moving one step down stream after every other cast. I typically cast, mend and then step if I'm familiar with the terrain but if not, it may pay to get your footing before making the next cast. As I mentioned just above, it is important to maintain the length of line as it may play a role if you raise a fish that doesn't take. Atlantic Salmon are notorious for rising to a fly but not taking it and Steelhead will often pluck or nip at one without actually biting it. There is no reason to think that either is doing it for any other reason than a display of curiosity or aggression; the question is, how one gets them to commit on the follow up casts. If I raise a fish, my next thought is to show the fish the same fly from a slightly different aspect so I will shorten my cast by six inches for the follow up. If the fish doesn't take after that, my cast will be lengthened by a foot and the fly will be presented six inches away from the original cast that he rose to. If I still have no satisfaction, than a change of fly may make the difference. The point though is to keep a constant and that should be the line length. (It is not a bad idea to mark your fly line at five foot intervals starting at 30". Magic marker works well and it takes the guess work out of the equation.)

Unless I raise a fish, I won't generally change flies in the middle of a run as I reserve that for the next pass and if I'm sharing the run with other anglers, it pays to have an idea of what each is fishing and change to something different for your next turn. If you break this down, it is tough to find a more effective method with which to methodically cover a run.

[OPEN MORE WATER](#)

Working streamers for bass or trout is one of the most effective ways to find big fish and one of my favorite ways to spend a morning is to cover a long stretch of water with just a spool of 8lb test tippet and a box of streamers. One of the problems with covering long stretches is that at the end, you find yourself a long ways from the starting point and covering the same water on the way back never looks as appealing as when you started. So why not go for broke. I discovered several years ago that most small towns have good taxi services and ever better, they are inexpensive. Where does this fit into covering water with streamers? Simple: park your car at your starting point and pick another access point down river. You can make a day or a part of a day out of it and at the end, call a cab to take you back to your car or in reverse; park at the bottom end and have the cab take you to the start. It is seldom more than 15 bucks but it is worth every cent as you often get to water between access points that seldom gets pressured and you may find fish that you didn't previously know about, giving you the chance to return during a hatch. Assuming that you have an idea of what streamer to use, my best advice here is to work the banks, crossing the river where it makes sense in

order to fish the most productive side. I typically target structure in the form of hiding spots like cut banks, current breaks, back eddies or submerged debris and make no more than two or three casts before moving on. If you have a piece of water that has given up big fish in the past, it may be worth changing flies and going back up to re-work it but budget your time accordingly. During these long hikes, you will come across unproductive water that doesn't warrant working but at each productive piece, work every possible lie and cover as much as possible. Typically, I am thinking ahead at least two targets. This allows me to approach each from the best possible angle and give myself the best shot. Streamer fishing is fast but productive and it makes for great casting practice as you will, inevitably make a ton of casts over several hundred yards of river.

DRY FLY FISHING

For the dry fly enthusiast, both of the previous scenarios are applicable in non hatch situations. Search patterns like Madam X or hoppers will often bring big, aggressive fish out so it pays to cover as much water as you can. Even in a hatch situation though, it pays to work the water with purpose. Remember that hatches begin, peak and ebb. During this progression, the fish react in different ways. Typically, it is just before the hatch begins that the trout will take up a semi-permanent station and will remain there until the hatch ends. It is at this point that you have to make a plan.

Of course it depends on the size of the piece of water that you are working, but for generalization, I begin working the trout that are set up down stream and closest to me and gradually work towards rising fish farther away from me. This serves two means; the first being that you tend not to cast over as many feeding fish and risk spooking them while in the attempt to fool the target fish; second, when you do hook a fish, it is easier to get them out of the way of the fish that you have not yet worked and again, less apt to put them down. I will stay with a fish as long as it continues to feed. If the trout is comfortable than chances are it's your presentation or fly selection that is failing you and odds are, the other fish in that run will be acting in the same manner. It makes little sense to move on to another fish in the hope that it may be a bit dumber. So I'll continue to work one fish until I hook it or put it down. One very important point further to this is that you should have made certain as to what the fish are keyed in on. If you don't see duns disappearing in the rise circles, then chances are you need an emerger or another form of that bug like a cripple. I can't stress enough how important it is to observe and learn each time you intercept a good hatch. By standing back and formulating a plan, you will give yourself the best chance at a good fish. Remember the words of the great George Weiss, "Only fools rush in."

NYMPHING

The previously mentioned "grid square" exercise is most applicable when nymphing. Mainly because you are blind fishing or you can't always see the fish that you are targeting so it becomes more critical to cover the water diligently. Even when you can see fish, it still makes sense to follow the plan because I feel that anglers get far too focused on the fish that they can see and miss out on others in the vicinity that are concealed by their surroundings. If the water is gin clear and you can see every fish without question, then follow the dry fly program but if that's not the case, then try this.



Fig 2

Like the cast and step approach, I like to begin at the top edge of the most productive looking water. From here, I will set up my first station and get a feel for what I want to do in terms of moving after I have covered the first section. Now pick a target up stream and on the opposite bank from where you're standing. It might be a rock, tree or a bush but this is going to give you a visual reference to cast to each time. The angle will depend on the depth and speed of the run but use the target to maintain the same angle and continue to cover progressive lines running parallel to the current.

Once you have established a plan, work out enough line to put you into fishable water closest to you and begin casting to the target. After a half dozen casts, take off one foot of line and repeat this process. This is similar to the cast and step procedure except you are covering lanes parallel to rather than perpendicular to the current.

Once you have reached your limit of length or the far side of the river put the line back onto your reel and step down to the next station. The distance that you move will depend on the size of the piece of water that you are working but you do want to overlap the stations to some degree. This will ensure that you are covering the extreme down stream range of the water that you just worked. If you do not overlap the stations, then you run the risk of missing the water between each station.



Assuming that you have a good idea of what the fish are eating, your fly selection should stay within the range of what is or will be hatching or most prevalent in the drift. But once you have worked the entire beat, than you may choose to change patterns and start over again. (Look for fly selection strategies next month.)



After a while you will no doubt develop your own style to achieve the same result; that being to cover water more diligently and show your fly to more fish. Further to that, the more you think about it now, the more automatic it will become and you will reach a point that you will no longer think about it at all. Ultimately though, you will find yourself in different situations that require you to adapt or make adjustments to my methods and in the end, you will become a more skilled angler.

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