FLY FISHERMAN

2018 Beginner's Guide

FLY FISHING

Made Easy

HOW TO CATCH

Trout on

STREAMERS
NYMPHS
DRY FLIES

24 ESSENTIAL **FLIES**

THE PROGRESSIVE **METHOD OF FLY CASTING**

THE ALL-TIME **TOP 20** TROUT SPOTS

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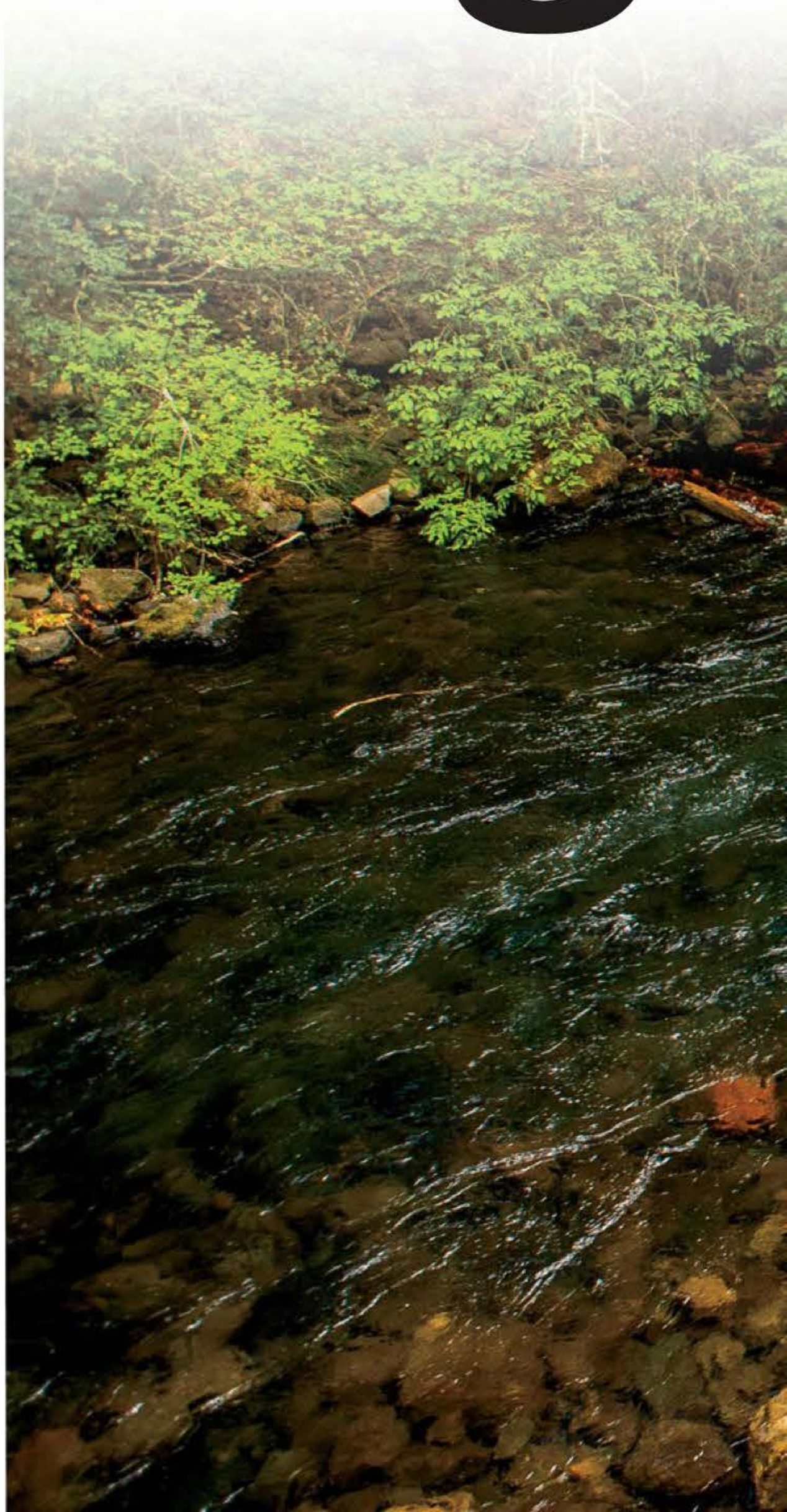
This feature is an excerpt from *ACA's Beginner's Guide to Fly Casting: A Comprehensive Manual for Novice Casters* (Skyhorse Publishing, 2018).

Getting

>JOHN FIELD

Photo | **R. Valentine Atkinson**



A FLY IS a hand-crafted representation of a food or threat that fish consume or attack. Some fish are carnivorous and others are vegetarians. When fish strike something, it is usually motivated by hunger, but often it's just instinctive or learned behavior. When fish spawn they are often territorial and attack parasitic or predatory intruders. With salmon and trout, spawning suppresses appetite, so striking at flies is mainly a reflexive feeding behavior. The stomachs of spawning salmon are usually empty, yet anglers catch them on flies.

The size of the creatures that a fish will bite—and that we can imitate with flies—ranges from almost microscopic to about 16 inches in length. The maximum size of a fly an angler might use is limited by his or her ability to cast it. Someone who designs their own flies has the choice of creating a realistic, an artistic, or an impressionistic imitation of what the fly tier thinks the prey might be. You tie a fly by attaching man-made or natural materials to a hook shank, tube, or line with thread and/or adhesives. Depending on the tier's objective, hook weight, materials, and quantities, flies can be made to sit on top of the water, just below, or sink at varying rates.

Fly fishing is generally harder to learn and perform than conventional fishing with bait or lures. It is considered by most anglers to be more challenging, and to have fewer impacts on a fishery. Many fly anglers voluntarily use barbless hooks to minimize damage to fish. With large flies imitating finned prey, tiers seldom use more than one hook.

That is much less damaging than the three-treble hooks on many crankbaits used with spin or conventional tackle. Flies are also usually safer to fish because they lodge in the fish's mouth, whereas fish tend to swallow live and artificial baits deeper, where the hooks can cause more damage.

In conventional fishing, baits or lures vary in weight from around ⅛ ounce, up to several pounds in the case of live saltwater bait. Flies tend to be lighter to facilitate easier casting. In either case, the translucent monofilament line is usually undetectable by the fish. In terms of simple machine mechanics, all fishing rods are a combination of lever and spring, but you cast them differently.

When an angler casts a bait or lure with a spinning or bait-casting outfit, she leaves the bait or lure hanging by

The flies, tackle, and knots you need to catch your first fish

Started

Maxine McCormick learned to cast through the ACA method at the Golden Gate Angling and Casting Club. She is already one of the world's best casters.

Photo | **John Field**

This is an assortment of weighted flies, floating flies, and poppers to catch a variety of freshwater and saltwater fish on or below the surface.

the line a few inches or feet below the rod tip and pins the line to the grip or holds it with a button. Then she makes a cast with the rod which bends the rod and throws the projectile when she releases the line or button. The momentum of the bait or lure pulls the line off the spool of the reel until it lands. When you catch a fish, or wish to bring in a bait or lure, you crank the line back on the reel with the handle. It is to be taken for granted these reels will have various drag systems to allow a big fish to pull line off the spool without breaking the main fishing line. With spinning and bait-casting reels, the handle does not spin backward when the line goes out. It remains stationary.

In fly fishing, the fly is relatively light and the relatively heavy line provides the weight needed to deliver the fly to its target. To prevent the fish from associating the heavy line with the fly, we use a leader or tippet made out of a translucent monofilament. When you fish for species with certain kinds of teeth, you would use other materials such as steel to prevent the fish from biting through the leader.

To make a cast with a fly rod, you need some line extended beyond the rod tip in a manner that provides resistance and then you must accelerate the rod with a stroke to get the line moving towards where you want it to go, then stop the rod to control the formation of an unrolling loop which will move toward its aimed direction. The bend in the rod is an indication of the result of your stroke against the line's resistance in relation to the flexibility of the rod.

The American Fly Fishing Trade Association publishes a line-weight chart showing the standard for lines from a 1-weight to a 15-weight. Weight is abbreviated as wt., or indicated with the # symbol. The measurement, typically in grain weight (or $\frac{1}{7000}$ths of a pound), is made for the first 30 feet of the line, starting at the tip where the leader would connect. Line manufacturers also measure and offer lines with just the grain weight of the first 30 feet. The fly-rod industry tries to design and label rods to correspond to these line weights. Most manufacturers are now laser marking the line information on the line coating of beginning of the fly line.

The rod acts as part lever and part spring. The action of a fly rod is how much the rod will bend and where it will bend against a downward pull, or resistance, on its tip. Rod designers and builders have testing equipment for this and measure and record rod actions. Rod manufacturers usually design a rod with an intended purpose and an action to achieve it. The action of a rod is designed to assist in casting well at distances, presentation, and in also protecting the tippet—the thin, translucent, and weakest part of the line attached to the fly.

The descriptors currently used in marketing rods to describe rod actions are slow, medium, and fast. A slow action bends from the tip all the way into the grip, a medium action from about half way down to the tip, and a fast action rod bends mainly from the tip to about a third of the way down.

Although it isn't the best choice for all-round accuracy and distance, a slow-action rod is easier to cast for beginners, and it can help maintain tension, so the hook can be set and you can detect soft bites. A medium-action rod is a good compromise for accuracy, presentation, and distance. A fast-action rod is intended for heavy flies and casting distance, but not intended for light tippets. The action of a rod also has an influence on how you cast them.

When you cast a fly toward the fish, or where you suspect a fish to be, there are two ways to make the cast reach. Either you pull line off the reel as you add more and more length in the air while you casting back and forth until it is the right length and make your delivery, or you have line ready and release it into a cast so its weight pulls line through the rod guides. The latter is like throwing an apple off a stick. These steps have specific names and techniques which I'll describe in detail in my book.

Instead of retrieving a fly every cast by cranking the reel handle, as you would on a spinning or bait-casting reel, you use your line hand (the one you don't cast with) and pull line back in through the guides. This action is called stripping line in. You can also strip line out, by pulling it off the reel.

When you catch a small fish, you can strip the line to bring the fish in and even let the fish pull line back through your fingers if necessary. If you catch a bigger fish that could break the line against resistance, it's usually safer to reel in the slack and fight the fish "on the reel" to prevent a break off from tangles. In some instances you must make sure a furiously-spinning handle doesn't hit you in the knuckles, and there are few fly reels made with special anti-reverse mechanisms to prevent this. Most reels today have an adjustable mechanical drag to control for this purpose.

There are different reasons why people fish. It can provide a challenge, immersion in nature, friendly competition between anglers, or a means of providing food. Some anglers want to

catch the most fish in the least amount of time, others want to catch the biggest fish they can. Anglers can select the type of tackle they use based on the degree of challenge or to minimize the impact on the environment. Tackle can even impact the likelihood a fish will survive being caught and released. Worms catch trout readily but cause them to swallow the hook and die. Some anglers harvest all the fish they catch when permitted and others catch-and-release most or all they catch. In some places where harvesting isn't permitting you must release every caught fish with the least injury and stress.

Fly casting and fly fishing have their unique rewards. You can catch most fish with bait and lures on bait or spin tackle more easily, but when you catch them on a fly rod, the degree of difficulty is higher. Most fly anglers say it is more fun to play fish on a fly rod because having the handle near the end is a disadvantage; it's more challenging. A fly rod gives good feedback through the grip when we cast well. If you golf or play tennis, you might have had a similar experience with a club or racquet. The best fly fishing is experienced pursuing wild fish in beautiful places. A nicely-cast loop is beautiful to see sailing through the air anywhere. Do it in the wild and it's even more special.

As the title states, this text is intended for people who are just beginning to cast a fly rod. You may never have fished before with any type of tackle, or you may have used other tackle and want to add fly fishing to widen your repertoire or increase your fishing skills.

There are several key things you need to know to become a successful fly fisher: What equipment and flies to use, how to cast and present a fly, and where and when to fish. This text offers the very basics. If you want to read about advanced fly casting and presentation, get a hardcover or digital copy of my book *Fly-Casting Finesse: A Complete Guide to Improving All Aspects of Your Casting* (Skyhorse Publishing, 2015).

Sight fishing is when you can see one or more fish, or the effect of their movement in the wild, and present your fly to them in an enticing manner. The most challenging is fishing for one individual fish, instead of casting into or in front of a group or school. Casting accuracy is important because if the fish you want does not see the fly, it won't take it, but if you hit the fish on the head it will usually spook. Timing is also critical. If the fish is cycling around a pool or structure, or establishes a feeding rhythm, putting the fly down when it isn't ready will result in failure.

If the water is clear, you can usually see the fish's reaction to your fly, or if it's muddy, you might see signs of a quick exit. It will either spook, strike, follow and strike, follow and refuse, or ignore your offering completely. It's exciting to see an immediate take, but it is very helpful to see other reactions so you can change what you're doing to increase your success. If you like to sight fish, fly fishing is ideal.

The other types of fly fishing where distance casting is very important are structure fishing, fan casting, chumming, and teasing. Structure fishing is when you cast close to a shoreline, island, or over submerged structure. It can also be casting to places in moving water where an unseen fish might be located. Fan casting is when you make long casts at regular intervals in a semi-circle resembling a Chinese fan. Chumming is when you throw food in the water and cast to the fish that come to feed. Teasing and "bait and switch," is when another person casts or trolls a hook-less bait or lure until fish show up. Then the person doing the teasing withdraws the teaser and the angler casts a fly to the fish. All of these require accurate casts, except fan casting.

Photo | John Field

Here are down-locking (left) and up-locking (right) reel seats showing where your hand grips the handle in relation to the end of the rods.

Lightweight fly rods for freshwater fish feature an end cap at the butt end made of aluminum, plastic, or rubber to protect the end of the rod if it contacts ground or pavement. On saltwater rods meant for large fish, there is usually a fighting butt below the reel to place in contact with your stomach or thigh as a pivot while fighting large fish.

This fighting butt is an extension of about three inches with cork or soft rubber.

The next part is called the reel seat and holds the reel onto the rod aligned with the guides.

There are two systems of locking real seats. The first is the up-locking seat and the second is the down-locking seat. The up-locking seat is the most common. There is one advantage to a downlocking seat for freshwater use or tournament casting—there are fewer items below the reel for line to catch on, but there is no fighting butt.

Rod manufacturers use three main handle shapes, full-wells, reverse half-wells (often called Western), and cigar. The idea is, the larger the line weight and the more effort needed for casting or fighting fish, the more thumb support is needed. Therefore, most manufacturers install full-wells handles for

These marks indicate that this is a Scientific Anglers Mastery Series GPX model weight-forward 4-weight floating fly line.

Photo | John Field

Cigar

Half-Wells

Full-Wells

rods over 7 weight and half-wells or cigar handles for lower line weights. They are even making some of these handle shapes in a range of sizes to fit all needs.

The blank of a rod is the flexible conical-shaped tube on which a fly rod is finished by attaching the other components. Manufacturers make them out of tapered manmade composites like graphite or of cultivated split-bamboo cane and glue. Rodmakers roll the blank material for modern graphite fly rods on a steel mandrill of the same length as the rod.

For ease of shipping to the dealers and transport by the consumer, rodmakers cut the rods into shorter lengths and fit them with mating ferrules for disassembly and reassembly. Some manufacturers offer one-piece rods for economy and decreased maintenance. With few exceptions, rods are available in two-piece through four-piece. Today, four-piece rods are the most common.

Rods usually have a label on the rod blank. It usually states the make and model, as well as line weight and length. Older rods were even marked with their physical weight. Most composite rod makers today coat the blank in pigmented epoxy. All windings on rods for decoration or attachment and labels are covered in a protective clear epoxy or varnish. A hook keeper, essentially a loop of formed stainless wire, is normally attached above the handle for hanging your fly when you're not using it.

To control the fly line with the rod and minimize friction, the line must be threaded and travel through rod guides which are attached to the rod at calculated intervals. The guides attach at one or two points and have either an integral ring surface in the case of wire guides, or a ring insert made of hard smooth metal ceramic alloys.

The first guides the line passes through are the largest in diameter and help straighten the line. The first guide is called the stripper guide. Next there are usually a few ring or circular guides, then snake guides, and the tip guide at the end of the rod. Snakes are coiled wire forming a loop with flattened attachment feet. The diameter of the guides is progressively smaller toward the tip. The tip guide is a ring attached at about a 30-degree angle to a tapered tube. This guide fits over the tip end of the blank and attached by hot glue.

Parts of the Reel

The main parts of a fly reel are the frame, spool, foot, handle, drag, and clicker. The clicker makes a clicking or zipping sound and adds friction to the spool to prevent overruns when there is no other drag mechanism. Some clickers are adjustable and some are not. In the case of those that are not adjustable, the resistance is usually below the breaking strength of most tippets.

The sound of a clicker helps an angler and a guide hear whether line is going out or not. The clicker sounds when an angler strips line off the spool, when a fish runs, or when a fly is snagged and the angler is moving away in another direction.

There are also more positive mechanisms and techniques to deter a willful fish from taking your line or reaching entanglements. On some reels there is a palming rim on the edge of the spool for your reel hand to add friction. The most effective mechanism, however, is an adjustable internal drag system incorporating friction washers or metallic cone designs. These can also be used in conjunction with stripping-in and palming. In big-game fly reels, the clicker serves more as a signal to the angler, guide, or crew about the actions of a running fish. The maximum size fish taken on specialized fly tackle today is about 500 pounds!

Most of today's reels have one-piece frames and removable spools of either molded graphite composite or machined aluminum. The removable spool gives you the option of getting extras for additional lines. Anglers often have at least a sinking line and a floating line, for example.

Photo **John Field**

The reel and quick interchange spools shown here are very convenient so you can have different weights, densities, lengths, and designs of fly lines at a moment's notice when your needs change.

In a well-designed reel, the spool can be changed in seconds.

Fly Line Design

To provide strength, manufacturers build fly lines on a core of single- or multifilament fiber. The core usually has a smooth plastic-like coating, so a finished line can slip through the guides and your fingers with little friction. The designers choose the density of the coating and additives to make a line either floating or sinking, and in the case of sinking lines, they specify variations for line density and sink rates.

To increase the weight of the line built on the light core and to control stiffness, manufacturers regulate the thicknesses of coating along the length of the line. Changes in line diameter are called taper. The total weight is engineered for different rod weights. The taper changes the weight distribution and the way the line transfers energy down the line and leader during a cast. Thin line lands softly but doesn't have as much mass as a thicker section. In addition to tapered fly lines, level fly lines—with a single line width the entire length of the fly line—are also available.

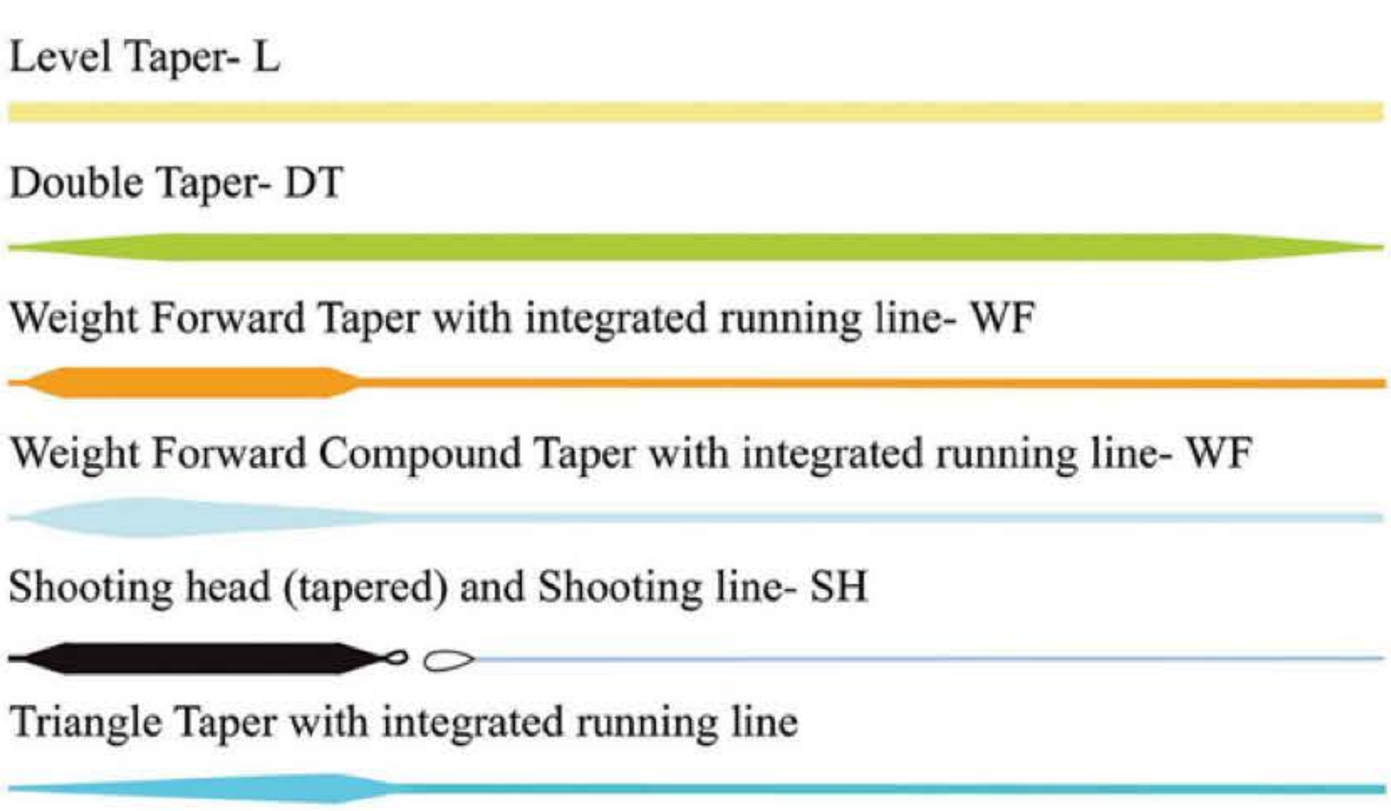
There are four basic taper designs that vary in diameter over their length. The first taper is called the double taper. The front half and back halves of the lines are mirror images of each other and can be reversed to extend the life of the line. The double taper starts with a thin level tip section about six inches. Next is a taper of constant angle, like a cone, which starts at the back end of the tip and increases in diameter, typically for about six feet in length. This blends into a section of level line called the belly. The belly contains most of the line weight we cast with. In the case of the double taper, the belly is double length and ends at the rear taper which starts with the same diameter as that of the belly and decreases in diameter until another tip section. The tapers provide a smooth transition and more, which we'll cover later. If we attached the leader directly to the line's thick belly, it would hit the water harder than we'd usually prefer.

Weight-forward lines have a tip, a front taper, a belly and a rear taper. The rear taper which is usually about the same angle and length as the front taper, ends at a level running line which comprises the remainder of the line. The running line is about half the diameter of the belly, for several reasons. This thinnest line takes up less room on the reel spool and reduces friction through the guides and resistance in the air. The running line also acts like the tail on a kite when long casts are made. The rear taper is a smooth transition in diameter between the belly and the running line. It helps smooth out certain types of casts which you will later learn.

A compound taper is a weight-forward line whose tapers or belly don't have constant angles. These are designed with more weight concentrated where the designer wants it. Usually a compound taper has more weight in the front of the belly or front taper, so it will theoretically cast better at short distances, without affecting long-distance casts. A short head is better to turn over heavy or wind-resistant flies and a long head delays turnover and is better for long casts with flies of most sizes.

The Triangle taper has a tip and combines a gradual front taper and belly up to a normal back taper. The heads are available in varying lengths. This design has most of the weight rearward and closer to the rod tip which is slightly better for roll casts than overhead casts.

The line from the front tip to the end of the running line is called the head. Even if the line differs in diameter along its length, if it has a continuous core with a running line, it is referred to as an integrated line. Another type of weight-forward line is a shooting line. Shooting lines consist of a head connected or knotted to a shooting line of much smaller diameter. The shooting line serves the same purpose as a running line but there are more choices in diameter, strength, and material and they are replaceable.



These line tapers are designed for various purposes having to do with how well they cast at different distances, how well they roll cast and how well they will present a fly.

Backing is a thinner and lighter line connected or knotted to the back end of a fly line that can serve two purposes. First, it can be used to fill the spool to provide the largest possible spool arbor diameter, which maximizes the length of line retrieved with each turn of the reel handle. Second, it increases the length of the line in the event a large fish makes a run longer than your line. This prevents a sudden break-off when the line comes tight. The most common material for backing is braided Dacron because it is the least likely to cause a line burn to your fingers if you try to apply finger pressure to the line. Ideally, the breaking strength of the backing should be equal to, or greater than that of the fly line core.

Leaders

The object of a leader is to reduce the visibility of the fly line near the fly, so that fish are not scared away. The other equally-important purpose of the leader is to reduce the energy of the line so it lands more softly than the bare fly line would. Fish like trout do not feed when they see or feel unnatural objects fall hard from the sky or go swimming by!

Making a leader less visible than the fly line is also accomplished by using clear or tinted monofilament nylon or fluorocarbon line. You match the tint to the water color. There are green, coffee, and clear tippet material. The diameter of leader material for freshwater is usually measured in the X system. This system refers to diameter, but breaking strength varies by many factors. For example, 5X leader tippet is supposed to be .006 inches diameter and

Photo **John Field**

This is an arbor knot before tightening on a reel set for right-hand wind. If your reel is set up for left-hand wind, insert the line through the other side.

4-pound-test, but nominally might measure .0055 inches and test at 4.5 pounds.

Most saltwater fishermen, on the other hand, prefer to use break strength instead when constructing leaders. For example, you might use a 20-pound-test tippet average for striped bass and twelve for bonefish.

There are generally three sections of a leader. The part of the leader you attach to a fly line is called the butt section. It is nearly as thick as the tip of the fly line and should be about as flexible. The next section is the mid-section which should be thinner and of less strength and the last is the tippet. The tippet is usually the thinnest, weakest section and can be lengthened to around three feet to make the mid-section less visible. When designing a leader for fish with close-mesh teeth like bluefish or pike, a bite-tippet of heavy mono or wire attached to the fly might be necessary, and for these species, stealth is usually not compromised because they generally aren't "line shy."

A leader can be hand-tied lengths of different diameter material, or machine-made down to a level tippet or bite-tippet connection, of knotless tapered-leader material.

The way to make a smooth transition from the thick fly line to the end of the leader is to taper the diameter of the material down toward the fly. A short leader turns over hard and a longer one turns over more slowly.

When you first learn to cast, the object is to have the leader land fully extended after the cast. So, abruptness of taper, final diameter, and length are the basic design considerations. One more factor, not as obvious, is the stiffness of the material selected. This will influence how well the leader will unroll when you cast.

When you are just learning or practicing, use a tippet heavy enough so you won't be breaking off too often. For practice a 10- to 15-pound test tippet is fine but when trout fishing, you might be using four pounds on average. The characteristics of a fishing leader should depend on the species you're pursuing and the conditions you're fishing in. The leader might need to be undetectable, designed to turn over easily, provide slack, or require protection from bite-offs.

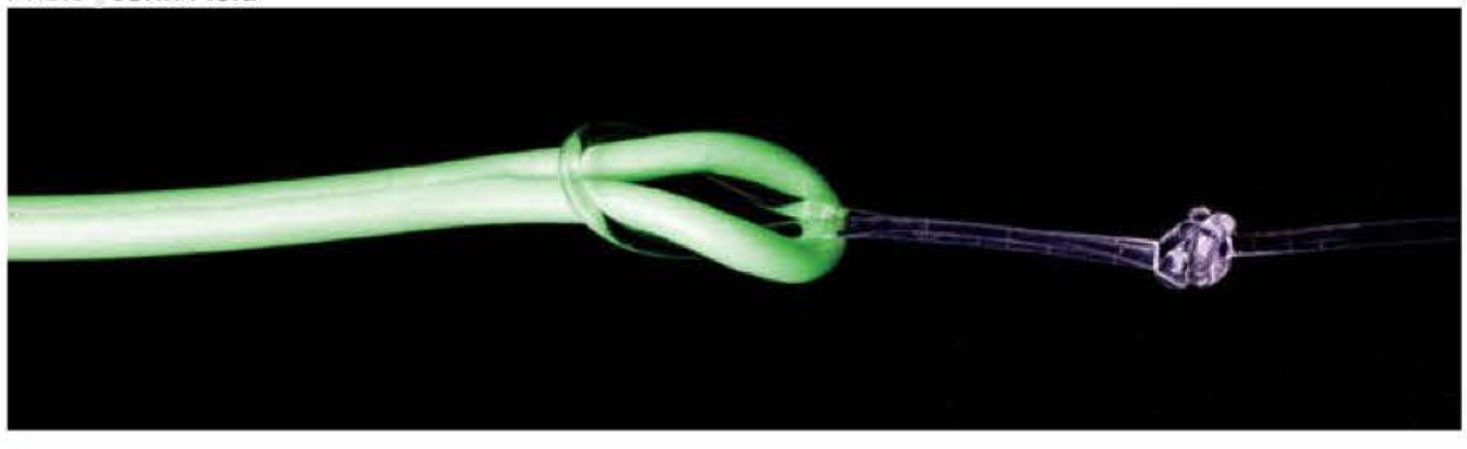
You can buy ready-made leaders or tie your own. You can select the dimensions, taper, and materials in your leader.

Nylon and fluorocarbon are today's two leader material choices. I opt for nylon for freshwater floating presentations, but will use a fluorocarbon tippet or replace the tippets of worn knotless nylon leaders with fluorocarbon, without worries of losing the floating properties of the fly. Nylons from different brands and selections can vary greatly in stiffness and you should use this to your advantage when designing a leader.

You can buy ready-made saltwater leaders or tie your own (or better yet, use your guide's leaders if you are fishing with one). For saltwater fish, I almost always use fluorocarbon rather than nylon. Fluorocarbon is stellar because it has much higher abrasion resistance than nylon with a greater strength-to-diameter ratio. Therefore, an angler can use thinner tipper diameters when stealth counts. When fluorocarbon first came out, I tried to cut a tag end with my teeth like I used to with nylon. It was so hard it hurt!

In fly fishing, choosing, testing, combining, and tuning the right components can create well-matched equipment and prepare you for the field. This will help you be more efficient in performing casts and fishing more intuitively. The ultimate goal in fly-casting is to learn the feel of all types of fly rods and line combinations and if presented with an unfamiliar outfit, adapt your stroke to make good casts.

Photo **John Field**



This is the fly line and leader connected with a hand-shake, or loop-to-loop connection. It is also used to join tippets to the leader. This system enables you to change leaders or tippets in a hurry for whatever reason.

Line Connections

If your reel did not come with backing and line attached and loaded on the spool, you, another person, or your local fly shop must do it before you can start. It's always hard to estimate how much backing to use but there is a trick to getting it right. Tape the end

of the fly line to the spool and wind it on. Next, do the same with the start of the backing and evenly wind it on until it is about ⅜-inch from the top of the spool. Take the backing off in an open field or put in on a temporary spool and do the same thing with the fly line.

Then attach and wind the backing first onto the fly reel spool using the following instructions.

The backing comes in bulk spools and must be attached to the arbor of the reel spool so you can wind it onto the spool without slipping and with the correct tension so it won't dig into itself under strain. If a fish takes all your line, connecting the end to the spool may or may not save it and the fish. However, a favorable and lucky outcome has occurred this way on many occasions.

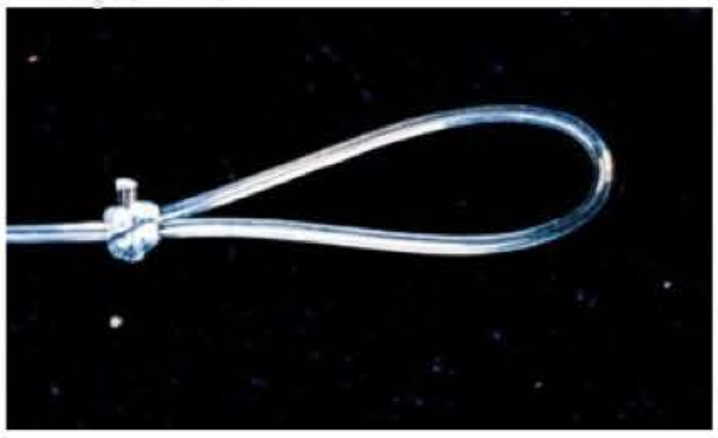
You can either hold the loose reel while loading it, or attach it to the lower rod section. If you do, it may be easier if you thread the backing through the stripper guide. One easy way to tie the end of the backing to the reel spool is with a knot called the arbor knot. Pass the end of the backing twice around the arbor and tie an overhand knot around the standing line. Next tighten the standing line until the knot is near the arbor and pull the tag end until it's snug. Continue pulling the standing line until the knot jams against the arbor. Trim, leaving 3/16 inch and wind on your backing.

Stores with a line machine can quickly load your reel with backing and line or you must load it yourself. You can mount the reel on the reel seat and hold onto the lower rod half while you wind or just hold onto the reel foot and frame. While reeling, use your finger tips and guide the line back and forth to keep it level like the level-wind in a conventional reel.

The fly line must next be connected to the backing. Most modern fly-lines come with a rear welded loop for this purpose. This loop can also be used to attach shooting lines which I'll cover later. To attach it and leave the flexibility of detaching your line without cutting anything, you can use a connection called the handshake loop. First tie a double surgeon's loop in the backing large enough to easily pass the reel or fly line spool through.

The way to tie it is to double the backing, making a loop about 14 inches long, and tie an overhand knot just about the point where the line is double but pass the end with the loop through the overhand knot twice and tighten; leaving the surgeon's loop. To connect this to the fly line, insert the end of the surgeon's loop into the welded fly line loop and put the line on the spool or the reel through this loop. Then tighten the connection until the loops tighten as shown in the photo on the facing page.

Photo | **John Field**



The perfection loop, which produces an elegant single-strand loop, is usually used in loop-to-loop connections.

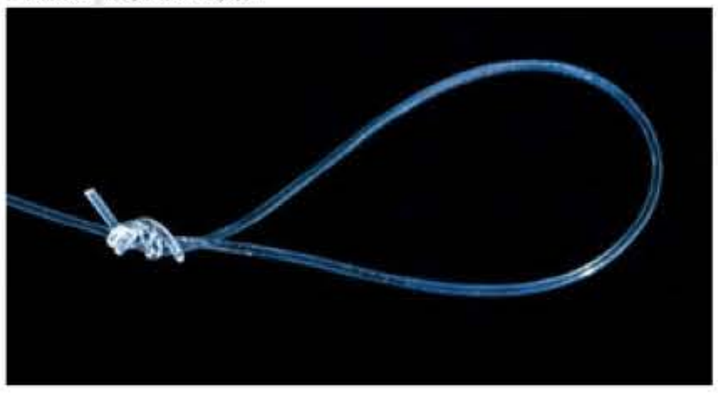
Now you're ready to attach the leader to the fly line. Most lines today come with a welded front loop for this purpose. If you tie a loop in the butt of your leader you can connect or disconnect them in seconds. The perfection loop is my preferred knot for this.

The second would be the double surgeon's loop which is slightly bulkier and often not as straight. The object is to tie a loop about an inch in length so you can connect the leader and line with a handshake loop, as I described for the backing to line connection.

If your fly line lacks a loop or it gets damaged, replace it with a nail knot. You can attach your leader directly to the fly line, or you can use the nail knot and attach a 6- to 12-inch piece of mono about the thickness of the leader butt. Tie a loop on the other end of it to connect to the leader loop. I cut off factory loops and do this anyway because I think it helps the cast a little.

The line-to-leader connections, as well as leader-to-butt selection, should

Photo | **John Field**



This is the surgeon's loop. The standard knot produces a single-strand loop, but if you make the loop long enough, you can tie another surgeon's loop with it and create a four-strand loop. All you have to do to tie it is make a loop about a foot long and use it to make a double overhand knot and tighten, trim the tag. The standard knot passes through twice, but if you pass through three times, it's a triple surgeon's loop for added strength.

Photo | **John Field**

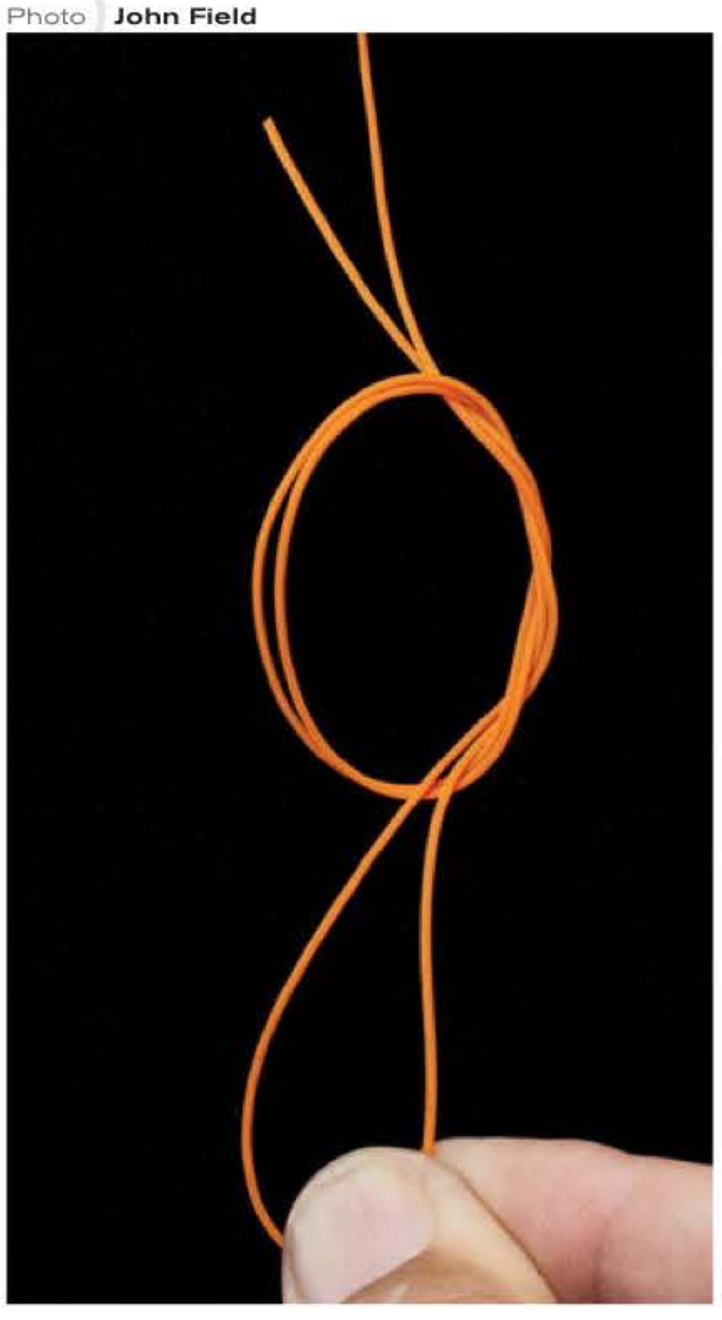
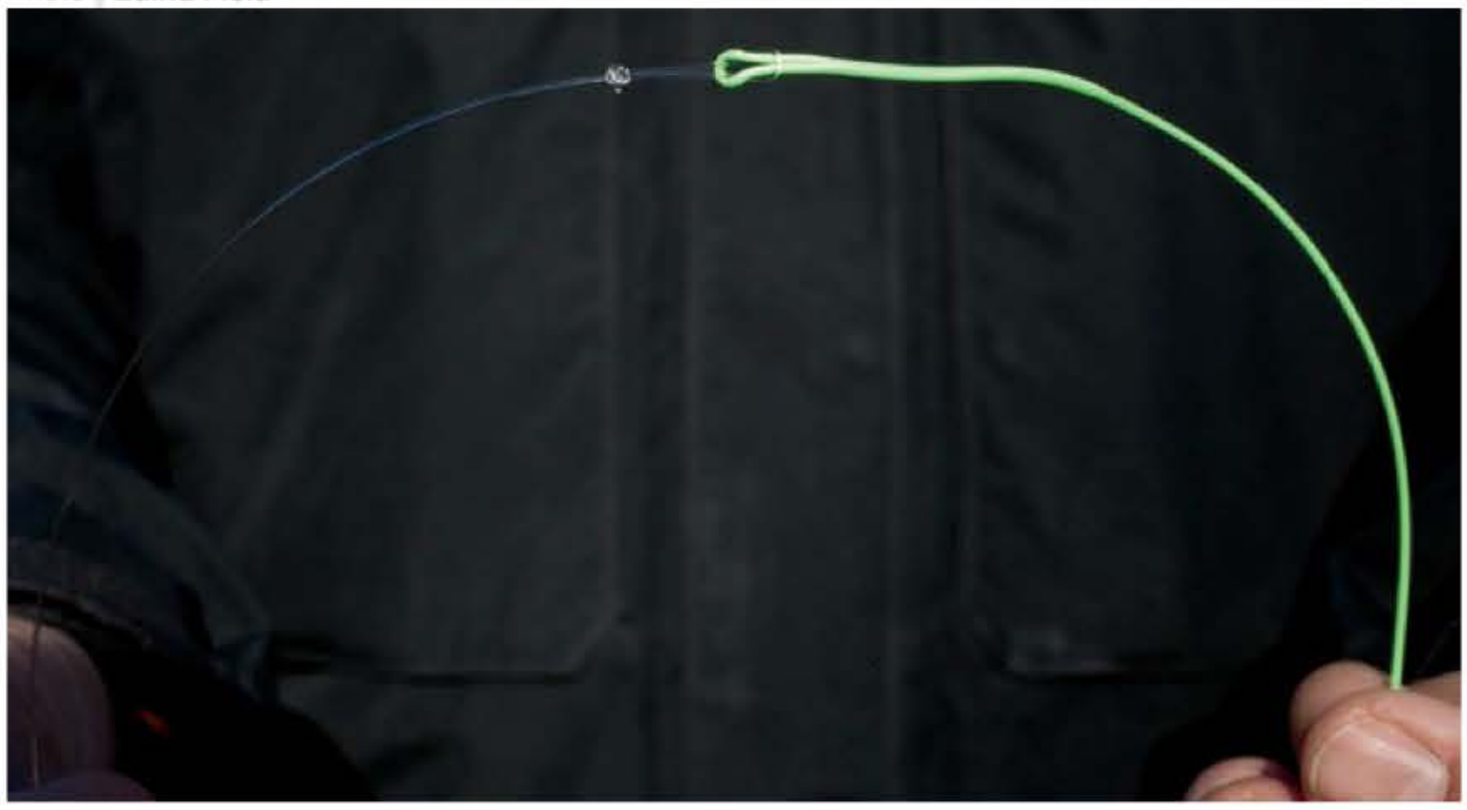


Photo **Edina Field**



The butt end of this leader and the tip of the fly line have similar flexibility so the line will be able to properly turn over the leader.

not cause hinging, or excessive stiffness. Poor leader connections can interrupt the energy transfer from the line to the leader.

Your First Outfit

Everyone can learn to cast a fly rod. It's easier to start with a rod measuring 7-feet, 6 inches to 8 feet, 6 inches in length rather than with a standard 9-foot rod. For kids, the shorter the better.

Photo **Edina Field**

This is a 6-weight fly-rod outfit including rod, reel, line, and leader for trout and bass. Several makers offer similar entry-level kits in varying sizes.

A rule of thumb is that the rod should be no longer than one and a half times the height of small casters. I recommend that everyone, regardless of strength and size, start with a matched 4- or 5-weight outfit consisting of a floating line, leader, rod, and reel. This size will also be matched to fish most small- to medium-sized freshwater cold and warmwater species. Beginners are best off learning to cast and fish with a medium-action rod. Stay away from stiff, fast-action rods made for distance when learning the basics.

Echo fly-rod designer and incredible caster Tim Rajeff suggests that beginners use lines that are designated one or two sizes heavier than the rod designation to make the rod bend more for more feel. He is a big believer in learning by feel, or kinesthetics. When beginners advance, they can use lighter lines that are more optimal. Many fly shops have bargain bins with inexpensive lines which are good for experimentation.

Since lines are generally less expensive than rods, Tim prefers to "overline" rods when getting started, instead of buying a soft-action rod just to learn on, and then have problems later when fishing in wind or casting longer distances, which are conditions where a stiffer rod is preferable.

Once an angler learns the basics, they can advance to outfits designed for heavier lines if they want to fish for bigger fish and in bigger waters. The most popular length for bigger waters is a 9-foot rod. You can purchase an inexpensive combination outfit for under $200 at the time of this printing. The inexpensive reels you find in a kit will be fine for small freshwater fish, but when you anticipate fish over about 5 pounds, a better drag system would be helpful or even essential.

Most ready-to-use outfits are set up for left-hand wind but if you select your own components you have a choice. There has always been a debate about which hand to use for reeling.

Almost all reels need to be set up by a shop or owner for which direction the drag or clicker will operate. At least one manufacturer builds them permanently in one direction or the other.

The debate centers on whether to reel with your dominant or non-dominant hand. If you can reel line in faster with your dominant hand and you're planning to fight fish that take more than 75 yards of line, it might be to your advantage to have reel that retrieves with your dominant hand. If you do, you would have to change hands after hooking a fish, and hold the rod with your non-dominant hand. To begin casting and fishing for smaller fish, I would recommend casting with your dominant hand and a reel set to retrieve with the other.

These mass-produced rods are usually made with a graphite composite blank, then the components such as the guides, seat, and handle are attached to it. Besides the outfit, there are some tools and accessories you should have on day one.

When practicing casting (which you should never do with a real fly), wear a baseball cap to shield your eyes from sun and sunglasses to protect them injury from the practice fly and knots. I recently was hit in the eye while casting, after I removed my sunglasses when clouds blocked the sun during an accuracy event. It was very painful and could have scratched my eye or worse. I'll bring my yellow sun glasses next time.

If you have difficulties focusing on small objects close-up, I recommend glasses with magnification for tying knots or fly tying. I like the functionally of the split magnetic readers with built-in neck loop.

To be able to cut leader material and trim knots, buy a line clipper or carry an extra fingernail clipper. The stainless-steel line clipper I carry has a retractable bodkin which is like a heavy needle. It's used to remove glue from hook eyes or pick out wind knots from the leader. If you're using a dry fly, buy a bottle of fly floatant to help prevent your fly from sinking.

I also recommend using fly ferrule wax or just rubbing some candle wax

Photo **Edina Field**

This is an angler's-eye view of assembling the ferrules on a composite rod, starting with the rod eyes on the loose rod sections at 90 degree angles apart.

on the male graphite or fiberglass ferrules on a new rod or after periodically cleaning an older one.

Assembling and Disassembling a Fly-Fishing Outfit

You can carry a rod in a tube or rod bag in a car, plane, or backpack and have it ready to fish in minutes. But if these multi-piece rods are not handled properly, breakage or stuck ferrules can result. The main thing is to keep the ferrules out of the dirt.

To assemble a fiberglass or graphite composite rod, take the rod sock, or bag, out of the rod tube and remove the rod sections. Hold the rod sections or place them where they don't get dirty or roll away. Put the bag back in the tube so it doesn't get dirty or wet. If your rod has more than two pieces, continue until you are done, trying not to rest the rod on the ground. A companion could hold it, or rest the butt on a soft spot like grass or the bed of your vehicle.

If you have a four-piece rod, you can assemble the lower sections and upper sections, then join them at the middle ferrule. Start putting it together with the butt section in your non-dominant hand and gently insert the male end into the female ferrule of the next section with your dominant hand, so the guides of the bottom section are facing up and the guides of the next section are at a right angle to the guides of the lower rod section.

Set the assembled lower rod sections down and assemble the other half in the same manner. Next assemble the two halves in the middle by also gently inserting the male end into the female ferrule of the next section so the guides of the bottom section are at a right angle to the next section. Push them together with both hands while twisting them into alignment. To be exact, sight down the guides as if they were gun sights and make any adjustments. In some cases the rod manufacturer will provide alignment marks to facilitate this procedure.

If you have a split-cane bamboo rod, do not insert the ferrules at right angles or twist the rod in any way. This can break the natural fibers. Only push the ferrules of a bamboo rod together aligned or pull the ferrules straight apart.

Photo **Edina Field**

You can string a rod quickly by inserting a loop of line in the guides, instead of sticking the end of the line or leader into the guides like threading a needle.

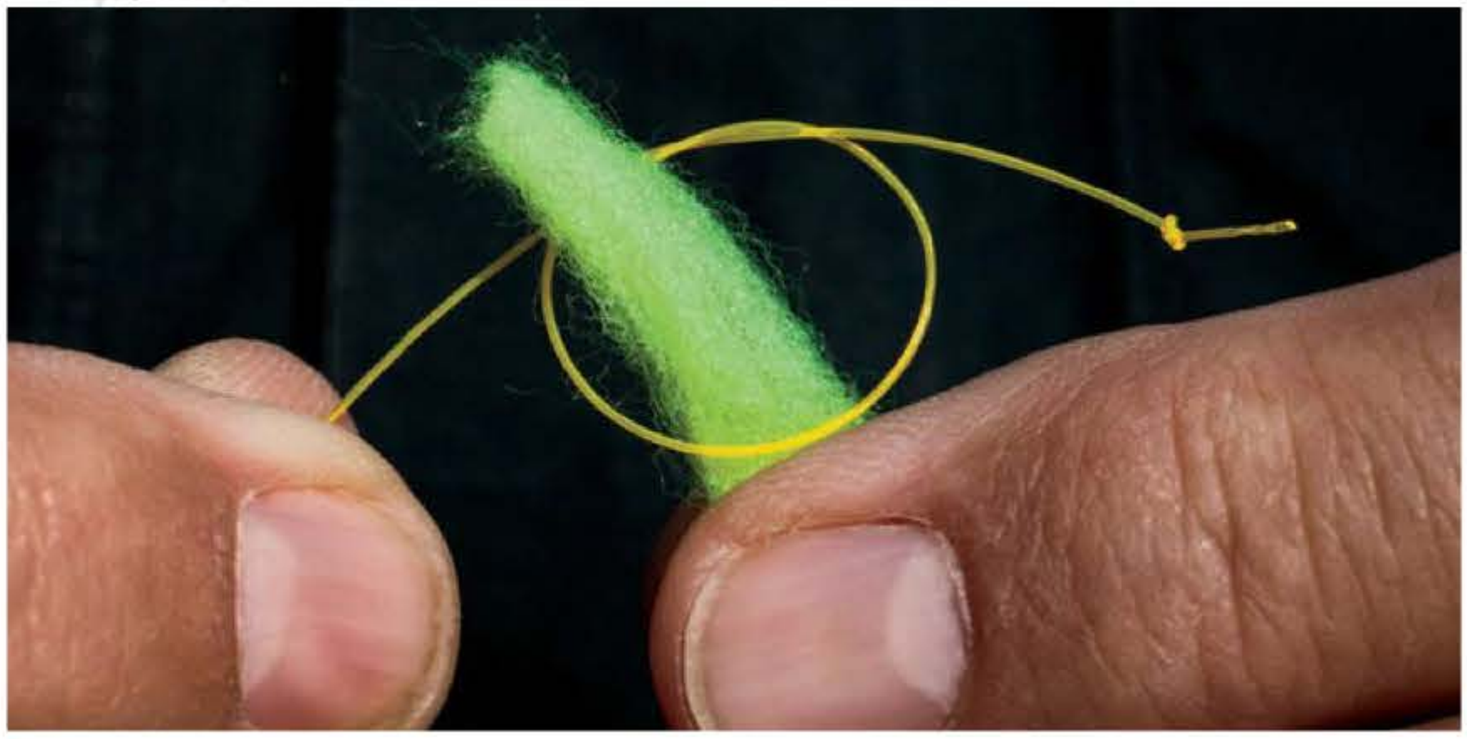
Next comes the reel. Start attaching the reel by loosening the reel seat locking rings so there is enough room to insert your reel seat. Insert one end into the pocket on the seat that is stationary. If you have an up-locking seat, it will be the top end by the handle. If you have a down-locking seat, it will be the bottom end of the seat. Next, slide the seat hood over the other reel foot and tighten the locking rings until hand tight. It the reel is a little wiggly, you can tap the reel into the stationary pocket with the heel of your hand and retighten.

You may string the rod before or after attaching a leader. To start stringing the rod, thread the end of the leader or line through the opening in the reel frame so the line will have an unobstructed path to the lowest and first guide on the rod called the stripper guide. Next, pull out a length of line from the reel that's a little longer than your rod. Next, double the line about two feet from the end and pinch it between your index and thumb so it forms a tight loop extending about two

Photo **Edina Field**

Holding a coiled leader with your finger inside while unrolling it prevents a tangled mess.

Photo | **John Field**



This super-quick yarn knot attaches Glo-bug yarn to your tippet for practice without the danger of a hook. It's actually a mini version of the arbor knot.

Photo | **Edina Field**

inches past your finger and thread it through the guides.

When you pull the loop through and one side of the loop is tight to the reel, pull the other one through the tip. Now you can attach a leader or fly, or secure the end or leader so you can move about without tangling or hooking something unintended. If you are attaching a fly, for now it should be a practice fly without a hook.

When you take a knotless tapered leader out to uncoil it, there is a simple way to prevent a snarl. Put the fingers of your line hand inside the coil to act as a spool and start unrolling the butt end and use the straightening directions below until the whole leader is ready.

Whenever I see coil memory or kinking in a leader, I stretch the sections between my hands by holding it with a loose wrap so my grip doesn't add kinks. I pull almost to the breaking point for each section and then release.

Knotless leaders also make straightening easy by pinching the line between thumb and index finger and slowly creating heat with friction by pulling down the leader toward the end. Maintain the stretch for a few seconds so the leader can cool, then release. A straight leader prevents the fly from springing back and piling.

After stringing the rod, either hold onto the practice fly or secure it. Put the tippet around the reel or put it between the Velcro of the reel bag, otherwise gravity will unthread your rod for you. The same thing happens when you're fishing with flies with hooks. It's best to attach a fly to the hook-keeper or a guide foot after you've strung the rod. Whether you're learning to cast or actually fishing, an improved clinch knot is a very reliable knot. Although you might not be fighting a fish when practicing, you might need a good knot if you need to pull on the line to free it from a snagged weed or branch.

There are two types of practice flies, one made by knotting on a piece of Glo-bug yarn, and a second made by tying on a hook and snipping off the hook at the bend while at the tying bench. A yarn-fly knot is unsurprisingly good use for yarn flies. The knot starts by tying an overhand knot at the very end of the tippet and tightening it. Next, tie another overhand knot about an inch up but leave it loose and slip the yarn into it with half sticking out either side. Now tighten it in the middle of the yarn until the line slips down and the knot at the end jams against it.

For the second type of practice fly, you can use rooster hackle, or Glo-bug yarn tied on a hook shank. I like chartreuse Glo-bug yarn for all-around visibility. I use a dark color on snow or ice. Dress the hook in a tying vise, then cut off the shank at the hook bend when you're done. If you're practicing for ACA tournaments, I recommend buying and training with their official flies made with rooster hackle, then you'll get used to how they cast

Photo | **George Mccabe**

This is the McLaren Lodge of the Golden Gate Angling and Casting Club in Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, California.

and appear on different backdrops and under different lighting.

Once you have your outfit and have learned a little about its various parts and components, I'd like to take a second to help you take care of them. Although rod manufacturers have special warranty and replacement policies, it's best to avoid needing to use them. It can take time and it's a disappointment when sections for older rods are obsolete.

The most common way to snap a rod is in a door or trunk. The next most common destroyer of rods is to raise the tip of the rod when fighting a fish and it swims under the angler or boat. This is called high-sticking. When a fish gets too close, raise the rod butt and point the rod tip down toward the fish to bend the rod more in the stronger butt section. Another way to break a rod is to reach up and bend the tip so you can grab the line. I've also heard horror stories of leaving rods loosely on top of vehicles and remembering miles later. They often end badly.

It's funny, but ACA distance casting participants leave their rods laying on the ground all over the place at events and I've never seen one get stepped on by a caster. It just takes a little awareness of your surroundings.

Instruction and DIY

Fly fishing is not a sport that's easy to learn. The most successful way to learn it is through a mentor at an early age. This works best if there is a personal connection between student and teacher. This person might be a family member, a friend, or a professional who takes a personal interest. The best ways to learn to cast are to watch and mimic good casters and to have an instructor or mentor show you the right way and teach good habits. On your own, you might start bad ones.

If you don't have a close fly fishing mentor, you can find instructors and people willing to share their knowledge. Not everyone has access to clubs and instructors, so you may need to use books, videos, and help from friends and family. The important thing is to engage in your passion to fly fish to the best of your ability wherever you can. In order to learn and improve, all you need is your willingness, a bit of tackle, and a lawn, athletic field, or local body of water.

The American Casting Association is good place to watch, get instruction, and practice. The ACA has about 16 clubs which offer free lessons and have casting ponds on which to learn and practice. There is a list of locations and contact info later in this book. Casting at targets at set distances gives you a way to judge your own results and something to build upon. Fly Fishers International, which is a conservation and educational organization, has affiliates around the world and individual certified casting instructors available. Independent schools and fly shops also offer group and private instruction.

Visual verification that your body, your rod, and your line are doing what they are supposed to is one of the most important tools in learning to cast well. Seeing what's going on will help identify faults and flaws. Practicing the right way from the beginning will shorten your learning curve. If instead you repeat and practice a defective stroke, correction may take years, even with professional help. If an instructor or experienced friend spots a fault that you do not understand or confirm, have them record it on video for you to see. It's easier to believe and understand faults if you see them yourself.

You can also learn on your own if you don't have regular access to a club or instruction. Even if you do, you should also practice on your own once you get the basics. I recommend learning to cast on an athletic field or a park lawn instead of on the water. Avoid casting on paving, concrete, sand, or gravel. These will damage your line and the grit is not good for the rest of your outfit either. If possible, record your casting with a tablet or camera on a tripod so you can check your form.

Photo | **John Field**

These are the official flies of the ACA, clockwise from the upper left corner: dry fly accuracy, distance, bass bug accuracy, wet fly accuracy, and trout fly accuracy.

John L. Field is a FFI Master Casting Instructor. He is past president of the American Casting Association and past president of the New York City Chapter of Trout Unlimited. John filmed and co-produced Hunt for Big Fish, which aired on ESPN and other cable networks. John, his wife Edina, and their two little children live in Weston, Connecticut.

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