My Nymphing System

by

Jim Brady

We have all been bombarded with the adage that trout spend 90% of their time feeding underwater and 10% on the surface. So why do we usually fish dries? Because its fun, that's why. It's visual, exciting and when a fish grabs the fly it's a thrill we long remember. The only problem is that during much of the year surface feeding is non-existent, such as during the cold water months delayed harvest is under way. Even when the water is in the 60's, I've found fish are often more accepting of a sunken fly than a floater.

But simply dredging your flies isn't enough. I have, over time, developed a systematic approach to nymphing that is the most productive I have ever found (with all due apologies to George Daniels). It's not mysterious but I have had people watching me asking what I was doing. If it's that unclear to some experienced fly fishermen seeing it in action, it's time to spell it out, or "fess up" as my wife, Molly, might put it.

The basis of "the system" can be traced to my passion for reading books about fly fishing. My reading of late has consisted of re-reading some old "classics" that appear so new and fresh to me I wonder if I ever read them in the first place or how I could forget so much in the second. One theme recurs again and again, like watching Bill Murray in "Groundhog Day." That idea is simply to take advantage of what the fish spend the bulk of their time: fish our flies near the bottom.

An old but refreshing text, full of heresy even by today's standards, is ***Advanced Fly Flyfishing*** by Eugene Burns, copyrighted in 1953. In '53 I was a three year old looking out the front window of our family's new home, watching a bulldozer grade what would become the front lawn. Speed up sixty-one years and I can't even think of another author who discusses velocity of streamflow throughout the water column as clearly and thoroughly as Burns, though I'm sure others have tried. Burns humbly described "Chapter 5, From the Bottom Up" as "the most important chapter you'll ever read on catching big fish." He discussed the effects of the stream rubbing against the banks, debris and rocks along the bottom. All of these structures slow the water's speed and provide resting places for fish to hold without a heavy caloric expenditure. He explained that the current moves the fastest in the middle of the stream a few inches under the surface and is actually slightly slower on the surface itself. But the payoff comes in the "fish-rich" bottom layer where fish can lay in low velocity (Burns says motionless) current right next to the bottom substrate where prey items live. Burns even claims "this chapter will show you how to catch fish frequently when no one else on the stream catches them." For the most part, I modestly boast my experience bears this out.

Most fishermen possess at least an inkling of these velocity changes but don't exploit them. Simply put, to catch the most and biggest fish you must drift your flies through the slow moving layer of water along the stream bottom. The big guys may move into slow moving pockets along the banks at times, especially during high, discolored water. The discoloration is key because it decreases light penetration. I think this lends the fish a bit of security given trout lack eyelids and can't tolerate much sunlight. The filtering effect of deep water, however, reduces light penetration all the time.

So deep water reduces the amount of sunlight, offers security from predators and has plenty of opportunities for food. And the fish expend a minimal amount of energy to boot. It's like a waiter wheeling the dessert cart right to your table. Grab those calories without breaking a sweat.

I have also enjoyed re-reading George Harvey's and Joe Humphrey's writings. Both were expert fishermen (Joe still is) and made fly fishing a lifelong study. George developed the tuck cast, which is basically a hard forward cast stopped abruptly with the rod held nearly vertical. Casting a weighted fly in this manner causes the leader to straighten out hard and then recoil to enter the water almost underneath the line point. The energy of the hard stop drives the fly to the bottom almost immediately.

Years ago I concluded that if my nymph was not near the bottom, it wasn't attractive to the fish. More crudely put, the fly "wasn't fishing" if it wasn't on the bottom. To be truthful, before I learned the tuck cast I cast my nymphs upstream just as if I were fishing a dry fly. I didn't realize that my fly wasn't near the bottom until it nearly drifted past me (which is oddly where most strikes occurred). That meant the "effective fishing range" of my fly was only a small fraction of the length of the cast. The tuck cast makes the fly attractive to the fish nearly the entire length of the cast. The tuck cast opened my eyes to the effectiveness of nymph fishing.

Joe Humphreys refined the tuck and always demonstrates it at fly fishing shows. But I value more highly his explanations of how weight affects how flies drift. He conducted a series of experiments adding lead wire or strips to hooks in various ways and then observed the effects on the flies' drift, sometimes donning scuba gear to make his observations. He found that flies oriented tail down, tail up and even upside down depending where the weight was. I suspect the added weight alters the fly's center of mass but that conclusion awaits some real effort. For now, I'll accept his finding that weight in the front third of the hook shank allows the fly to drift right-side up. If you tie lead wire parallel to that part of the shank, the fly can even wobble side to side, again right-side up.

Joe also studied how placement of split shot or lead wraps on the leader affects the depth of the flies. He even looked at the effects of added weight in combination with weighted flies. For years I have been placing a single split shot about eight to ten inches above the fly. Assuming the shot bounced along the bottom, this lets the fly drift roughly four to eight inches higher: right in the zone! Joe really excelled in these unique studies. I highly recommend you read ***Tactics for Trout*** to glean the most from his work.

It has taken many years for me to recognize the final piece of the puzzle. When I started fly fishing in 1964, I read everything I could find, which were mostly magazine articles. I read about Joe Brooks catching enormous browns on the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers by casting huge Muddler Minnows as far as the eye could see. My most revered fishing hero, A.J. McClane, the fishing editor of *Field&Stream*, wrote about drifting wet flies among rocks and under cut banks on the end of forty foot casts; I guess fishing downstream required that much separation to keep the fish from spotting you. And today there is way too much emphasis placed on distance casting in light of superlative graphite rods, space age lines with highly efficient distance tapers and the influence of saltwater fly fishing on freshwater tactics. But from a practical viewpoint, I think it's all a lot of bunk.

I recommend fishing in close. On most streams in North Carolina, that means fifteen to twenty feet max. I often find myself casting only the leader, especially when exploring one small pocket at a time. Assuming you are dead drifting your fly, it's very tough to detect a take to a nymph in two to five feet of water twenty-five or thirty feet away. Even if you use a strike indicator, can you really respond in time to hook the fish at that distance? Please understand the question is purely rhetorical as you just might be good at long distance nymphing. But most of us mortals would admit we are much more efficient fishermen at short range. Fishing in close of course demands careful and stealthy wading. Sound travels faster in water than in air. Grinding gravel immediately tells the fish something is amiss.

So there you have it. The system to catch the most and biggest trout is: fish in the slow moving layer of water on the bottom, use a tuck cast to get the fly down quickly, weight your flies and leader appropriately to drift the flies right in front of Mr. Big and make short, accurate casts. I might add wear olive or camouflage colored clothing to conceal your presence and always, always carry a hook hone and use it. A sharp point that hangs up in the fish's mouth tips the odds in your favor. I also suggest tippets not less than 4X, and 3X or 2X if you're using big flies. If you're after a big fish, try 1X. Tippet diameter doesn't bother the fish at all underwater. When I hook a big one, I want him in my hand. Long distance releases are poetic but I want scales in the net.

Some additional reading. The first two books are written by or about the most creative and productive fly fisherman ever. Class registration records confirm George taught over 35,000 students in fly tying and fly fishing, a record that will never be broken. The first three books can be purchased from Flyfisher's Paradise in State College, PA (flyfishersparadiseonline.com).

George Harvey, ***Techniques of Trout fishing and Fly Tying***, revised ed.; Lyons and Burford. Excellent introduction to both topics.

Daniel L. Shields, ***George Harvey, Memories, Patterns and Tactics***, DLS Enterprises, Lemont, PA 1998. An informative trip through George's fishing life; much practical information. It will open your eyes to the contributions George has made to our sport.

Joe Humphreys, ***Tactics for Trout***, Stackpole Books, Harrisburg, PA: 1982 (new revised edition is available). George was Joe's mentor. This is the most practical fly fishing book ever published. If you buy one book on fly fishing, make it this one.

Eugene Burns, ***Advanced Fly Fishing***, The Stackpole Company, Harrisburg, PA: 1953; May be hard to find, but worth the effort. Try used book sites on the internet.