

Fly Fishing : Nymph Fishing Technique

Nymph fishing is probably the most challenging of all fly fishing techniques. Nymph fishing, since the fly is underwater and is often extremely small, can test the abilities of any angler, and often leaves the beginner angler frustrated to extreme levels. Yet, the ability to have good nymph fishing technique is essential for productive trout fishing. The reason for this is simple – most trout have a diet that consists primarily of sub-surface insects (nymphs). An angler who does not know how to nymph fish will be greatly limited on where they can fish and what they use.



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This article will hopefully provide some information for any angler who is in search of how to improve their nymph fishing abilities when fly fishing. While this article provides a more information than any other article on the Internet about fly fishing with nymph, ultimately, the only way to learn the technique is going out and doing it – living with the initial frustrations that WILL come with it.

Fly Fishing with Nymphs : What is Nymph Fishing?

Let's start at the basics. Nymphs are, as defined by the Meriam-Webster dictionary : “any of various immature insects; especially : a larva of an insect (as a grasshopper, true bug, or mayfly) with incomplete metamorphosis that differs from the imago especially in size and in its incompletely developed wings and genitalia”

Does that make sense? Probably not. In everyday terms, nymphs are aquatic insects that are still in their underwater stage, not having reached their adult, or flying, stage of life yet. One thing worth remembering is that, if you enjoy dry fly fishing, all the flies you see on the water are adult insects. These insects have “grown up” from their underwater stage and have taken to the air for their mating rituals. In essence, dry fly fishing involves using fly imitations that involve imitations of the adult aquatic insect (such as a mayfly, caddisfly or stonefly). By contrast, when nymph fly fishing, the angler attempts to imitate the younger, underwater stage of these exact same flies.

Now let's go over the [Challenges of Nymph Fly Fishing](#).

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Fly Fishing with Nymphs : The Challenges

When nymph fly fishing, the angler is imitating the juvenile stage of aquatic insects. As such, all fly fishing is done underwater, not on top of it. Thus, unlike when dry fly fishing, an angler will not see a rise or the fish itself pop through the surface when gulping in a fly.

Additionally, unlike dry fly fishing, when using nymphs an angler will usually not be able to see the actual fly itself. Not being able to see the fly itself is probably what gives anglers new to fly fishing with nymphs the most problems, as it needless to say makes it more difficult to detect strikes and set the hook.

Yet another challenge of nymph fly fishing is that, frequently, the nymphs are floated along or just near the river bottom. As such, the nymph will constantly be “bumping” into underwater obstructions – particularly rocks. All these little bumps cause beginner anglers to mistake these bumps for strikes (as the strike indicator will momentarily pause when the nymph hits a rock). And, of course, sooner or later, the nymph will actually hook a rock or log, leading to the fun of getting the fly unstuck from whatever it hooked.

Finally, the angler who is fly fishing with nymphs will have to use methods to get their fly down into the water. Dry fly fishing, in this regards, is easy. All fishing occurs right on the surface. Everything in dry fly fishing is two dimensional. With nymph fishing, however, the angler will need to determine how deep the trout are and then figure out how to get their fly to that depth – adding a 3rd dimension to their fly fishing. To accomplish this requires being able to know how to get your nymph to the right depth, as well as making good, accurate casts, so as to allow the nymph to sink to the right depth where you believe the fish may be.

To top things all off, trout tend to be much more subtle when they eat nymphs. Unlike in dry fly fishing, when trout often times hit a fly really hard, trout unfortunately don't show this characteristic with nymphs. This is probably due to the fact that the bulk of a trout's diet is in the form of nymphs. Whatever the reason, though, a trout tends to “slurp” in nymphs gently – often times just being lazy and waiting for the nymph to float right to it. Because of this, setting the hook properly (and knowing when to do it) when fly fishing with nymphs is extremely important for success.

These are the challenges of fly fishing with nymphs. And these same challenges are generally what put off many a fly fisherman from attempting nymph fishing – all the more so if they just happen to be fly fishing on a river known for top-water hatches (even though the exact same river may have even better sub-surface



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fishing!).

The next thing to go over is the [Gear Used for Nymph Fly Fishing](#).



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Fly Fishing with Nymphs : Gear Needed

Now that we've covered what nymph fly fishing is all about, let's next take a look at what sort of fly fishing gear you're going to need to do it. While nymph fly fishing uses pretty much the same gear you use when dry fly fishing, there is a few small items that any successfully nymph fisherman will want to have. These items are strike indicators, some small weights, and a good pair of fly fishing sunglasses.



The Boulder River in Montana

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Strike Indicators for Nymph Fishing

First, you will need some strike indicators. Strike indicators are generally bright orange, ungodly looking things that get put on your leader well above the fly or on the fly line itself, at the junction of the fly line and leader. These strike indicators are what you look at when nymph fishing – not the fly itself. With practice and patience, you'll eventually be able to tell when “unnatural” movements occur in the strike indicator – which most likely indicates that a fish just took your nymph fly imitation.

Exactly where to put the strike indicator is a matter of some debate, but ultimately boils down to what you are fly fishing for and where you are doing it. Wary brown trout in heavily fished waters, like the Missouri River, are not likely to be real wild about seeing a bright orange thing just a few feet above the fly. On the other hand, more gullible trout or trout that receive less fly fishing pressure could probably care less about it. In short, use your judgment, erring on the side of caution (placing the strike indicator as far away from the fly as possible for your abilities).

Small Weights for Nymph Fishing

The second thing you'll need for many rivers will be some small weights to add to your fly line or leader. In many if not most nymph fly fishing situations, a floating line is still used. However, in order to get the fly down to the depth you want it to go, will require weighting it (at least in faster water). This is best done with the newer “twist on” non-toxic weights that are now available. Using these types of weights, an angler can put on as much or as little weight as needed to bring the fly down to depth, while at the same time preventing the fish from inhaling toxic lead (which can kill them).

Should you plan on fishing in really deep or fast rivers where even a weighted leader will not get the fly down to depth fast enough, then you will also want to look at investing in a sink-tip fly line. Sink-tip fly lines have the tip of the fly line weighted to sink, thus allowing it to sink the nymph fly more quickly.

Fly Fishing Sunglasses for Nymph Fishing

Another item of heavy importance is a good pair of polarized sunglasses. It's absolutely imperative that you be able to see the strike indicator, and polarized sunglasses are just the ticket to accomplish this.

Well, we've gone over the challenges and the gear needed for fly fishing. It's now time to talk about technique and tactics. Let's first start off with the [Basic Nymphing Technique for Beginners](#).



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Nymph Fly Fishing : Basic Techniques

Just like dry fly fishing, there are many, many ways to fish a nymph. Which one you should use really boils down to how skilled you are in nymph fly fishing and what you are attempting to catch and where you are doing it. Make sense? Probably not, but let's move forward to give you some idea on the different nymphing techniques available when fly fishing.

This page goes over the easiest method for beginners to use. The more effective Dead Drift Method is covered on the next page.



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Nymph Fly Fishing Technique : Beginner Method

This method of fishing nymphs is probably the easiest for any beginner to use, and is certainly a good way to get introduced to nymphing in general. This nymph fly fishing technique, which involves casting the nymph directly across the river and then letting it float all the way down to a point on the river directly below the angler, removes many of the problems of nymph fly fishing for the new anglers.

The beginner method of fly fishing with nymphs is quite simple. First, just cast your nymph directly across the stream from where you stand. Then, let the fly float down the river, keeping the line tight as it floats away as well as following the fly with your fly rod. Eventually, the nymph will be at a point directly downstream from you.

This is the point you want, as here, due to the current, the nymph will begin to "rise" out of the depths due to the current of the river. The current will also wiggle the little nymph all around. Thus, when the nymph is directly downstream from you, hold the nymph there for a couple of seconds, and then gradually raise the tip of your fly rod, which will bring the nymph a bit further up from the depths of the river. This is the most likely point of a strike using this method.

This is a nice method for beginners, as it is all done by feel, not by sight. You do not need to use a strike indicator for this nymph fly fishing method. Instead, since the fly line will be tense at all times, you will have a trout strike immediately. Moreover, setting the hook is a snap, too, since the trout will hook itself when it takes your fly due to the tight tension in the fly line.

So, what's wrong with this beginner method? Well, a number of things, actually. First, the only point this method is likely to draw any strikes is right at the point

where your nymph begins to lift off from the depths of the river. This greatly narrows the scope of the effectiveness of this fly fishing method; since the vast majority of the float of the nymph is “wasted” (trout are unlikely to take a nymph that is careening at weird angles across a river).

Secondly, since the point of the strike will occur directly below you, you need to make sure that you are able to be directly upstream of this point. If, for some reason (and there are lots of potential ones) you can’t get directly upstream of this point, you’re unlikely to get your fly there.

And, lastly, this method won’t work from a boat too well. This beginner method is mainly designed for the angler who is fly fishing with nymphs from the shore.

Well, this page covered the "beginners nymphing method", for lack of a better word. While this method is an excellent way for the beginner to get started in nymph fly fishing, there are better methods available. So, let's look more closely at advanced nymphing techniques, particularly the [Dead Drift Method for Nymph Fishing](#).



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Wet Fly Fishing : Advanced Methods

The method listed on the previous page is an excellent method for beginner anglers to use when fly fishing with wet flies. However, there are a modifications of this basic method that will improve your fly fishing productivity and are not much more difficult to learn how to do. This page discusses several of these methods.

Wet Fly Fishing : Across & Downstream Method

This method of wet fly fishing isn't too terribly different than the basic technique discussed previously. This method simply involves casting the fly above an appealing piece of water, then dead drifting the wet fly through this section at the proper depth. Once the wet fly has drifted through the area, then the basic method takes over. The fly line will sweep the wet fly across the water, landing the fly directly downstream from the angler, where action can be put on the fly by twitching and raising the fly rod.



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In essence, this method is the same as the basic wet fly fishing technique – except that the angler is extending the wet flies float by providing a short dead drift through an area that may look appealing. The only real trick to using this method is to be sure to cast your fly well above the piece of water you want your wet fly to “dead drift” through, in order to give the fly time to get to the proper depth. You will also want to take care to make sure that the fly line is not taught during the dead drift section (otherwise the dead drift won't happen!). A line mend or two may also have to be made, especially in faster waters, to prevent the current from sweeping the fly away before it reaches the prime “dead drift” area you're shooting for.

Since the wet fly will be making a dead drift for a short section of its float, using strike indicators is really required in order to detect strikes during this dead drift section. Attach a strike indicator at the junction of the fly line and fly leader. As the wet fly makes its dead drift, watch the strike indicator closely, looking for any “unnatural” movements or pauses of the indicator (which indicates a strike). If you see the strike indicator move or pause suddenly, set the hook immediately.

Wet Fly Fishing : Other Methods

There are numerous other methods for fly fishing with wet flies. These include the dead drift method and the upstream and across method. However, these methods tend to be rather more demanding – requiring greater skill on the part of the angler. To learn more about these particular types of methods currently used for nymph fishing that can also be adapted for wet fly fishing, simply read our [nymph fly fishing guide](#).

Wet Fly Fishing : Summary

Wet fly fishing use to be the most popular type of fly fishing. Today, it comes in a distant third to dry fly fishing and nymph fishing. Nymph fishing is now often times considered to be “wet fly fishing” today. While the more precise fly imitations and more precision methods used in nymph fly fishing do indeed generally work better for catching larger, more wary trout – anglers should never overlook fly fishing the traditional wet fly. This is especially true for beginner anglers, who by wet fly fishing can be introduced to some of the basic principles used in nymph fishing while actually catching fish while they do it.



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