

# Fly Fishing Stillwaters

## *Third of Three Parts:*

### *Stillwater Fishing techniques*

**By Bill Sunderland**

Fly fishing in lakes and reservoirs requires techniques that are different than angling in moving water. Just like learning how to manage a dead drift or short-lining a nymph through pocket water they take some practice.

For novices, trolling around dragging a Woolly Bugger seems to be the only answer. It does catch fish – you’re covering water and offering a moving target to any passing trout. But how many other trout took a look at it and then decided, “This ain’t natural. I’ll dine elsewhere.”

The basic difference between moving water and stillwater fishing is obvious – in streams and rivers the water provides the action, in lakes and reservoirs it’s up to the angler to make the fly imitate the natural. That covers a great range of action, all the way from letting a midge pattern sit quietly with just an occasional twitch, to fast-stripping a streamer that imitates a minnow.

The more you know about whatever bug you are imitating, whether it be a caddis, mayfly or damselfly, the better your technique. Take damsels, for instance. They’re one of the favorite fish foods on many lakes, including the ever-popular Davis. How do they behave?

When they are hatching they are easy to see. They tend to swim along just under the surface, heading towards the shore. Unlike mayflies and caddis flies, they have to get out of the water to hatch, so they are looking for somewhere they can get above the water. They propel themselves along by wiggling their body back and forth, stopping occasionally to rest. They work hard at it, but actually don’t move that fast.

And that is one of the keys to fishing for them: strip slowly. In fact, that’s an important key to stillwater fishing and the one most anglers tend to ignore. Really, you are almost always stripping too fast unless you are pulling a streamer.

Taking all this into consideration what’s the best technique for being successful during a damselfly hatch? First, you need a fly that has an extended body that moves as it goes through the water. There are plenty of them on the market, but my personal preference is Jay Fair’s Wiggle-tail Damsel. Color is not as easy. Most damsels are greenish, but the green can cover the entire spectrum. They also can be light brown. On Davis, damsels will start out green in the early part of the day and then get darker and turn brownish as the day wears on. They don’t need to be weighted because there usually is no need to fish them deep. A floating line works just fine.

They will be trying to get to shore, so wading rather than float-tubing is, when possible, the way to go. Cast out and strip toward shore. They also tend to move with the wind, so if you have a choice – such as fishing on a spit of land – cast into the wind. Strip

slowly, with regular pauses of a few seconds. One technique is to twist the line back and forth over your thumb and little finger. It makes for a slow, very steady retrieve and keeps a lot of the slack line off the water.

Don't forget to pause because that's an invitation for the trout to slurp up dinner.

What you learned about stripping damsels also holds true for the main trout foods of mayflies and caddis flies. The major difference is that they move to the top of the water to hatch rather than make their way to shore. For the most part they move upward through the water column, then sink back down a ways when they rest. Logically, a sink-tip line or a long leader that imitate this upward motion would work best, and it can be effective if you know where the trout are feeding. But the reality is that much of your time on stillwaters is spent searching for trout, which often hold at a certain depth, so (as described in an earlier article) a full-sink line that keeps a fly at one level is more effective in finding them.

Most fishing on lakes and reservoirs is below the surface, but when fish are taking emergers or dries, anglers have to adapt. The most effective way is to target a feeding fish and go after it. Trout taking dries during a hatch usually cruise in a pattern, often a circle or an oval, picking off bugs as they go. By watching carefully a fly-line angler can determine this pattern and put a fly where the fish is headed. Spotting this pattern takes some practice, but is well worth the time – it is a great way to catch big fish.

Also, big fish don't usually make big splashes as they take these flies, they just suck them in, so don't pass up a dimple in the water because you think it is a small trout.

An exception to this slurping rule is the annual Hex hatch, when the largest of mayflies, *Hexagenia limbata*, do their thing. Lake Almanor is famous for its Hex hatch that begins in mid-June and lasts for about a month. It is in the evening, about a 45-minute period from the time the sun goes down until it is dark. Big trout just smash these two-inch yellow mayflies as they reach the surface, break out of their shucks and prepare to fly away. Seeing five-pound trout come all the way out of the water after a fly is an adrenalin-pumping experience.

And, yes, I've actually seen big trout come out of the water to pick off a Hex that already is in the air.

At the other end of the spectrum is fishing midges. It can be like watching grass grow, but is an extremely effective technique. Midges hatch year-round, so during the winter it is about the only choice for dry-fly angling.

Most midges are small, down to size 20 and 22s, although some range as big as a 14. When they hatch they very slowly make their way to the surface, where because of their size they can have trouble breaking through the surface film. Fishing them in the film, or just under, is the best way to go. Except for perhaps a gentle twitch every now and again, just let your fly sit and wait. And wait and wait and wait. Fish need a lot of them to make a meal and hopefully at some point they'll get around to yours.

Trout sip them gently, so set the hook at any movement. My eyesight isn't good and to offset this I usually put the midge as a dropper from a larger dry fly that I can see clearly.

When you get tired of midges or stripping slowly, there's always the possibility of hooking a big one with a streamer. These minnow imitations can trigger a vicious strike from larger fish, but it usually is a case of a lot of work and few fish. Strip as fast as you can, those little fish stay alive by moving fast. One way of doing it is to hold the rod

under your arm pit and strip with both hands. Be sure and use a heavy leader because there aren't going to be any gentle takes

A good place for streamer fishing can be Crowley Lake, that big impoundment on the Eastern Slope of the Sierra Nevada. Sacramento Perch are a favorite food for Crowley's big trout and using streamer imitations can be a killer when the small perch are seeking cover in or near the weed beds along the shoreline. The Hornberg Special has long done well as an imitation but local tiers have developed numerous other patterns that imitate perch minnows.

In putting all these techniques together, the effective angler should make every cast count. If you are using a sinking line, don't just toss it out and wait for a bit before you start stripping. Know how quickly that particular line sinks and count it down. That's the only way you'll be able to duplicate it if you get a strike or a fish. If you're not getting hits, change your technique before you change your fly. Try it deeper, or even slower, before you switch to something else, particularly if you are using such all-purpose nymphs as a Hare's Ear, Pheasant Tail, Prince, or Bird's Nest.

And above all, remember to strip sloooooowly.

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A word about playing and releasing big fish caught in stillwaters. You need to get them in fairly fast, so keep the pressure on them. First, don't go light with a rod – a five- or six-weight is fine, but lighter means you'll have a longer battle getting a big one to the net. I like a rod with a fairly soft tip but a good, solid butt section so you can really put pressure on the fish.

Second, whenever possible, use a heavy tippet, 4X or heavier. In some cases this won't be possible but usually fishing underwater allows you to use a heavier tippet without spooking the fish.

Once you have a big trout hooked, play it hard. If it's not taking line you should be trying to get it in. Once to the net, make as quick a release as possible, preferably without taking the fish out of the water.

There's a reason for this. Trout build up lactose during the fight after being hooked and if there is too much of a build-up it kills them. They may seem revived and swim away, but actually can die minutes or even hours later. So get them in fast and makes sure they are completely functional before letting them go.