

How to Improve Your Fishing Skills by Steve Salkow

Beginners should try to learn from an expert. On the job training is best but fundamentals learned in a class give one a better understanding on which to build. I am a person who has made practically every error possible in both streams and lakes. I have fallen in practically every stream I have fished in every state where I fished. Some days, I have fallen in more than once that day.

As I attempting to learn how, I suffered a two-year dry spell where I caught nothing except parts of my clothing or exposed skin. If you are alone, it is practically impossible to remove a hook embedded in the back of your right hand especially if you happened to be right handed. The value of going barbless becomes immediately obvious when those barbed hooks start embedding into tender parts of the body. Part of my dry spell was from bad advice. I had been told that a 5/6 weight system was best for a beginner. Perhaps if one consider the average cross section of western trout streams that may have been a fair statement. I was trying to fish many smaller streams and spring creeks. Those heavy lines hitting the waters were scaring the trout. A scared trout sulks for a while before recovering. Another bad/sloppy cast puts them down again where they hide under a rock.

While I was an accomplished spear fisherman, I knew nothing of inland waters. I had no idea how to think like a trout. I started frequenting the Trinity Alps, California with my family. If you can stand the cold, learning where the fish hangout may be as simple as drifting down the river while completely submerged with a mask on. I remembered a talk given by Charlie Brooks who said he did that to checkout new waters. "There are more waters than one can fish in a life time!" he said. Learning which waters to skip is a real boon to one's success.

My beginning class in Fly Fishing was taught my Ken Heinbecker of the Midge Fly shop in San Jose, Ca. Virtually everything he ever taught me about fishing has been proven to be true. He told me to make sure take care of your equipment . Leaders and tippit material degrades and needs yearly changing. Losing the first big fish of the year teaches about parted lines. In one case, it was a Coho salmon in the Klamath River. He said clean your line at the end of each fishing season if you want it to last. Salt water is hard on all equipment. Rinse thoroughly. Do not wade with all your flies (great advice to someone who falls in as often as I do. Buy the best fly-tying vise you can afford. No matter what you pay for the vise, it will be cheaper than the feathers you buy. Your tying bench needs the best possible lighting especially as you grow older. A pocket light and magnifier glasses will help you survive late evening rises when the action gets serious. A bad pair of scissors will cost you more than buying a better pair in the first place. (For me, I had five scissors before I finally bought a really good pair.) If an exact match of the hatch is not possible, match the size. Keep in mind, a fly you cannot see is of little practical use dry fly fishing.

As a member of the San Jose Flycasters, I was fortunate to listen to many real experts. Of those, the man that would have the greatest impact on my fishing improvement was Dave

Whitlock. He said he always fishes straight up stream. If you have tried that with heavy gear and long casts, you have discovered that is an excellent way to wear yourself out in a hurry. I questioned what I was doing wrong. First, I am exhausted. I needed lighter gear, as I am tired of slinging the weight and tired of scaring fish.

Uncle Doug and I were trying to catch our supper in the spring run off pond at the top of Trinity Lake. We were camping, and getting fed up with beans. The pond is where the locals hold the area's spring fishing tournament and usually there were some dumb stocker fish of size left over each year 'til the pond eventually get low enough that the eagles pick it clean. We were chest high in our waders in some very cold water. Rises seemed just 5 yards further that I could cast. Sunset was an hour before. Looks like beans was it. Suddenly, an osprey pounced into the pond not 5 feet in front to me. It was making off with what appeared to be a four or 5-pound trout. Doug yelled: "Feel like climbing a tree?" This was an important lesson. The water closest to me was never fully explored. At the time, it seemed almost tragic.

I wanted to distance myself from heavy gear. I built my next rod. I found a light 2-weight glass blank from Fenwick a mere seven-foot in length. I was fishing small streams after all. The water closest to the fisherman is easiest to fish. My fishing casts became much shorter, and my success rate increase dramatically. It turns out, fish are the best teachers. Lighter line means less scared fish. Less scared fish means more catches. By now, I had been fishing barbless hooks for ten years. It would seem that barbless hooks catch more fish than those with barbs.

Success fishing improves reading the stream skills. I learned not fall in love with a patch of water. There is more water than I can cover. In places that look fishy, I look for "grey water" which is the water you cannot just see through. No seasoned trout will hang out in the clear still water unless it is very deep. I look for shadows on the water, trout will hang out there. I look for well oxygenated water with a good delivery channel to a sheltered lie such a protruding log or low branch, or tight bend in the river where there are eddies. I hit the best places with perfect cast. I never hit the same spot consecutively twice in a row. I may eventually come back with another cast but only if I am certain a trout should be hanging out there, and only after letting the waters rest 30 minutes. Deep water means I need cast upstream, allowing time for the fly to get down to the trout. Careful, quiet wading, calm and patience approach.

"In the fall of 1997, ultra light fly fishing enthusiasts worldwide were presented the newest "LIGHTEST weight fly rod in the world" -- [the Sage SPL Ought weight](#). It was ground breaking because the rod would beautifully the lightest line ever and the line would land as lightly as the wings of a butterfly.

By the time I switched to a zero weight, I was at a point where it did not matter to me if I caught a fish of size. The zero weight allowed me to fish straight upstream directly over a visible trout and NOT spook him at all. My average cast was 15 to 20 feet max. Mind you, the size of the fly one can fish now matters a lot. Large hopper patterns are not possible having to much wind resistance.

Dropping the reel to a super light Scientific Angler Concept Fly Reel Model 35 made of graphite help lighten the whole outfit. I found I could fish as long as my legs could hold me up without tiring. The lightness of the rod gives the fish little to struggle against, hence even a larger fish is manageable on light gear. My success rate was directly related to the stealth of this light gear. Stealth becomes more than just the gear. After a while, patience, observation, wading to a position where the best possible cast is afforded, all combine – become second nature. I fished perhaps 10 years with a zero weight and I would never go back.

One of my biggest joys was to catch fishermen. If anyone asked me “is that hard to do?” I would immediately give them a lesson. On a decent stream, these novices would catch a fish within about 5 minutes using my rod. Over the course of 30 years on those small California, gin-clear mountain streams, the opportunity to turn people on to the joy of fly-fishing presents itself many times.