

# Fly Fishing - Fish With A Fly

by Tom Dickson

Ever heard of fly-fishing? It's a way of catching fish by casting handmade flies. These flies are hooks covered with feathers, tinsel, and other material to look like an insect or other fish food.

Fly-fishing is often the best way to catch fish. It's also fun. Even when they don't catch fish, fly-fishers enjoy sailing their line through the air and watching the tiny fly land gently on target.

Many fly-fishers go after trout. Some pursue bass, northern pike, muskies, alieyes, and even carp and catfish. Any fish that chases lures and feeds by sight will eat a fly that looks like food.

Anyone can learn to catch fish with a fly rod. Learn the basics on the following pages. Then head outside and practice. Fly-fishing is like any sport: No one is great at it right away, and the more you practice, the better you get.



This boy caught a trout with a fly rod and fly.

## Tackle Comparison: Spinning Versus Fly

### Spinning Tackle:

A spinning rod flings a heavy bait or lure on a thin line. You reel in the line and lure, and cast again.

### Spinning rod:

Most spinning rods are shorter (5-6 feet) and stiffer than fly rods.

### Spinning lures:

Much heavier than flies, lures do not require as much throwing action from the rod as fly-fishing does.



### Fly-Fishing Tackle

The flies fly-fishers use are too light to cast with spinning tackle. To try would be like trying to throw a leaf.

Flies are too light to cast with spinning tackle.

Instead, fly-fishers cast a fly line, which is heavy and thick, like cord. It's covered with plastic so that it floats and glides through the rod guides. A 9-foot piece of clear fishing line called a leader connects the fly to the line. The leader is less visible to fish than the fly line. And because it's lighter, it splashes less on the water.

### Flies:

Flies are too light to cast with spinning tackle.

## Fly Rod:

Most fly rods are longer and more flexible than spinning rods. The fly rod must bend enough to fling the heavy fly line forward.

## Fly Reel:

Unlike a spinning reel, a fly reel isn't used for casting. Its main purpose is to store extra line.



Most spinning rods (above) are shorter (5-6 feet) and stiffer than fly rods. Most fly rods (below) are longer and more flexible. The fly rod must bend enough to fling the heavy fly line forward.

## Gearing Up

Here's all you really need to begin fly-fishing:

### Basics:

- Mid-weight fly rod (5 or 6 weight) and fly line to match
- Reel (inexpensive)
- Leader
- Flies
- Glasses or sunglasses (for safety)

### Extras:

- Boxes to store flies
- Vest or fanny pack for gear
- Waders (keep legs dry)
- Nippers to cut line (fingernail clippers work fine)
- Forceps, or hemostat, to unhook fish
- Landing net
- Polarized sunglasses (help you see fish underwater)
- Fly floatant (paste, oil, or spray) to keep dry flies afloat
- Strike indicators
- Small split shot to squeeze on leader to sink flies deeper

## Casting

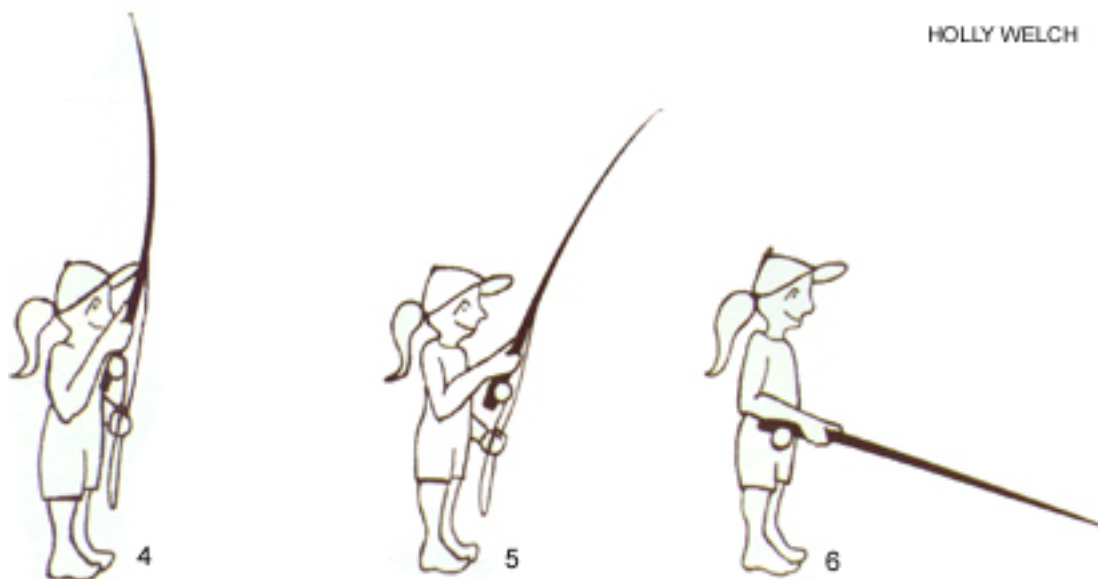
Casting consists of two parts: *the backcast and the forward cast*. Begin practicing on an open grassy area. Instead of a fly, tie a small piece of yarn to your leader. Lay your rod down and pull 25 feet (about three rod lengths) of line straight out from the end of the rod.

## The backcast:



1. Now go back to the rod and, if you are right-handed, hold it in your right (casting) hand while holding the fly line in your left (line) hand.
2. Use the rod to lift the line off the grass in front of you.
3. And fling it up and back so it sails over your head and lands in a straight line in the grass behind you. This is called the backcast.

## The Forward Cast:



4. Next do the same movements in reverse. Starting with the line stretched out behind you, fling the line from back to front.
5. The line sails overhead.
6. And lands in a straight line in front of you. This is called the forward cast.

# Putting It Together

Next, put the two parts together. Make a backcast. As the line is straightening out behind you, but before it touches the ground, reverse your arm motion, and do a forward cast. The line should straighten out in front of you.

When fishing, you make a backcast and then a forward cast to present the fly to the fish.

## The flick:

Fly-casting is like throwing a dart. Keep your elbow down. Begin moving your forearm slowly, speed up with a strong, quick flick of the wrist, and then stop suddenly. On the backcast, stop the flick at about the 10 o'clock position. On the forward cast, stop the flick at about 2 o'clock. Imagine you are holding a big brush dipped in paint; flick the paint off the brush onto a wall. The stronger and quicker the flick, and the more sudden the stop, the tighter the loop of the line will be and the farther you will cast.

# Flies

## Surface Flies:

Surface flies float. The neat thing about fishing with a fly on the water surface is that you can see when a fish comes up and bites it. Dry flies, terrestrials, and bugs are all surface flies.



(clockwise from left) Adams, Royal Coachman, and Black Midge

## Dry Flies:

Dry flies imitate adult aquatic insects, especially mayflies, caddisflies, stoneflies, and midges. They are used mostly for trout, but other fish such as bass and panfish will strike a dry fly too.

## Terrestrials:

Terrestrial flies imitate ants, beetles, spiders, caterpillars, crickets, grasshoppers, and other insects that live on the ground and sometimes fall into the water. Twitch these flies to make them look like struggling insects.

## Bugs:

Bugs include poppers, divers, and sliders. Twitch these flies forward little by little to disturb the water and attract fish. They imitate large insects, frogs, or mice.



Barry's Pike Fly (left) and Bead-Head Woolly Bugger

## Sinking Flies:

Sinking flies are made with heavy or absorbent materials so that they sink.

## Nymphs:

Nymphs imitate immature insects that live underwater. Nymphs make up a big part of the diets of many fish, including trout, bass, and panfish. Nymphs often catch fish when nothing else does.

## **Wet Flies:**

These were probably the first kind of fly ever made. They are made of materials that become waterlogged quickly and sink, so they look like drowned insects and sometimes baitfish.

## **Streamers:**

Big fish, such as pike, muskies, large trout, and bass, are attracted to streamers because they look like baitfish. Retrieve these flies to make them look like swimming fish.

## **Specialty Flies:**

These are flies made for special situations. A fish-egg fly works in spawning season to catch rainbow trout. Crayfish flies work in summer when smallmouth bass are gobbling crayfish.

## **Panfish on a Pond**

A good way to learn fly-fishing is to wade the shallows of a lake while casting a small popper for sunfish and bass. Fishing is best in early summer, when sunfish are on their "nests" in water 2 to 4 feet deep. Wade quietly along the shoreline or in the shallows. Cast toward visible fish or their light, circular nests.

## **Casting the Fly:**

Pull 15 feet of line (two rod lengths) from the rod tip and let another 5 feet of line hang from the reel down at your feet. Cast back and then forward. On the forward cast, after the wrist flick, release the line with your line hand. The weight of the line in the air moving forward should pull the line at your feet and extend the cast another 5 feet. This is called *shooting line*. The more line you pull from the reel and shoot, the farther you can cast.

## **Retrieving the Fly:**

After you cast, loosely hold the line against the rod handle with the first or middle finger of your casting hand. Then grab the line behind your casting hand with your line hand and quickly jerk the line to make the popper pop on the water. The pop attracts sunfish and bass. Let the line fall in loops at your feet as you continue pulling in line.

## **Trout in a Stream**

Trout swim in cold streams in southeastern and northeastern Minnesota. They feed near fast water. Fish for them where choppy shallow water, called a *riffle*, dumps into a deep pool. Trout swim below the fast water, protected from the current by rocks. Or they rest in the "seams" between the fast water and the slow water near a bank until they spot an insect drifting in the water. Then they can dash into the swift water to grab the food.

## **Approaching Fish:**

When fishing a stream, cast upstream. This way you can sneak up on the trout, which face upstream. Move slowly and stay low. If a trout sees you, it will dart away.

## **Surface Fishing:**

If you see a trout rising to eat insects, cast a dry fly a few feet upstream of where the fish broke the water. This gives the trout a few moments to see your fly as it drifts overhead.

## **Underwater:**

If no trout are rising, they are probably feeding underwater on nymphs. Cast a nymph upstream into the fast water and let it drift naturally back toward you. Because it's hard to see or feel when a trout grabs a nymph, many fly-fishers put a small foam bobber, called a strike indicator, on their line. The strike indicator jerks when a trout bites the nymph. Lift the rod to set the hook.

## **What to get and where to get it:**

### **Tackle**

Start off with a mid-weight fly rod (5 or 6 weight) and fly line of the same weight. Buy an inexpensive fly reel. A good deal is a beginner's package with a rod, reel, line, and leaders. Beginner' kits cost \$120 to \$160.

You can buy tackle at large outdoors stores. There are also small fly-fishing stores in the Twin Cities, Duluth, and Rochester.

## **Instructions**

*"Kids usually learn to fly-cast way quicker than adults,"* says Chris Hansen of the Fly Angler in Fridley. Most fly-fishing specialty stores offer fly-casting clinics or private lessons. You can also learn from instructional videos sold in outdoors stores or rented at video stores.

Many books, some for beginners, have been written about fly-fishing. Publications such as Fly Fisherman and Midwest Fly Fishing, available at newsstands and by subscription, contain fishing and casting tips.

Many web sites have information on fly-fishing. One good one for beginners is [Fly Fishing 101](http://www.flyangleronline.com/begin/101/) <http://www.flyangleronline.com/begin/101/> .

*Tom Dickson* is a staff writer for the DNR Division of Fish and Wildlife. "I'm not all that coordinated," he says, "and if I can learn to catch fish with a fly rod, anyone can."

*A complete copy of the article can be found in the May-June 2000 issue of Minnesota Conservation Volunteer.*