

Fly Fishing : Techniques of Wet Fly Fishing

Many anglers who are new to fly fishing consider dry fly fishing the “traditional” way of catching trout. Well, that’s not entirely true. Wet fly fishing dates back hundreds of years, well before dry fly fishing came around.

Wet fly fishing is one of the best ways for anglers to get introduced to sub-surface fishing. Unlike nymph and dry fly fishing, where skill and practice and precise imitations are needed to effectively take trout consistently, wet fly fishing can provide rewards quickly to even beginner anglers. The reason? Well, unlike dry fly fishing and nymph fly fishing, when using wet flies, the angler is not attempting to precisely imitate any particular insect.



The Blackfoot River in Montana

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Wet Fly Fishing : Basic Overview

Instead of looking precisely like a particular type of insect, a wet fly is more an imitation of a stage of life of aquatic insects. Many wet flies imitate a struggling nymph as it attempts to reach the surface of the river. These same wet flies also suitably imitate dead or drowning insects. Either way, one thing about wet flies is that they generally imitate aquatic insects in motion (moving to the surface, drowning in the water, etc...) – not just floating merrily along in the current, completely helpless (although that is done, too!).

Even better, unlike dry fly or nymph fly fishing, wet fly fishing can be very rewarding to beginner anglers. Perfect, or even good technique, is not needed for new anglers to hook some nice fish. And the reason for this is because of the way most wet fly fishing is done – neither requiring perfect casts nor split-timing when setting the hook.

And to top things off, anglers when fly fishing with wet flies frequently will use 2 or more flies together. By using two or more flies together in a dropper setup (described later), an angler can improve their chances of finding trout interested in the anglers fly offerings.

So, let’s take a close look at how wet fly fishing works, what is used and why any angler should give it a try – even on those rivers that are normally the bastion of the dry fly fisherman.

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Wet Fly Fishing : Gear & Flies Used

There are a myriad of flies available for wet fly fishing. Normally, most wet flies have soft hackling. The reason for this is because this type of hackling has fibers in it that move around in the water – sort of inviting the trout to take it in. Additionally, unlike most nymphs, wet flies are designed to sink rather quickly, since wet fly fishing is generally done (though not always) quite close to the bottom of the river. For this reason, many wet flies tend to be a bit heavier (tied in a wide variety of ways, each way designed to sink the fly in a particular manner) than the typical nymph.



The Clark Fork in Montana
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Frequently, wet flies tend to be fished in areas that have fast moving water. Because of this, many anglers fly fish wet flies using a sinking tip line. While using a sink-tip fly line can definitely aid the fly in getting down to the right depth, an angler who only has a floating fly line should not despair. Generally, simply using weights on the leader or the fly line can do an adequate job of pulling down a wet fly to the right depth.

Wet Fly Fishing : Dropper Flies

As mentioned, wet flies are frequently fished in groups of flies – not just a single fly by itself. When a second, or third, fly is used, it is called a “dropper fly”. A dropper fly – which is a very effective and rather ancient method of wet fly fishing – is a fly that is tied to the main leader.

When rigging up your fly fishing gear using a dropper fly, simply attach the first fly onto the end of the tippet as you normally would. Then, for the second fly, take a 12 inch of tippet material and tie it to the leader about 12-24 inches above the first fly. Attach the second fly to the end of that line. You now have a dropper fly set up. Additional flies can also be attached – you are in no way limited to just using 1 or 2 flies. However, obviously, the more flies you have, the greater the likelihood of tangles occurring are – both when casting and in hooking underwater obstructions. For beginner anglers, it is probably best to start with one fly, then go to two flies when comfortable with basic casting and wet fly fishing technique.

Either way, one nice thing about a dropper fly is that it allows anglers to test out flies at the same time. Thus, you can tie on one type as normal, then tie on a completely different looking wet fly as a dropper fly. It's a great way to quickly experiment around to see what works and what doesn't on a particular river (especially a new one you've never fished before). Additionally, from time to time, you may even be rewarded with having two or more fish hooked simultaneously.

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Wet Fly Fishing : Basic Method

There isn't really anything fancy about wet fly fishing. While common sense always needs to be used of course (no splashing about, slamming the fly line into the water, good wading technique, etc...), wet fly fishing isn't nearly as demanding skill wise as is dry fly fishing or nymph fly fishing. As long as an angler can do even just a basic cast, an angler can catch trout using wet flies (although not necessarily the largest trout!).



The Madison River in Montana

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The tried and true technique of wet fly fishing involves casting your fly line downstream and across the river. This technique, called the basic method here for simplicity, is excellent to use for the beginner angler, since the fly line is tight at all times – a trout generally hooks itself when taking a wet fly fished in this manner (although you still want to set the hook).

This method of fly fishing the wet fly is very simple to do. Simply cast your fly downstream and across the river from you. Follow the fly downstream with your fly rod, keeping the rod tip pointed at the wet fly. The current of the river will quickly form a belly in the fly line, swinging the fly across the river – which imitates a swimming insect. An angler can also twitch either the rod or fly line to put a little more action on the fly.

Once the fly hangs directly downstream from the angler, raise the rod tip slightly, which raises the fly out of the depths of the river (thus imitating an emerging insect). An angler can also twitch the fly rod to provide a little additional “action” to the fly – something which frequently provokes a strike. You can even leave the fly there for a short while, moving the rod tip up and down, thus taking the fly up and down in depth. This provides some time for any nearby trout to have more time to see and look over your offering.



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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.



The Ruby River in Montana
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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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