



In The Beginning – Part I

So you want to learn to fly fish?

By Slapout Mike



A fair number of posts to this and other forums each year are from folks who want to take up fly fishing. Either they are envious of some recent trophy shot of that four pound smallie taken on a Clouser Deep Minnow or they just want to expand their horizons. In any case, they almost always start their posts—I am new to fly fishing, what do I need to get started.

The Basics

Fly fishing like any other fishing requires essentially three things—equipment, bait and skills. On the skill side, successful fly fishing requires two distinct skills—fly casting and general fishing skills. Since this piece is about fly fishing, the only comment I will make about general fishing skills is that they apply to anyone who wants to fish successfully. You’ve got to find fish, get bait in front of them, make them strike and land them when you catch them. It’s the same for bait casters, spin fisherman and fly fisherman alike.

Fly casting on the other hand is an essential skill distinctly related to fly fishing and must be learned to be a successful fly fisherman. The *bait* in fly fishing is the artificial fly, the variety of which is almost infinite. The successful fly fisherman is skilled at matching his flies to the fish he’s trying to catch, the waters he is fishing and the equipment he is using. Finally, success at fly fishing, even success at fly casting requires the right equipment. Get the right equipment, learn how to use it and get the right bait (fly) in front of fish and you can become a successful fly fisherman and enjoy the sport immensely.



Fly Fishing Is A Great Pastime

Equipment-What Do I Need?



The Newcomer Has A Daunting Array Of Choices To Make

This is probably the most common question the newcomer to fly fishing asks. One only needs to look at a retail fly fishing catalog or visit a fly shop to know that there is a lot of equipment to choose from. The newcomer not only needs to determine what he needs, he needs to understand what’s really available. He also needs to determine how much he’s willing to pay. The choices are daunting and you can spend a lot of money, without getting what you really need. So I find it useful to break down the basic equipment like this—fly rod, fly reel, fly line and leaders/tippetts, fly boxes—and discuss each one separately. Obviously there is a lot of other equipment, clothing and accessories that can add to the fly fishing





experience they can wait for another essay.

Fly Rod

The first Fly Rod is the single most important piece of fly fishing equipment you will ever own. Fly line runs a close



Basic Stuff

second. You will learn to fly cast with this rod. You will learn to fly fish with this rod. If it is the wrong rod, you will be disappointed, discouraged and god forbid, abandon the notion that fly fishing is something you want to do. At the low-end and high-end of the price spectrum, there is probably not a fly rod available that could be called an all-round rod. In the mid-prices ranges there might be some rods that are more all-around than others. However, my advice is: don't try to find or buy the all-around fly rod unless you've narrowed your prospective fly fishing significantly. Apart from the material and construction quality of any given

fly rod, they generally have three important characteristics—length, recommended weight and action. Each of these characteristics impacts how the

fly rod will cast and fish in different conditions and waters. Of lesser importance is the number of pieces—typically four for travel rods and two for non-travel rods. A typical fly rod description would be: 9', 4 piece, 6 weight fast action fly rod. In general, actions can range from Fast to Slow, although most of today's graphite rods are in the medium fast to very fast range. Assuming your line is well matched to the rod and your personal casting style, faster rods allow for longer casts with heavier flies in windier conditions. By contrast, slower rods allow for more delicacy and precision with lighter flies.

As a newcomer to fly fishing don't tell the fly shop owner you want a rod that works well with small poppers in a bluegill pond but will handle heavy streamers for deep bass on a big river. If you do, you are liable to get a rod that won't do either very well. As well, you won't hear me saying "What you need is a 9', 6 weight fast action rod with a half-wells grip." I don't know where you want to fish, what kind of flies you want to use or how much you can spend. If you are planning to fly fish small Alabama creeks, a 9' rod might be too long. If all you want to fish for are Bluegills in the pond, a 7 weight rod isn't necessary. So deciding on the configuration of your first rod deserves some deliberation, fact finding and soul searching. Discussing your ideas about where you want to fish and what you want to fish for with fly shop experts or experienced friends can be very useful. Additionally try casting a number of different fly rods before you buy your first one. Believe it or not, you can get a brand name fly rod for \$22 online. It is probably a closeout or second, but it is cheap and its real value is probably pretty difficult to assess. On the other hand, if you have \$755 lying around, you know an Orvis Helios is a high-end value fly rod. The beginning fly fisher should stay away from both ends of the spectrum to avoid disappointment with low-quality equipment as well as frustration at the cost of the high-end, generally specialized stuff. **Tip:** *Even if you already know how to fly cast, try different rods in different configurations before you buy them and don't let an expert TELL you what you need!*

Fly Reel

For the new comer to fly fishing, any premium spent on a fly reel is wasted money. Except for those of you who want to start off hunting bonefish, tarpon or other species that make blistering runs where a good drag is essential, the fly reel





serves only one purpose—line and backing storage. The reel need only be matched in size to the rod and line being used, otherwise reels of almost any vintage, quality or design will work fine. In today’s market, if you are spending over \$100 on a fly reel, you are spending dollars that you cannot justify for any practical fly fishing reason, especially as a new comer. If you can get a 2nd hand reel with extra spools for the same price as a new reel, you are making a wiser investment.



Fly Line

My first fly line was a level line. I bought it because it was all I could afford at the time. In retrospect it was the biggest mistake I made when I bought my first fly fishing setup. My first rod (a glass Wright-McGill Trail-master 7.5') and reel (a Pflueger Medalist) were well matched for their intended purpose. However, my opting for level line on my reel versus a double-taper set back my learning to fly cast effectively for almost a year. For a 20% premium I could have acquired that double-taper line and I would have been casting better, sooner. What’s the point here—don’t cut corners matching up fly line to the fly rod you select and the type of fishing you intend to try. There were relatively few options when I bought my first fly line in the 1960s compared to the market today. A quick review of fly fishing catalogs reveal many manufacturers and dozens of types of fly line of different quality and price.



The Newcomer Is Faced With A Wide Variety Of Fly Line Choices

This leads me to the one thing I’ve learned about fly line in the last 40 years—no one fly line will meet all your fly fishing needs. Understand that and respect that. The worst mistake a new comer can make is to select a fly line that isn’t suited to the type of fishing you want to do or try to do, isn’t matched with the fly rod and casting style, and isn’t of sufficient quality to avoid falling apart from the inevitable abuse it takes on the water or learning to cast. A part from your ability to cast a well matched fly line and fly rod, the line you use does impact what kind of flies you can use effectively. A floating line is essential if you are going to fish top-water bugs, poppers and flies. Weighted and un-weighted nymphs and streamers can be fished with floating line, but not as effectively as with sink-tips or full sinking lines. On the flip-side, it’s very difficult to fish a floating fly on sinking line. The newcomer has a serious dilemma in this regard. If you can only afford one fly line, then which one? My answer is this, buy a line of high-quality that is well-matched to the fly-rod. Learn to cast well with this setup. If the line is suitable for large, heavy or wind-resistant flies, then cast those types of flies. Don’t try the same setup for delicate dries or nymphs. You will be disappointed and blame your equipment.





Leaders and Tippets

Whether you are fishing small poppers or heavy streamers, your leader and tippet connect your fly line to the fly. The length, stiffness, taper and breaking strength are all relevant factors in fly casting as well as hooking and landing fish. Leaders and tippets must be matched to your fly line as well as the size, weight and type of fly you are fishing. In general, the lighter, smaller your fly, the longer and finer your leader can be. If you are fishing a heavy fly, such as a #6 cone head Woolly Buzzer, your leader needs to be shorter, thicker and stiffer, otherwise the heavy fly will not cast well. Also important, regardless of what leader/tippet combination you choose, is the connection of the leader to the fly line. There has got to be a smooth transition between the line and leader. Although there are many methods to make this connection, if it acts like a hinge, you are going to have problems casting. There are lots of leader and tippet options on the market. Learn the advantages and disadvantages of each. If at all possible, when you try different rods at a fly shop, take that opportunity to do the same thing with different leader tippet and fly combinations. If you think you want to pay \$15 for a furred leader, try it before you buy and make sure you understand how it performs compared to other options. Try different options and find out what works well for you given your budget and desired type of fly fishing.

Fly Boxes



Fly Boxes - Don't Skimp On Quality

Those of us who have been fly fishing for decades will jokingly tell you that “You can never have too many fly boxes.” As wise as that may sound, on the stream, too many fly boxes is a detriment. For the beginning fly fisherman, one box, two at the most is sufficient for many reasons. Fly boxes serve the primary purpose of keeping your bait (your flies) organized, secure and readily available to be tied to your tippet. Whether you are on foot, in a kayak or canoe or a big bass boat, the fly box stores your flies in such a manner as to keep them accessible, secure and

selectable. Over the years I’ve learned that I only use about a dozen flies a day. It is sometimes more, sometimes less, but in general if I had a dozen flies in my fly box, I probably wouldn’t run out before I finished fishing.

Just like other fly fishing equipment, there are dozens of options out there for fly boxes—from the cheap to the extravagant. When selecting your fly boxes, avoid the cheap and the extravagant. Select boxes that will withstand a lot of abuse. Cheap boxes won’t. Select boxes that will hold your flies securely while you impart that abuse, or merely open them in the wind. If your flies become loose in the box or the box won’t stay closed, you are sure to lose a few in the wind or in the stream when abusing your fly box. Select boxes suitable for the size of flies you are going to fish. You can fit small flies in a large box, but you can’t put large flies (at least very many of them) in a small box. However, small flies, especially small dries and nymphs can get lost or obscured in a box that’s too large. Probably the best exercise to undertake when buying a fly box you intend to carry with you on the stream is this. Select the two dozen flies—bugs, buzzers, streamers, nymphs, and such you just have to have with you. Select a box that will accommodate these flies securely, in an organized manner. **Tip:** *Don’t skimp. Cheap boxes break and are not worth the money. But expensive boxes, especially too many of them are a bad investment. You are going to lose a fly box on the stream someday and with it a lot of good flies. Don’t aggravate that probability by carrying too many expensive boxes.*





Flies-Which Ones?; Does It Matter?

Fortunately, individual flies are not a significant new comer to fly fishing. Costs average from less than a \$3-4 for large, complex flies. Sources abound with fly sources able to supply just about any fly you might want. number of patterns available seems nearly infinite and new comer may feel overwhelmed by the available had the opportunity to take many new comers fly fishing bought their outfits and flies, lot of them show up with *assortment* box designed for some target species or new comer these assortments seem like a cost-effective



investment for the dollar each up to shops and on-line Unfortunately, the the uninformed choices. Having after they've the proverbial water. To the good idea—the

net cost per fly is less than buying each one individually. I don't think they are. The reality is that flies get consumed on the water; they are an expendable item in fly fishing. The other reality is all flies don't work effectively all the time in all the water, whereas for any given target species or target waters, generally certain flies work well most of the time. Assortments generally give the fly fisherman too few of the flies they really need and too many flies they don't need. If the bass are slamming olive or black woolly buggers and your assortment contains only two of those, you are out of luck when that last bugger snags on a tree limb out reach. Instead of buying assortments, the newcomer should seek local advice and acquire sufficient numbers of a few proven patterns for the target species and waters they want to fish. This accomplishes two things. It allows the new comer to learn to fish a few proven patterns successfully. This builds confidence fast, which is important when you are learning how to fly fish. It also forces the new comer to really think and learn about target species and different techniques and flies used to catch them—the process of doing so and knowledge gained is an intimate part of the overall fly fishing experience. **Tip:** *When acquiring your first batch of flies, don't opt for the cookie cutter, expedient option by purchasing mass market assortments—do the research to get what you really need.*

Fly Casting-The Long Pole In The Tent!



Professional Casting Instruction For The Newcomer Is Invaluable

Fly Casting is something that is difficult to learn on your own. Some people are good at "book learnin", but my guess is it's tough to learn how to fly cast from a book alone even though there are some really good texts out there. I was lucky enough to learn to tie flies and fly cast from accomplished old timers at a hometown casting club with I was a young teenager. The skills were learned well before I ever attempted to fly fish. My recommendation to anyone desiring to learn how to fly fish is to get some expert instruction in fly casting at the onset. Even better is to get some instruction and practice BEFORE you buy your first fly rod. Even better is getting expert instruction using the fly rods you might consider buying. Local fly shops and local guides all give casting instruction and clinics. Take advantage of these and learn how to fly cast properly. Having spent a lot of time over the years

with guides on my favorite rivers, there is one lament they all repeat. Folks who have the best equipment, the best flies and otherwise all the best gear, don't catch





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many fish if they can't fly cast effectively. They are quick to blame it on their gear or conditions, but invariably it is their basic casting skill set. In my cynical opinion, the reason nymph fishing under an indicator was invented (bobber fishing for trout) was too mitigate poor casting skills by otherwise high-roller fly fisherman. Although you don't have to be a distance or accuracy champion fly caster to catch fish, eventually you have to consistently make good (the right distance and accuracy) casts to catch fish consistently. **Tip:** *Do not assume you can teach yourself to cast, you can't!*

So you want to learn to fly fish!

Equipment, the right flies and fly fishing skills are all important to your success as a fly fisherman. However, the most important step is learning how to fly cast effectively with the fly rod, reel and line setup you choose. In fact, learning how to fly cast will help you make a more informed choice of equipment to buy and the flies you choose to fish with.



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