

Few contemporary innovations have caused as much controversy among fly fishers as the Strike Indicator. Hypocrisy is rampant in our little sport with the reality being that just about every innovation in the past 25 years has made it easier for us to catch fish. However, I like to think that there is a time and place for everything.

I am not certain who used the first strike indicators or when. There were more than likely many creative anglers over the years in various scattered locations that recognized the merits and at some point experimented with the idea of fastening something to a leader to show sub-surface takes. I am also quite certain that those same individuals felt a tad sheepish upon their discovery and were reluctant to share the idea with any but their closest friends, making the origin somewhat convoluted.

About 25 years ago I read an article on the topic and I recall believing in the concept. The article mentioned only yarn type indicators soaked in fly floatant, but everything, from the addition of small split shot to the intricacies of line mending made perfect sense to me. My only source of split shot at the time small enough to sink a fly but not affect my casting was pellets from a shot shell. I cut open a #4 shell and sunk an indent into a piece of scrap 2x4 so the pellets would sit still as I cut half way through with a sharp hunting knife. The procedure was tedious but effective and the yield was enough shot to get me in the game.

I won't say that I was overly successful in my first attempts but there was no question that I had turned the corner on nymphing. As I continued to refine what I had been practicing, my success rate increased as it should and strike indicators earned a dedicated pocket in my vest.

No matter the nature of innovation though, someone will almost always contest its place or effectiveness and the strike indicator and its users are not above criticism. I however, consider myself a bit of a heretic and play a mean Devil's Advocate. So here goes. There *is* a time and place for everything and understanding when and where the indicator can be implemented will most surely help the novice and expert alike.

### TO USE OR NOT TO USE?

There are several applications for pro-use that can't be ignored. The first one that jumps to mind is that it is a great way to flatten the curve for the novice angler. When one is nymphing, the handicaps are numerous and any advantage that can be gained should be taken. First of all, when fishing sub surface, we seldom see the fish that we angle. Unlike surface situations when we can clearly see the rise to our fly, the visual advantage of using an indicator is immediate. For the angler starting out, the indicator is best suited as a teaching tool and helps that person get a feel for what the fly is doing underwater and sets the stage for more advanced techniques that may incorporate the use of the indicator or allow one to eliminate it if desired. In either case though, using an indicator is a great starting place for first time nymphing.

Depth control in both lakes and deeper rivers where fish may be suspended off the bottom during feeding is attained efficiently with strike indicators. Although I seldom fish lakes, it makes sense that once you have found the depth that the fish are feeding at, an indicator can keep the fly at that level indefinitely. Whether or

not you use a trial and error method and constantly adjust your depth until you find the right one, or you use electronics to locate fish, the indicator is the best way to maintain a consistent depth or adapt as things change. Electronic fish finders are perhaps the best way to find structure in the form of humps, ledges, or depressions on a lake bottom. Using the depth variations on your fish finder and setting the indicator at the depth that you feel the fish are most likely suspended at will cut down on the amount of adjustments that you would make if you were fishing blind or guessing. I have used slip floats on lakes for both bass and trout with outstanding success. A slip float is simply a strike indicator that you would normally peg in place with a tooth pick except you eliminate the tooth pick and allow the indicator to slip independently up and down the leader. The slip float allows one to set a depth with a rubber bobber stop and impart action on the fly with subtle movement of the rod tip. If fish are suspended at ten feet, it is as simple as placing the bobber stop at that distance from your fly, casting to your target and allowing the fly to sink to that level. Once its there, it stays there and can be left still or jigged in a vertical fashion that allows the material to undulate and attract feeding fish.

In rivers, fish will often suspend in the column off the bottom to intercept a particular stage of an emergence, or a particular type of insect. Chironomids, for example, will often be in the drift under the surface and unless they are within six inches to a foot, it is difficult to detect strikes. A small indicator set at the correct depth can be deadly effective and it also provides a better visual reference for very small flies. The best type of indicator material in this case is putty or very small foam pinch ons (1/4 of an inch is all you need) and the indicator serves two purposes. It allows you to detect strikes but it also makes it far easier to locate your fly after the cast is made. If your fly is only six inches to a foot under the surface, you may see the strike in the form a swirl or a bump on the surface before you see the indicator move. The indicator though gives you proximity and any movement close to that area may warrant a hook set.

During a blanket hatch of Hendrickson several years ago, I was frustrated to have fish taking duns everywhere. The run that we were on was a long, uniform glide with a bug every four inches and a fish every four feet. In this case though, the challenge was not matching the hatch, as the duns that I had tied on worked consistently in the past. The challenge instead was statistics. Having a fish locate our imitation, no matter how accurate, was like asking someone to find one particular needle in a stack of needles. After about fifteen minutes, I made a dramatic change. Instead of matching the hatch, I decided to set our presentation apart from the chaos on the surface. A very small amount of strike putty thirty inches ahead of a drowned Hendrickson cripple changed our fortunes and we managed several good rainbows before the hatch ebbed. With a tiny amount of sink putty, the fly held six to eight inches under the surface away from what was happening up top. The strike indicator not only gave us the advantage of strike detection but also allowed us to pick up the fly visually very quickly and follow its progress throughout the drift. The presence of that many duns is one of the most exciting things a fly fisher can experience, but it can be equally frustrating. However, the duns are just the tip of the iceberg and you know that below the surface are struggling nymphs, stillborns and cripples. A decent representation of one of these, fished just below the surface film is an innovative approach to a tough angling situation and the strike indicator gave us an advantage.

Another area that indicators excel at is pure versatility. What I mean by that is, when you find yourself in a situation where the depth varies, a movable indicator puts you in a position to adapt very quickly to those changes. Some anglers will use the tip of the fly line, leader knots or simply watch the leader to detect strikes. I feel that unless the water that I am working is a fairly consistent depth, then I am out of touch with my fly. Certainly with practice, one can become more in tune but frequent leader length changes are not required with an indicator. For example, if I am walking a stretch of river that features tight pockets, riffles and long, deep runs, I can make the necessary adjustments in seconds simply by sliding the indicator closer to or farther from my fly and removing or adding shot as the depth or current dictates.

Further to that, a movable indicator allows me to quickly address a rising fish without changing my tippet by cutting off the nymph, sliding any shot off and tying on the appropriate dry fly. Most of my nymph leaders are perfectly suited for this change and are equally efficient in either situation.

The cold temperatures of late fall and early spring require slow, deep presentation perfectly suited for strike indicators.



I struggle to find any real disadvantage to using strike indicators. As long as you can get past the idea that they are, for all intents and purposes, bobbers, they will increase your success rate. I'll draw a parallel to perhaps put things into tighter perspective. There are many anglers who frown on using patterns like yarn eggs (glow bugs) and San Juan worms as a reliable steelhead and trout pattern. They disapprove because they are easy to tie and they represent food items that we fly fishers associate with spin fishing. Hypocritical? Yes. I mean, what are we here for? Sure, the overall experience

of being on a pretty river at day break as the sun cuts through the mist and starts to warm the day is a wonderful experience, but its fun to catch the odd trout too. If you take fish food in the order of importance, in many water sheds, other fishes eggs would be right up there amongst the top. They are found in and are as much a part of nature as stoneflies, caddis and mayflies so what the heck is the hang up. (Forgive me Frederick Halford). If you want to pick fly poop from pepper, the same guys that discourage the use of eggs and indicators are probably casting the latest graphite blanks and fighting fish with large arbor reels, hooked on a fly tied on a chemically sharpened hook made with all synthetic materials. See my point?

### ARE THERE DISADVANTAGES?

As a guide, I have instructed just about all skill levels and it's my experience that you will hook more fish with an indicator than without. However, there are some downsides to their usage that should be addressed. First and foremost to me is that although you will hook more fish with an indicator, you will also lose more. Those that are really proficient at nymphing by feel will end up with a better hooking to landing ratio because the reaction time is that much faster.

I feel that when a fish takes a nymph under an indicator, a lot happens before you react. The fish eats the fly and almost immediately realizes what it's done and starts to reject it. So before you can even react, the slack has to come out of the leader between the fly and the indicator and transmit the message to the indicator. By the time this happens and you react with a hook set, the fly is being pushed out of the fish's mouth by its own accord resulting in the fly being set in the skin around the mouth rather than in the hard bone or the scissors. It is not as big a factor with smaller fish that won't fight for long but big trout and steelhead will fight harder and longer resulting in more fish being lost than those hooked on the swing or the lift.



Left to right: Thingamabobbers, Thill, home made high density foam.

Of less consequence but deserving mention is the daunting task of simply finding the right indicator to suit all of your needs. There is no such thing as the perfect indicator but I have found a system that works for me. For light tackle stuff I like strike putty. Both Loon outdoors and Orvis make a good product but bear in mind that they don't perform well in water below 5degrees or above 18 c. In cold water they become brittle and break off and in warmer water they are too pliable and won't stick to leaders. (It is worth mentioning that occasionally a package will become dehydrated if left too long. All you have to do in this case is put small amount of river water on the putty in the container and close the lid. Within an hour it will re-hydrate and work again.) I like the putties because the package is small, they are biodegradable and you can make them as small or as large as you want depending on the situation.

For Steelhead, I recently discovered the balloon type indicators available from West Water Products called Thingamabobbers and love them. They are light enough that they don't affect your casting dramatically, easy to put on and take off, and although I have not yet tried them in a still water situation, I'm certain they will perform well. Another quality I like in this product is that they are not overly bright. In fact, the colors are rather dull (I have always preferred white or black depending on the sun glare on the water.) Which brings me to the next disadvantage-- I feel that in gin clear water, indicators can be a distraction to the fish. It may be a psychological hang up for me (I have many) but I will tailor my presentation in very clear water and usually eliminate the indicator. If the water is that clear it pays to watch first for the fish to move to your fly and react accordingly than to look for a twitch or movement in the line. Recently while guiding for steelhead we were faced with low clear water and every fish that we hooked was a result of seeing the fish move to the fly rather

than watching our line. In these conditions, either dead drifting with a lift or a greased line swing will often prevail.

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention that casting with indicators can be a colossal pain in the butt. Indicators are usually accompanied with weight of some sort and the two combine for an equation that equals horrible tangles. With practice, one can get more efficient, but even the most skilled are not beyond the odd birds nest that requires a complete "do over." You have to remember that fly lines and leaders were never designed to cast rigs like this so you must adjust your stroke to fit. The best advice I can give on casting these rigs is to open up your loop or incorporate the Belgian cast to your arsenal. To open your loop, you need only to have your rod tip traveling in a wider arc. The casting stroke looks more like a base ball throw than a cast, but it will get the job done. These will help to eliminate the line and leader collisions that occur with weighted rigs.

I use indicators more than I don't and will admit that they have become somewhat of a crutch. My advice is to become proficient with and without, as you will invariably find yourself in situations where one or the other will suit. Like any aspect of fly-fishing rewards are found with practice and only practice, so work on both. Taking a good fish on a dead drifted nymph, sans indicator is very rewarding but we all must walk before we run so consider the lowly strike indicator training wheels for your dead drift fishing. Once you get the hang of it, you may choose to wean yourself off.

Fishing with an indicator and nymph may seem academic on the surface. Cast fly, watch for twitch in bobber, set hook. Easy! Well in reality, indicator fishing is as technical as it gets if you are to be consistently successful. The first thing that you must consider is the depth and the current speed in relation to where you place your indicator. The rule of thumb is one to two times the depth of the river but how does the speed of the current affect that rule? In simplest terms, the faster the current, the greater the distance required from weight to indicator. There are, however, a few solid pointers to follow in order to establish the correct depth in a given piece of water.

I prefer to use less weight than more for a couple of reasons. First of all, the addition of weight makes for sloppy casts and line-leader collisions as previously mentioned. Secondly, I feel that with more weight, my fly does not tumble naturally along the bottom and hang ups are far more frequent. So how do you determine the correct weight to indicator formula? Start with the indicator and set it at the depth that you think is correct. Then, apply as much weight as you feel necessary. I have a rule of thumb for establishing the correct depth and weight, and that is: I need to be setting the hook on every fifth or sixth cast regardless of whether it's a fish or the bottom. If you are setting the hook on every cast, than you more than likely have too much weight. If you are not setting the hook at all, than you need to make adjustments to the indicator or the weight. I always start with the indicator and make big adjustments. One to two feet at a time either up or down depending on what the fly is doing. As I get closer to my one hook set for every fifth or sixth cast, I can make micro adjustments in the way of six inches at a time until I have established the correct depth. Only if I am not touching bottom at all will I add more weight. Now this may sound time consuming but you will eventually get so use to looking at a piece of water that the correct formula will come almost automatically, requiring fewer adjustments. This formula works well for Steelhead, Trout and Bass but keep this in mind. The colder the water, relative to each species, the closer to the bottom you have to be. As the fish get more aggressive, it becomes less critical that you are in direct contact with the bottom. Early in the trout season, when temperatures are below 45 degrees, it pays to be right on the bottom, but as temperatures rise and more insects are present in the drift, the need to be deep diminishes. The same goes for steelhead or bass and the need to understand the individual behavioral characteristics relative to water temperature becomes paramount.

Equally important to the proper weight/distance formula is line mending. With practice, the introduction of slack after the cast can aid in getting the fly deeper, thus using less weight. I mentioned earlier, less weight allows your fly to drift more naturally in the current and will hang up far less. You have to let the current dictate when and how you mend but the goal is to introduce enough slack to sink the fly and keep it down for as long as possible during its drift. Don't make the common mistake of always mending up stream. If there is a slower current between your rod tip and the indicator, it may require a slight down stream mend to dump line below or down stream of the indicator to allow it to catch up with the slower current. The fly line in the slow current, if left un-mended, will hold the portion of line in the main current back and cause the fly to rise up and out off zone. Further to that, an up stream mend would accelerate that effect rendering the drift almost useless.



Effective mending goes hand in hand with high stick nymphing and needs to be practiced.

To tip the scale from mediocrity to affective nymphing will require a lot of time on the water. Don't pass up the opportunity to fish for small, dumb trout. A few hours of catching easy fish will pay dividends when you start hunting for larger, more sophisticated fish. You will also undoubtedly develop your own style and techniques that suit but keep this in mind; depending on who you talk to, 70% - 90% of all feeding occurs under the surface. Don't let yourself get frustrated with lack of success. If you stick with it, watch what others are doing and practice, the light will go on.

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