

## Sight Fishing Techniques in Clear Still Water: Peter Turnham

One of the great joys of running a Trout Fishery is being able to benefit from the wealth of collective expertise of our Members and Visitors, and it is clear from questions and conversations with fishermen, and visitors especially, that sight-fishing for trout in clear still water is poorly understood; this is true for those more used to fishing streams, as well as regular Stillwater fishers. This might initially sound like a strange state of affairs because lake fishing has been around for ages, but in fact still waters suitable for sight-fishing or stalking are comparatively rare. The water must be crystal clear and not too deep, or you will simply not be able to see your quarry; not too big, or the fish will simply move out of your casting range; it must be alkaline, or there will not be sufficient insect life to produce rising fish; and with little fishing pressure, in order that the trout behave in a natural way. If any one of these requirements is absent, as they usually are, then sight-fishing becomes impossible - the consequence is that the technique of cast-and-retrieve has become the default technique for most still waters.

Sight-fishing is all about spotting your trout, and then setting about catching that specific fish, by pure imitative fly fishing. The first requirement, therefore, is to spot a feeding trout. The second requirement is to know, or at least to have a good idea of, what the trout is feeding on, in order that we can present the correct fly. The third and final requirement is that we must present our fly in such a way that the trout is completely deceived, so that it takes our fly believing it to be the real thing.

The first and second requirements are pretty self-explanatory, although often easier said than done! The third requirement, however, is all about presentation and this is an altogether more difficult discipline to master. Our ambition is theoretically simple enough — we want to present our fly to the fish in the right place, at the right time, and in a way that looks just like the natural insect, and above all we must do nothing to give the game away!

The right place is where the fish is feeding; this may be a two-dimensional position on the surface of the water, or it might be a three-dimensional position at a given depth. The right time is the fourth dimension, because we always have to calculate the time it takes for the coming together of fly and fish after the cast is made. For the still water fisher, the trout is not stationary, and so we have to make assumptions about the movement of the fish, and calculate the sink and drift rate of our fly so that it coincides with the moving fish at the correct depth.

When fishing the dry fly, the fourth dimension of time is less important, but is still a factor. Provided the fly intercepts the fish, it only needs to do so in a two-dimensional position. There is, however, the absolutely critical consideration of your leader sinking and allowing time for that before the fish is intercepted, but more of that later.

Assuming that we can present our subsurface nymph in a timely fashion so that it arrives at the correct depth and position to coincide with the trout's arrival, we still have to ensure that the fly appears to move in a natural way, and that we do nothing to give the game away.

This goes to the heart of all presentational problems in still water, because our artificial fly suffers one huge disadvantage, that the natural insect never suffers from, namely that the fly is attached to a fly line and leader! This presents the fly fisher with two big problems:- one is how to make the artificial fly move like the natural, and secondly - and most importantly — the implications of the interaction of our leader and fly line with the surface film. These two problems are inextricably linked because, to move the fly, we must move the line, and if you move the line, you increase that interaction with the surface film.

When the line sits in the surface film, it distorts the water surface, thanks to the forces of surface tension which — if you think back to your schooldays — is sufficiently strong to support a floating needle. Viewed from above, that distortion is not very apparent, but viewed from beneath the surface, the incoming light is refracted in such a way that your almost invisible leader will look like an anchor rope. If you then move your line, you create an additional surface disturbance, you create a wake - a shock wave akin to the bow wave of a moving boat. Again, when viewed from beneath the water, the incoming light is now distorted even more; you are unwittingly sending the trout the clearest possible indication of your presence, and the calmer the water surface, the more obvious is your announcement. In my opinion, if you want to fully deceive a still water trout with a perfect imitation, then line wake is your principle problem followed of course by a whole list of other problems not far behind.

That last statement goes to the heart of why I think still water fishing is poorly understood, because it is undeniable that cast and retrieve is the default technique, and cast and retrieve — by its very nature — creates an enormous amount of line wake, and so why this contradiction? The answer is that we are talking about two totally different fishing methods. The sight fisher is targeting a particular fish which can be approaching the fly from a range of different angles (more of that later) and in addition, we want to deceive the fish with a pure imitative method. The cast and retriever is not targeting a particular fish, the retrieve is very often much faster than the natural insect can move and so even when using a nymph, it cannot, by definition, be imitative, and often relies in part upon the aggression of the trout. The result is that the trout ends up following the retrieved fly and so fish, fly and fly line end up in a straight line; the significance of this is something I will expand upon later. The corollary for the stream fisher is the down-stream cast, where the fly swings towards the bank in a totally unnatural way. Both techniques catch fish, but there are more sophisticated and satisfying methods of catching trout where conditions allow.

So - how do we overcome line wake and still impart some movement to the fly? And the answer is a bit like the old joke asking how do hedgehogs make love — they do it very carefully! Most of the time, when still water anglers think they are giving life to the fly, they are in fact moving the fly orders of magnitude faster than the natural can possibly move. In reality, even the more mobile nymphs like Pond Olives and Damsels move around pretty slowly in terms of line retrieve, and most pupae forms merely rise up in the water column. The fact is, you cannot make your nymph move like, say, a natural Pond Olive nymph - all you can hope to do in order to be as realistic as possible is to twitch the nymph up a few inches in the water column and then allow it to sink a few inches. The sinking aspect of this "sink and draw" movement is probably the more realistic movement, and it is why a lightly dressed nymph will often beat a heavy nymph in terms of pure imitation. Apart from

imitating the natural as closely as we can manage, keeping line movement to a minimum is the key to reducing line wake.

So, if we want to truly deceive our targeted trout into thinking that our fly is the real thing, we must reduce to a minimum the surface wake, and the best way to do that is to make sure the leader is sunk out of the surface film. This is easier said than done, and is certainly not made any easier by the use of "sinking" fluorocarbon. The only thing, in my opinion, that works is Fullers Earth, liberally applied to the entire leader on a regular basis. Opinions vary about how Fullers Earth should be mixed and the addition of glycerine and washing-up liquid is often recommended, but I would caution against that. Glycerine by itself would act as a floatant so why use that! Washing-up liquid as a surficant is great at breaking the surface tension, and so acts to help the line sink by itself. The problem is — if you wanted to wash your Fullers Earth off your line — what better way than to rub some washing-up liquid onto it? The answer in my experience is just Fullers Earth and water, mixed as thickly as possible, like a putty, so that it still retains a degree of absorbency in the material. Fullers Earth is not easy to get hold of but we have managed to buy some, and so if anyone wants some, we have it.

All fly fishermen should be using a tapered or stepped leader - that goes without saying as far as presentation is concerned — but a leader with a good thick butt section will also help greatly to break through the surface film, and so for both nymph and dry fly fishing, all of the leader should be sunk. As far as leader length is concerned, it needs to be as long as is consistent with pinpoint accurate casting. The further the fly is from the fly line, the better. The minimum length would be about 10 feet for close range casting, and perhaps 15 feet for longer casting. Beyond 15 feet, pinpoint casting becomes more difficult, because if any of the leader lands in a heap, you have to draw the slack line out, which creates surface wake, and effectively negates the cast. The final requirement for a leader is that it must be straight; any kinks or curls just create more surface disturbance.

Even if we can overcome all of the problems of line drag and the resulting surface wake, and we can present our fly at the right time and place, there is still one final, and very tall, hurdle to overcome. We must not give the game away. To be successful, the trout must not see us standing on the bank, and in still water that is incredibly difficult to achieve.

Whenever possible, the still water sight fisher should endeavour to cast from behind cover, but in the early Season, that is not always possible. The thing to remember, however, is that - at Brook Farm especially - you are not often seen by the trout as a silhouette against the skyline, and so what gives us away is colour and movement. The answer is to dress accordingly, and stand still, and preferably reduce your profile by stooping or kneeling down.

So, we have a good long leader which will sink; we are keeping still and out of sight; we have spotted a feeding trout, and decide to employ a sub-surface nymph. The temptation is to cast at the fish immediately, which will mostly prove to be a disaster! We do not have the luxury in still water of a stationary fish as in the stream, but neither will a feeding fish be quick to flee the area, provided we keep out of sight, but time is not on our side. Your imitation is lightly dressed, perhaps with a few turns of copper wire, but it could still require

maybe 10 seconds or more to drag the leader down say 3 feet, and that time delay is crucial to our cast.

This is where the position of the trout relative to the caster is of paramount importance, because this directly affects how much of the fish's visual field of view extends to our leader and fly line, and its attendant surface wake. The ideal position is a fish that is moving in a line towards you. It is effectively looking straight up the line, and will see very little of it, and this is why the trout following a retrieved fly will often overcome its fear, and finally grab the fly (although never forget it is facing you as the caster). The worst position is a fish moving straight away from you, because you would have no option but to cast over the fish and the game would be up immediately. It follows, therefore, that there is a window of opportunity when a trout is moving towards you that gradually diminishes as that angle relative to the line of cast changes towards the reverse position. Depending upon the speed of the fish, and the sink rate of the fly, you will probably be able to cast well away from the fish, so that the fly has sunk to the desired depth and all the line disturbance has ceased by the time the trout enters the taking spot. This time delay, from the cast to the point where the trout and the leader come together, diminishes as the angle of the fish to the fly line diminishes. As that angle diminishes, so does your chance of catching the fish. A good way to understand this is to visualise a clock face on the surface of the water with your fly line going through the 6 o'clock position, and your fly at the centre of the clock face. A trout approaching your fly between the 10 o'clock and 2 o'clock directions sees the least of your leader and fly line, while a trout approaching from between the 4 o'clock and 8 o'clock positions is in closer contact with your line as it nears the fly.

Hang on a moment; for the stream fisher casting up-stream, the fly always approaches the fish from about the 4 o'clock or 8 o'clock position, depending upon which bank you are fishing from. This is quite true, and it clearly demonstrates one of the key differences between still and flowing water. Surface line wake is less of a problem in the stream, due to the constant "boiling" movement of the surface, which disguises some of those optical effects viewed from beneath the water. The other difference is that it is instilled into the stream fisher from an early age that line drag spells disaster, and so the dead drift is essential. Drag in flowing water produces two undesirable effects - it moves the fly in an unnatural way, and it creates surface line wake, which of course is the identical situation in still water when the line is retrieved. Why an essential discipline from one branch of fly fishing has not been transferred to another is a mystery!

The prudent approach, therefore, is not to cast to a trout unless it is in a good position, because all you will achieve is a spooked fish. Far better to wait and see; perhaps the fish might turn and present a better casting opportunity. Above all, the still water sight fisher must be a quick and accurate caster, in order to take opportunities when they present themselves, because very often a single cast will be your only cast.

The techniques that I have described for the subsurface fly depend upon calculating the "coming together time" of fish and fly. A popular technique to hasten this coming-together is to increase the weight of the nymph. At the extreme a heavy fly can be cast almost at the fish, and will sink in seconds down to the required depth. It is certainly easier to end up with a heavy fly in the right place and at the right time, and this accounts for the popularity on

some waters of the so-called stalking bug. The problem with this technique is that all your line disturbance is directly over the fish, and because the fly sinks so rapidly you will have to retrieve line sooner rather than later, or the fly will touch the bottom, and with that retrieve comes more disturbance. I find this technique works well on waters where the fly life is not so prolific, and/or where there is more fishing pressure. Trout in these conditions seem less inclined to rise up in the water column to take a nymph and a deeply-fished nymph works well. At Brook Farm, it is seldom necessary to present a nymph deeper than a few feet, because the fish will usually rise up to take a well-presented fly, and so a heavy fly will seldom offer any real advantage.

Another consideration for the nymph fisher is knowing when to set the hook. When line is retrieved, the take is instantly felt, and the fish effectively hooks itself; but this is not the case for the sight fisher. The point to remember about imitative fishing is that we want the trout to take our nymph as if it were the real insect, and the trout cannot afford to expend more energy catching its food items than these tiny food items provide. In other words, the trout will not waste energy grabbing a small food item and swimming off with it, and so you are unlikely to feel the take through the fly line. This is no doubt another reason for the ubiquity of cast and retrieve, because I suspect a lot of fishers, when fishing a slow or static nymph, are often unaware of the takes.

The best option when possible is to actually see the fish close its mouth on your fly, which is very often the case for sight fishing. The other option, when conditions do not quite allow that clarity of vision, is to watch the last foot of leader, or the tip of the fly line. I usually sink all of my leader except for the last foot or so of the butt section, which I grease. When the trout takes the nymph, the resistance of a foot of floating leader is negligible, and so it will not instantly let go of the nymph; the trick is to be able to see the slight movement of leader and to set the hook in time. The visibility of a foot of leader on the surface depends upon any breeze and the reflection of light, so you can often see the leader better by simply changing your position slightly, and seeing it against a more helpful reflective surface. When conditions do not allow the leader to be seen, then the last resort is to watch the tip of the fly line, but reactions to a take need to be instantaneous, because the resistance of the fly line immediately gives the game away and, unless the trout hooks itself, it will drop the fly in a second. The take is not normally going to be a large movement of line — it will often only be an inch or two, or if the nymph is sinking, it might be no more than that the leader stops sinking! The ease with which you can spot takes is entirely dependent upon light conditions, but even in the best of conditions, it requires absolute concentration.

There are another set of conditions in still water that can have a profound effect upon presentation, and that is the wind. Everything I have said about the difficulties created by line wake in the surface film goes out of the window when it is windy! The dilemma is that, while the fish is far less likely to see the wake created by your line, you are equally less likely to spot the fish! These are the conditions where fish-spotting becomes an art, one which you can improve upon with practice. It is possible to see trout on breezy days, provided it is at fairly close range, and your chances improve if you can sight-fish in calmer water on the edge of wind-broken water. Above all, on breezy days, the ideal way to spot trout is the rising fish, and this is why good natural fly life is so important. It is a rare day at Brook Farm

when there are few rising trout, and the combination of rising trout and a strong breeze to cover your line are the ingredients for the perfect day.

It is perfectly possible to target a rising fish with a sub-surface nymph - a trout taking hatching midge from the surface will happily take a sub-surface buzzer - but why bother, when you can use the dry fly? of all the sight-fishing techniques, the dry fly is by far the most enjoyable, and on breezy days, I would say it is the most successful. Line wake is much less of a problem, but line drag takes its place, and moves the fly in unnatural ways. The secret here is to either fish the fly for a short duration between casts — in other words, lift off cleanly and re-cast before the line drags, or fish with the wind behind you, and feed line if necessary.

Surface fishing with a dry fly, or an emerger, presents a different set of challenges. The time delay of sink rate and fish coinciding is gone, and so in many regards, surface fishing is less complicated. The difficulty is that, unlike subsurface fishing, all of the leader is initially on the surface, and so — unless there is a good breeze — it is highly visible to the fish. It takes time for even the best-prepared leader to sink, and so the consideration of delay before the trout intercepts the fly is still important, but is not so critical. What is paramount is that the leader is sunk - a dry fly that is dragging what will look like an anchor rope behind it in the surface film will be swiftly rejected.

A variation to try with the dry fly is the "on the nose" cast. The still water trout will not take from the surface and return to the bottom like his river counterpart; the fish will often remain very close to the surface, especially if there is a good hatch. A pinpoint cast that drops the dry fly exactly on the fish's nose can often be greeted with a spontaneous take. Needless to say, the fly must land softly with no leader heaped around it, and preferably the fish needs to be approaching the fly from between the 10 o'clock and the 2 o'clock positions. But, given the perfect cast, this reaction take gives the fish no time to examine the leader and — in my opinion — is just about the most exciting way to catch trout!

A variant of this cast is to spot a natural fly on the surface within a trout's feeding zone, and wait until the fish is obviously heading for the natural. Time the cast so that your fly lands just an inch or two behind the natural relative to the path of the trout, and cast just as the trout takes it, and nine times out of ten the trout will take the natural and in one movement go straight on to the artificial. The natural insect presumably negates any fears the trout may have, and it takes the artificial without hesitation mostly! This is an immensely satisfying trout to catch.

Still water dry fly fishing almost always necessitates at least some breeze on the water. It is not impossible to deceive a fish on a calm day, but it is incredibly difficult, due to the problems created by line wake. Some of our Brook Farm Members can manage this feat, but I would suggest visiting fly fishers keep their Adams or Greenwell's in the box until the breeze returns!

The last word to be said about dry fly is that it has been proved to me beyond doubt that the fly must sit on the surface film and not sit within the film. The difference might appear subtle but it makes a huge difference. I therefore change my dry fly regularly, and always

change it after I have caught a fish on it. Silica gel drying powder is useful, but it is no substitute for a fresh fly.

Even when all of these tactics are put together, sight fishing in still water is still extremely difficult, largely because it is so difficult not to give the game away. If you are fishing a lake like Brook Farm by yourself and undisturbed, it is perfectly possible to sneak up on a fish feeding in the margins and hook him right under the rod tip, but quite often it becomes necessary to fish at longer range, simply to reduce your visual impact. This is where casting skills come into their own, because all of the techniques that I have described will often need to be practised at fairly long range. The challenge is not to reach 40 yards; the challenge is to be able to reach perhaps 20 yards but with pinpoint accuracy, with a dead straight leader, or perhaps a deliberately curved leader, but always with the least possible disturbance to the water. Not only do you need to be able to do that, but you will nearly always need to be able to do that in a split second, and usually involving a change of line direction!

The final point to remember about imitative fly fishing is that the trout has only three mental functions as far as I can see:- they reproduce, they avoid danger, and they eat. If you can manage to avoid giving the game away, and you can present an artificial fly to a trout in such a way that the trout sees it as the real thing — then there is only one thing that trout are programmed to do with it !

If the trout does not take your fly as a food item, then I am sorry to say that it is because you have given the game away, and for no other reason. You can change that situation by "inducing" a take, by moving the fly quickly and appealing to the trout's aggression, but it is not the same thing. Pure deception is very difficult to achieve - appealing to aggression is comparatively easy — I know which technique for me is the more challenging and satisfying. I hope both the trout and those fishing for them will rise to the occasion!

Tight lines!!

Peter Turnham