

Introducing Fly Fishing

Contributed by Gus

So what is fly fishing? Why is it so different from other kinds of rod-and-line fishing? Hopefully the following article can help explain these questions, and also encourage readers to have a go at this effective method of catching fish to eat!

My name's Gus, I live on the banks of the river Tweed in the borders of Scotland. I'm 32 and have been fly fishing since I was six years old. Between fishing trips, I studied biology and ecology at Edinburgh University. Eight years ago, I qualified as a casting instructor and Guide.(STANIC, SGAIC, GAIA) . I've worked as a Ghillie (salmon fishing guide) as well as running a couple of tackle and gun shops in my time. I'm also a professional fly tyer. My flyfishing exploits have taken me as far afield as the mountains of Slovenia, and the saltwater mangrove flats of southern Cuba. I've worked for and fished alongside some of the biggest names in flyfishing, Farlows of Pall Mall, Sportfish, and Michael Evans amongst them. I've had a few articles published in magazines and recently wrote a chapter for a published book on fly tying techniques. On top of this, I'm also a keen Downsizer!

It's a wonderfully mobile method of fishing - no dragging trolleys full of bait and kit down to the waterside and sitting motionless for hours on end covered head to toe in bulky thermal clothing. It's about the rod in your hand, and a couple of essentials in your pocket, fishing on the move. I've covered five miles (and more) of water in a single session using this method, so it's great exercise too. You can catch not only trout and salmon, for which the method was almost singularly intended, but also coarse and predatory species, and it's even being used with great success along our saltwater shores as well! It encourages a great understanding of aquatic ecology and will put you right in amongst the myriad of beauty and wildlife our environment has to offer. As to sceptics who say it's a play-fishing method for the upper classes and landed gentry.... I would say this. I've known dozens, if not hundreds of coarse fishermen who have converted to fly fishing, but only a handful who have gone the other way. It is undoubtedly the most successful method of catching edible fish for the table, and in terms of sustainability and eco-friendliness, the least damaging to the environment.

Fly fishing differs from other forms of rod and line fishing mainly in the type of tackle required. Anyone who has ever cast a worm or a maggot in pursuit of fish will be aware that the rod works like a bow and arrow - you attach a weight of some sort to a very thin nylon line along with baited hook, and as you flick the rod towards the water, the resistance of the weight bends the rod tip (storing energy... i.e. drawing the bow) and when you arrest the forward flick, the rod 'unbends' and the stored energy catapults the weight in the direction of the water. This is just like releasing your grip on an arrow, and letting the bow and bowstring recover its original shape, thus propelling your arrow onto target.

Fly fishing is no different from any other in terms of the physics of casting, other than that the rod is lighter and thinner, therefore more 'bendy'. Another crucial difference is that you do not attach a small lump of lead to ultra thin nylon line, but rather use a special type of line called (unsurprisingly) a fly line. These are made of a braided core covered in a plastic coating. This coating can contain air bubbles to make it float (for surface fishing) or various powdered metals or synthetics to make it sink at different speeds for fishing beneath the surface. The 'fly line' is obviously much heavier than the hair-like nylon used in coarse fishing, and contains sufficient weight to bend the rod without the need for additional lead weights. It is tipped by a short length (8 - 15 feet) of the thin nylon I've already mentioned. This is usually referred to as the 'leader' and it's where you will ultimately attach your fly. However..... this setup requires a different casting technique, and it is here that most prospective flyfishers falter and are put off the idea.

Fly casting by written instruction is an article in itself, so I won't go into any detail here, but if there's any demand for it, I'll write more on the subject soon.

Fly casting is an acquired skill. Like so many other things in life, no-one is born able to do it. But it isn't rocket science, and even a ten year-old child is physically capable. The best piece of advice you will ever receive if you want to pursue this rewarding fishing technique is this - Get a casting lesson from a qualified instructor before having a go yourself. Now, as a member of the Game Angling Instructors Association (GAIA), I have a vested interest in encouraging you to do this but that is not my reason for giving such advice. I promise you faithfully that it comes from the bitter experience of being self taught, and then having to unlearn years of poor technique and bad habits before finally cracking the right way to do it! One hour with an instructor who can show you and explain to you the basics of casting, will save you months, if not years of frustration which, in 90% of cases, leads to throwing down the rod and wishing you'd never bothered in the first place. Look in the classified ad section of popular fly fishing magazines or google it - there's a few of us around. Always look for GAIA, APGAI, or AAPGAI registered instructors as this will ensure you are being taught by someone who has had to pass a rigorous peer assessment programme, and who is also insured against accident or personal injury. In most cases, members of these organisations will be able to provide decent tackle for your lesson so you won't have to go blind into a tackle shop, and if after a lesson you are still keen, then your instructor will also be able to give you some good impartial advice on what kit you need to buy.

Central to the whole tackle issue is a system called 'AFTM'. In its original inception, this was the 'American Fishing Tackle Manufacturers Association' (AFTMA) but this is now defunct and the generally accepted modern interpretation is the 'Association of Fly Tackle Manufacturers'. In truth, there is no real organisation or official body, and the AFTM number on a rod or line is a set of standards loosely agreed upon by the largest manufacturers which in theory enables you to match a line with a rod without taking either of them out of the packaging. The AFTM scale starts at 0 (the lightest of lightweight trout equipment) and proceeds to 15 (heavy artillery for marlin, tuna etc). The most common AFTM number used today is AFTM#7 (often written on the tackle itself as #7).

So why is understanding this system

important? Look at it this way - if you try going to the local pond with a fifteen foot beachcasting rod that really needs half a pound of lead to make it bend enough to sling the bait out beyond the waves, and then attach a 6 gram weight to it..... you'll find that you'd actually get the bait out further by just throwing it freehand. Conversely, if you take a nine foot light float rod to the beach and attach the half pound lead to it, your rod will just disintegrate under the stress. So as with all types of fishing, the fly tackle must be balanced, and the AFTM number system exists to help you do this.

I'm hesitant to give advice as to which set-up would best suit the 'average beginner', as there really is no such thing - each of you will likely have very different types of fishing in mind, but as a rough guide I would say this: For small brown trout and coarse fish on small streams or ponds, use a rod around 8 or nine feet long, rated AFTM #4 or #5. For bigger brown trout and coarse fish on larger rivers and lakes use a rod 9 or 10 feet long rated AFTM#6 or #7. For stocked rainbow trout in lakes, use a rod around 9 or 10 feet long rated AFTM#7 or even #8. (the latter will also be suitable if you intend to pursue inshore saltwater species such as bass and mullet). If you're putting a gun to my head and saying "yeah, but which outfit will do a bit of everything?", then I'd say a nine foot rod rated #6. But always remember that the jack of all trades is master of none. As far as reels go, they are simply a line holding device. I've sold reels for £5000 in the past, but honestly, you can get a plastic one for a tenner that does pretty much the same job. The most important bit is the rod. Then the line. And, of course, ensuring the two are matched. Fly reels are a secondary consideration in my opinion - I've even fished without one, gathering any spare line into my pocket between casts.

OK, so we've learned to cast from a decent instructor, and we've kitted ourselves out with a rod, reel and line. So now we come to the business end.... the fly! Unlike spinners or plugs, flies are generally much smaller (as small as 2 or 3 mm) and lighter, consisting of a variety of materials - threads, furs, feathers and custom made synthetics- lashed onto a light hook, and made to represent one of the wide range of invertebrates and small fish that the fish would normally feed on. If you ever turn over a stone in a stream, you'll see tiny 'nymphs' clinging to the stone, or darting beneath another as soon as you disturb them, and anyone who has ever walked the banks of a river or lake in the summer months will have seen millions of flies form the tiniest midge to the biggest mayfly and sedge, skittering on or above the waters surface. The number of telltale splashes and rings in the water will soon demonstrate to the casual observer just how big a part of the food chain these insects are, and how important they are to the fish..... and to the fly fisher!

You can buy flies in any tackle shop, or from a hundred online suppliers, but this is Downsizer, right?! Make your own - it's a hobby in itself! If you get any good at it, you'll find (as I have) that there are thousands of anglers who do not have either time, patience or both to tie their own, and are willing to pay up to three quid each for well made flies! All you need is a small vice to hold the hook, and a few basic tools - things that cost a few quid and last for years! Any decent scrimper amongst you will be able to obtain most of the component materials for little or no cost - you'd be amazed at how many of them you already own in some shape or form. The only thing you actually need to buy are the hooks, and if you shop hard enough you can buy 100 fly hooks for a couple of pounds. There are so many 'how to' websites on fly tying that you won't believe it. Have a go because trust me, there are few things in life as satisfying as catching fresh fish for the table on a home made fishing fly!

So get out there and try it - as a fishing experience it is second to none, and if you're casting your fly to the right species, you'll be able to enjoy eating what you catch!

Getting kitted out - budgets.

Getting kitted out to begin flyfishing needn't be as expensive as you might think. It's like any sport or hobby popular enough to support a retail market. There are labels, intensive marketing and brand loyalty all contributing to make it seem a very exclusive and quite often inaccessible pastime.

I'm sure this will be preaching to the choir, but you can ignore all the hype and kit yourself out without paying fortunes for labels. Sage, Hardy and Loomis all make some lovely rods, but £600?! At that price I'd expect the rod to catch fish for me! So how much are we talking? I'll break it down into 3 budget groups and in each case I'm talking rod, reel and line. 'Terminal tackle', I'll look at separately.

1. Ultra cheap. Go to Tesco or Argos and buy a ready packaged kit for £20 or less. I wouldn't advise it. As you may not be surprised to hear, these giants of retail are purely price driven, and the kits they sell are useless. I was recently hired for a casting lesson by the parents of a lad who had just been given one of the types of kit I describe, and within minutes it became clear where the problem lay. As I've mentioned, fly fishing requires a balanced kit with certain properties, and these supermarket kits possess none of them. As an instructor, I pride myself in being able to perform a decent cast with virtually any kit, but I struggled with that one! I loaned the lad a rod, reel and line and within the hour he was casting just fine.

2. Budget. For less than £75.00 you can get a perfectly good rod, plastic reel and line. DO NOT spend more than £15.00 of that amount on a reel. It's only going to hold the line which, incidentally, shouldn't cost you more than £20.00, and if it costs that much you should expect it to come with a spool of backing and braided loops* A good tip here is to find out which type of core material the line has, and choose one with a 'braided' or 'dacron' core, rather than a nylon monofilament core. So that leaves you with £40.00 to spend on the rod. Brands such as Shakespeare and Leeda have rods in their range that fall into that price bracket. You might not get a lifetime guarantee, but it'll be covered against defect, and quite honestly you'll discover any defects the first time you use the thing. Look for bent rings, loose handles, and loose fitting sections.

* terminal tackle - see below.

3. 'I want to buy something that'll last me

a lifetime'. OK, you're keen to buy the best quality you can afford. These days, that usually means a rod with a 'lifetime guarantee' and an aluminium reel. A few lines are tougher than others, but price doesn't always reflect this so forget the line for now. Manufacturers like Grey's and Sharpe's both produce rods around the £100.00 mark that have such a guarantee. They're also all very good rods. Grey's and Vision produce some fantastically light and robust reels for around The £50.00 mark. Try not to be dazzled with sales speak about "teflon coated disc drags that will stop a train...". Remember we're talking trout here, not trains. Keep it simple - the fewer bits there are, the less chance there is of something going wrong with it. And, as I say, you don't have to spend much more than £20.00 to get a decent quality line. If you're feeling flash, £35.00 will get you a Cortland 444 line - these are about as tough as they come.

What else do you actually need to start fishing? Not a lot actually. You need backing line - thin cord that you'll be glad of if you ever catch a fish that runs further than the 25 metres of the fly line you've just bought! This is loaded onto the reel before the fly line. 50 metres is plenty, and if you're paying for it, then £2.50 is about right. "Terminal tackle" i.e. the bits at the end nearest the fish, really means a fly and the leader material (often referred to as 'gut' -the thin transparent nylon that provides a less visible link between the end of your fly line and the fly itself.) 50 metres of nylon will cost around two or three quid, and you'll be using around three metres at a time. Drennan subsurface (bold green print on bright yellow spools) is a good cheapy. Don't use fluorocarbon - if you lose it in a tree or drop it, it takes around ten thousand years to break down. Nylon decays in a year or two. You attach one end of the nylon to the fly line via a special knot, or with a braided loop. A pound should get three of these, and I'd ask the shop to fit them for you, one on each end of the line. It's not a big hassle for someone who's done it a hundred times. Then you need some flies - 50p gets you a commercially tied fly from Kenya or the Philippines, but don't expect them to last long. I thoroughly recommend tying your own. Better quality, and morally acceptable! Fly tying is an art in itself! A vice will cost you a tenner, maybe £15.00. A set of basic tools will cost you less... maybe £7.50 (Lureflash do a set for around this price). And you'll get a pack of 100 hooks for a couple of quid if you shop around. Lastly, I advise buying a landing net. Fly rods are not robust enough to swing anything but the smallest tiddler into your hand or onto the bank. A knotless (legal requirement!) net shouldn't cost you more than £10 or £12, and it not only lets you keep hold of the takeable fish but also handle undersized ones carefully enough to release them unharmed. If you do intend to eat what you catch, please make sure you take a suitable clubbing implement to dispatch your fish quickly and cleanly.

If this article is well received, then I'll write more if you like, focusing on the different aspects to fly fishing and fly tying that I've deliberately skirted or simplified here. It's not for no reason that there are a thousand tomes, some weighing several kilos, written on the subject! I hope this is enough to encourage a few Downsizers to pursue this method, or even ask for more detail on the subject.