

A Nymphing Primer

By Mike Loeb
Illustrations by Brennan Sang

THE MADISON, Gallatin and other legendary rivers surrounding West Yellowstone attract fly fishermen from around the world. But many visiting anglers lack knowledge of the techniques needed to fish them successfully. At no time is this more apparent than when tactics call for nymphing. It is surprising how many anglers simply do not understand what is required to achieve good presentations with nymphs in these rapid pocket water rivers. Some nymph patterns are more effective than others at given times but even the best patterns are ineffective if not presented in a realistic manner.

Some anglers scoff at fishing nymphs under an indicator but nymphing is often the most effective way to fish many western rivers, including those surrounding West Yellowstone. Anglers who look down on nymphing often fail to grasp a basic understanding of its principles and overlook the method's complexity and challenge. Trout do a majority of their feeding on aquatic insect nymphs and larva. Imitating the behavior of these nymphs is almost always best done with a sub-surface dead drift.

On most rivers nymphing is productive throughout the season. With

the exception of major hatch periods it is usually the most effective way to fish. The Madison and Gallatin differ from most other nymphing environments in that trout are holding and feeding in water that is quite shallow but carrying a heavy flow. These differences call for a few adjustments to the nymph rigging and strategies often described in books and magazines.

Achieving long natural drifts, as if the fly were unattached to the line, is the key to nymph fishing success anywhere. Add good strike detection and proper hook set and even the most avid dry fly fishermen will be impressed at how productive and fun nymph fishing can be.

Tackle and Rigging

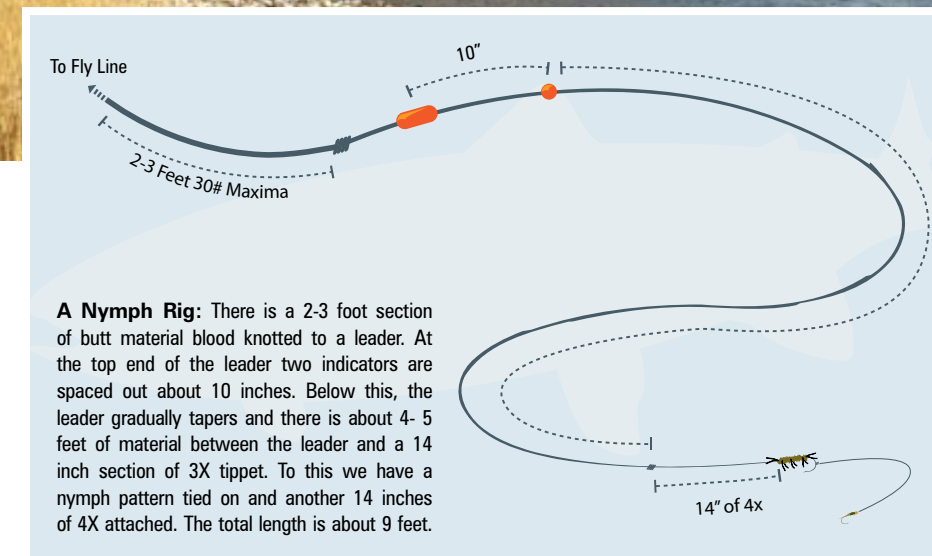
GOOD SETUP is extremely important for successful nymph fishing. There are many different types and variations of nymph rigs. Some are effective in certain types of water and some are more versatile than others. The set up described below works well in the local rivers and can be easily adapted to many different types of water.

Most anglers already have a good nymphing rod. A 9' 5 or 6-weight rod is the standard issue trout fishing tool

these days and is ideal. For most of this area's nymphing a 5-weight gets the nod over a 6-weight simply because the 5-weight line is slightly thinner and less resistant to the water. In heavy wind or when casting large flies a 6-weight can improve performance for the average caster. Longer rods of 91/2' or 10' are advantageous for mending and line control on the water but are more difficult and tiring to cast.

Fast action rods like Winston's BIIX and Sage's Z-Axis are excellent choices for nymph fishing because they are lightweight but very powerful. This combination of reduced weight and increased strength makes it easier to cast, set hooks and to mend line more efficiently than is possible with slower action rods. Any reel that holds a 5- or 6-weight line and 75 plus yards of backing is sufficient as long as it is balanced with the rod. A smooth drag is helpful for landing larger fish. Fly line choice is more important for nymphing than the choice of reel. Requirements for a good nymphing line are that it is high floating for ease of mending, turns over weight well and loads the rod. Scientific Anglers GPX and Rio's Grand and Nymph lines in the correct sizes fill these requirements.

Once equipped with a suitable



rod, reel and line the next challenge for nymphing the Madison or Gallatin is rigging up flies and a leader that allow a good drift in the water that will be fished. Let us examine the types of water in which we commonly find trout holding and feeding in these rivers. For the most part we will observe that the fish are in water that is between 1 and 4 feet deep, though it is not unusual to discover fish feeding in shallower water. This is especially true if there is cover in the form of a slight drop off or a cloudy sky. While both rivers have a rather high gradient, trout can be found holding in very slow water at the edges of the flow, fast heavy runs and everything in between. When we rig up, it is important that our rig is suited to this rather shallow water and that it is easy to make adjustments for varia-

tions in water speed and depth.

At the end of the fly line we have our first rigging decision. The distance from the end of the fly line to the indicators is of great importance and impacts the performance of the entire set up. The rule of thumb here is: The closer to the fly line the indicator is, the easier the rig will cast. The further from the fly line the indicator is, the easier it is to mend. A good compromise is to have 2 to 3 feet of leader between the fly line and indicator. For ease of casting it is important that this distance is comprised of heavy material rather than a thin length of tippet. A 2 to 3 foot section of 30# Maxima is our choice for the butt section, to which a tapered leader can be blood knotted or attached with a loop to loop connection. Since the Madison and Gallatin

generally call for 3x or 4x tippets, a 7 1/2 or 9 foot 3x leader is the basis for a nymph rig.

Indicators can then be attached to the top end of the leader. There are countless varieties of strike indicators. For fishing on the Madison and Gallatin we've become big fans of fishing two small indicators spaced between 8 to 12 inches apart. Never-Miss are our favorite because they are easy to cast and float well, even when used with a good deal of weight. The two indicators spaced apart give an angler a very good reference for observing how the flies are drifting and remain useful even in the event that one indicator sinks. To attach the indicators simply thread them up the leader and hold them in place with tooth picks. Be sure to cleanly break off the end of the tooth pick so that the flies and leader do not catch on it when casting. With a 7 1/2 or 9 foot 3x leader attached to the 30# butt section and indicators spaced out and held in place with toothpicks we come to our next important rigging decision.

Anglers visiting our shop commonly ask, "How long a leader do you use?" Though this is a valid question, the more important length to be concerned with is the distance between the indicators and split shot. This



brings us to a fundamental difference between shallow-water nymphing and the techniques used to fish deeper runs. In shallow water the nymph(s) is drifting horizontally in relation to the indicators. Alternately when the water is more than a couple of feet deep the fly will drift vertically directly below to the indicators.

Using less weight, smaller indicators and a slightly longer leader relative to the depth of water allows an angler to fish the varying depths with equal effectiveness, adjusting only the amount of weight to keep the flies close to the bottom. With this set up, the flies are drifting upstream from the indicators and the leader is angled horizontally through the water. In contrast, an effective rig for deeper pools consists of a more buoyant indicator, more weight and a shorter distance relative to the water depth between the shot and indicator. With this set up the indicator is used to suspend the weight off of the bottom and the best drift is achieved when the flies and weight are vertically straight below the indicator.

A good starting point for distance between the indicators and split shot for fishing horizontally on the shallow water of the Madison and Gallatin is 4 to 5 feet. With a 7½ foot leader tied to our butt section and indicators spaced about 10 inches apart at the top of the leader, simply cut the leader

a little over 4 ½ feet from the bottom indicator. To this we can blood knot or surgeon's knot a section of tippet. Weight can be added or removed from the leader at the point just above this knot, keeping the shot from sliding down to the flies.

A normal rig for early and late season fishing on the area rivers consists of a large weighted stonefly nymph trailed by a smaller dropper. 3X is standard tippet to the large fly, 4x is tied off the hook bend or attached to the eye of the big nymph, and to this we attach our dropper. When fishing two smaller nymphs, 4X is most often used for both sections of tippet. Fluorocarbon is preferred to standard mono tippet material for its abrasion resistance and lesser visibility underwater.

Length of tippet from the shot to the flies is governed by another important principle. For most of the nymphing on the Madison and Gallatin, some weight is added to the leader to help the nymphs sink. Split shot is often utilized for this purpose. The closer the flies are to the shot, the easier it is to detect strikes. By keeping this distance close the more likely it is that the flies and shot remain in the same current line as well as at the same depth. While the later point is fairly self-explanatory, the reason for the ease of strike detection from a shorter tippet is that the flies most often will be drifting

downriver from the spilt shot, as they catch more of the current and are less dense. This is doubly true if the shot is tapping the river bottom, further slowing its drift. When a fish takes the fly that is downstream of the shot, the shot must continue its drift past the fish in order for the take to begin to move the rest of the leader and then the indicators. The longer the tippet the further the shot has to drift before it impacts the rest of the rig. Based on this precept it would seem that a short distance between the shot and flies is beneficial. While this is true at times, remember that the spilt shot can spook fish at times. A good compromise is to use 12 to 16 inches from the shot to the first fly and between the two flies. This spacing can be adjusted if fish are spooky, or if discolored water renders the trout unable to see split shot drifting closer to the flies. If fish are missed, or hooked only for a head shake or two, shortening this section of tippet can result in better hook ups.

Now let us review the rig we have just described. There is a 2 to 3 foot section of butt material blood knotted to a leader. At the top end of the leader two indicators are spaced out about 10 inches apart. Below this, the leader gradually tapers through a section of 4 to 5 feet of material to a 14 inch section of 3x tippet. To this we have a nymph pattern tied on and another 14

inches of 4x attached. The total length of the leader is about 9 feet.

Casting

ONCE WE HAVE set up a proper rig, the next hurdle to overcome is casting. Nymphing can lack the delicate presentation of dry fly fishing but casting and fishing a nymph rig can be every bit as technical as dry fly fishing. Most nymphing presentations begin with the flies being cast upstream of the angler. Nymphs can be fished directly upstream and allowed to float back towards the fisherman as the slack line is being retrieved. Another tactic is to cast up and across the river so the nymphs are allowed to drift downstream past the angler. Long casts are not necessary when nymphing as most fish will be caught within 10 to 30 feet. Accuracy is a much greater asset than distance. Avoiding tangles with the flies, weight and indicators on the leader can be a bit of a challenge at first.

When casting any weight it is important to allow the line to straighten completely on the backcast. This requires a little more power on the backcast than when casting an unweighted fly, and puts an emphasis on pausing until the line is fully straightened. Once the fly line is straight behind the caster and the rod loaded, a normal casting stroke easily directs the flies to the target.

One problem anglers often have when casting nymph rigs is coping with the large change of angle between where the flies end up at the completion of the drift and where they need to land. This can be as much as 170 degrees of difference. One simple solution, which is perfect for beginning anglers but remains in the arsenal of even the most skilled casters is the water-loaded cast. With this cast, the flies and shot are allowed to drift completely downstream of the angler at the end of the drift so the current straightens the line and lifts the flies off the bot-

tom. By pointing the rod downstream at the flies, the angler has simulated a perfect backcast, one that straightens out the line and leader. To make a forward cast one must simply turn the tip of the rod so it points 180 degrees from the intended target, lift the fly line slowly off the water until just the indicators and leader are in contact with the surface of the water and then propel the rod tip in a straight line toward the target. This cast can also be used to reposition the flies for a regular backcast and subsequent forward cast that shoots more line.

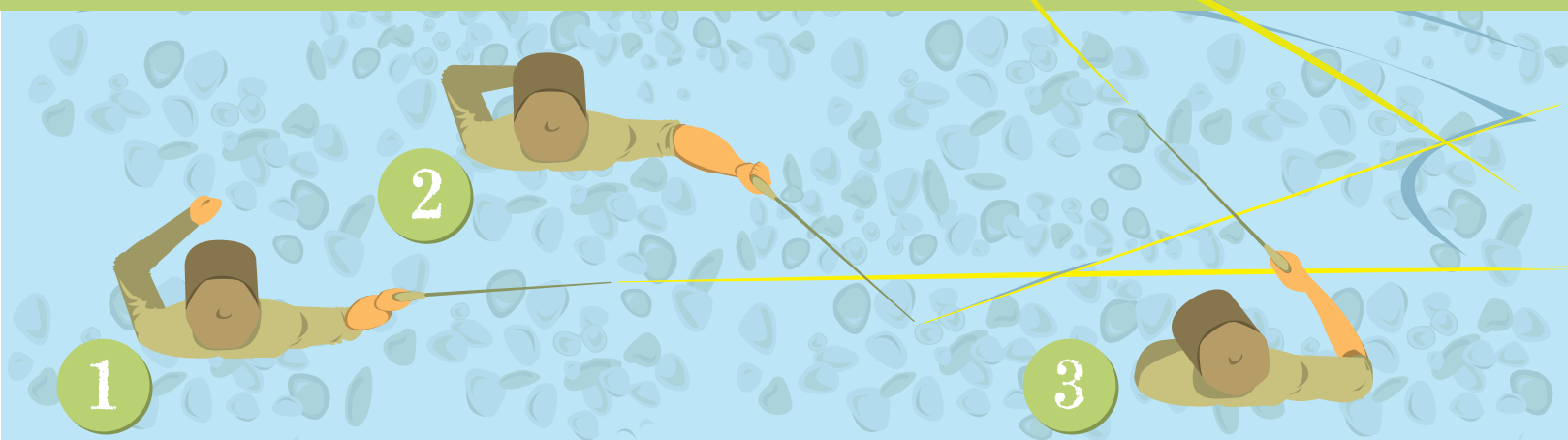
A good cast naturally leads to the next step of achieving a good dead drift. One of the most important factors in getting a good drift is making the flies, shot, indicators and whatever fly line is on the water land in the same current line. This is only possible if the angler can cast a straight line with a powerful forward loop that completely turns over the leader and flies, regardless of wind. One thing working in the angler's favor is that the weight of a nymph rig actually aids in turning the rig over. A good back cast gets things started. The forward cast drives the rod tip in a straight line toward the target with a pause at the completion of the forward cast. This makes it easy to get everything to straighten out, especially on the short casts most often used while nymphing.

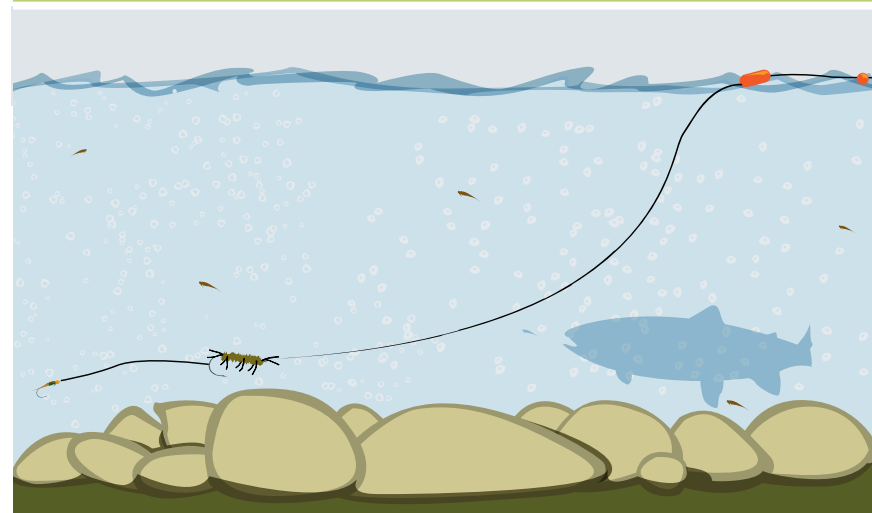
Dead Drift

ACHIEVING A DEAD DRIFT is by far the biggest determining factor in whether or not trout are fooled into taking nymphs. As previously stated, the cast is the first step in achieving a dead drift and it is the most important part of getting a good presentation. Before we look at how the cast affects drift, let's look at the importance of getting a dead drift itself.

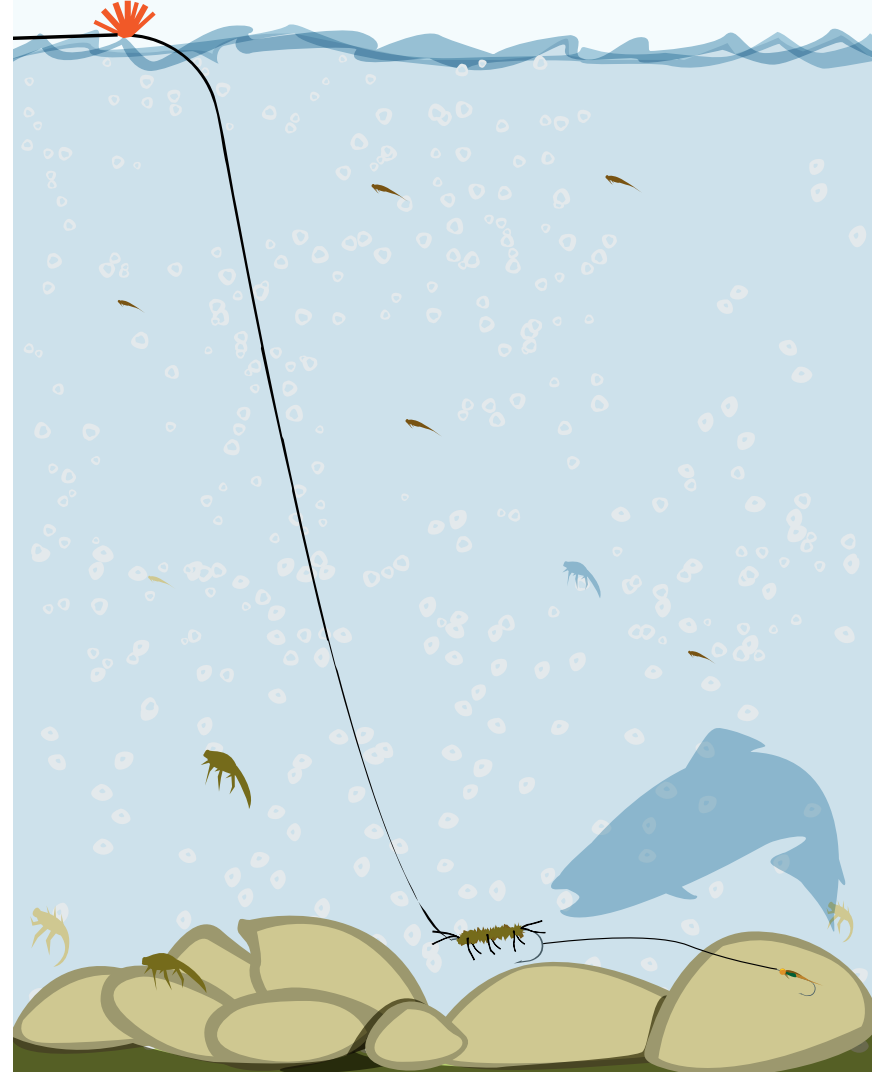
There is a common refrain in angling that 10 percent of the fishermen catch 90 percent of the fish. Though this refrain may not be completely accurate, during any given day on the river it seems that a few anglers enjoy more success than their counterparts. While location and fly selection have influence in the number and size of the fish hooked during the course of the day, the biggest factor by far is proper fly presentation. If two anglers are fishing and one gets a 1 foot dead drift and the other achieves a 2 foot dead drift, the angler with the better drift will have 100% more fish eat his flies. Let's consider if one angler gets a one foot drift and the other gets a nine foot dead drift. The difference in fish that eat the flies is a staggering 900%. While this may seem like an interesting statistical game, the reality is that proper presentation is what separates expert anglers from all others. In the

1. Allow your line to drift downstream until the water pulls your flies, splitshot and indicators into a straight line behind you.
2. Raise your rod tip vertically while moving it to point 180 degrees away from your desired target. Pause at this point, keeping the indicators in the water. The fly line should be straight and tight from the rod tip down to the indicators on the water.
3. Drive your rod forward toward your target, as you would for a normal forward cast.





Horizontal Drift



Vertical Drift

case of nymphing, proper presentation is a long dead drift. The good news is that achieving a long dead drift with nymphs is not difficult and with a little practice, anyone can become a competent nymph fisher.

Once rigged up correctly for the water to be fished and in possession of basic casting skills, an angler can start worrying about getting a long dead drift in the different types of water in which trout will be feeding. Adding weight to allow the nymphs to sink is the first step. Remember that too much weight is just as harmful as too little. When dead drifting, the flies are not under tension from the fly line. It is this lack of tension that allows the flies to sink. The longer the dead drift, the more the flies will get down toward the river bottom. Thus as an angler's drifts get better, less weight is needed to get the flies in front of the fish.

Weight can take the form of split shot, weighted flies, tungsten putty or a combination of these. It is a good rule of thumb to add just enough weight so the shot will hit bottom at the end of a good long drift. With the nymphing set up described above, the angler looks for any hesitation of the indicators as a signal to set the hook. When split shot hits the river bottom, it causes a hesitation in the indicators that is indistinguishable from the soft take of a trout. If the rig is continually bouncing on the river bottom, the angler is forced into setting the hook all of the time instead of allowing the flies to drift, or ignoring hesitations in the indicator that will always result in missed fish. Start off with a little weight and see what happens. When trout are feeding heavily on nymphs they often move upward in the water column to feed so it isn't always a necessity to be drifting right over the bottom. If a run or pocket looks especially good yet doesn't yield a fish, add a little more weight to see if it makes a difference.

With the right amount of weight a dead drift boils down to two factors. The first is aligning the indicators, shot and flies in the same current line with a good cast. The second factor is keeping the fly line from pulling the indicators unnaturally, thus causing drag.

To examine good and bad casts to start a presentation, imagine fishing to a pocket or pool formed by a medium sized rock of 3' or 4' in diameter. Hundreds of these pockets exist along the Madison and Gallatin. Behind the rock is a 20' stretch of water that flows more slowly than the water around it. Trout hold and feed in this quiet water as they can conserve energy while the current brings food downriver. The slow slick behind the rock is surrounded on both sides by water moving at more than twice the speed of the slow water. An effective cast will put the flies, shot and indicators all in the slow water behind the rock. Picture the

leader aligned so that the flies land closest to the rock, followed by the shot and lastly, at the furthest point downstream, the two strike indicators. To simplify the example, imagine that the rig is unattached to anything and left to drift by itself in the river. The current will draw the entire rig down the river at approximately the same speed, the flies will sink towards the river bottom and the leader will maintain its straight alignment in the river as it slowly drifts the length of the current seam. If there is any interruption in the drift, from the flies hitting a rock, or getting ingested by a trout, the straight leader instantly telegraphs this interruption causing the indicators to hesitate.

In the same slick, picture a cast that places the same rig lying across the seam on the edges of the current. The indicators are in the slow water behind the rock, the flies land upriver and in the fast water that flows around the outside of the rock. Left to drift unattached to any flyline, this rig has no chance to achieve a dead drift. The flies are swept downriver much faster than the indicators until the leader straightens out. The flies are then held up in the faster current by the indicators that are trapped in the slower water of the slick. If a trout were to eat the flies, the indicators would have to progress downstream a full leader length below the flies before a take would register as an upstream hesitation. The drift would be equally poor if the flies were cast into the slow water and the indicators landed in the faster flow surrounding the slick. In this case the drag of the indicators would pull the flies through the water at a speed much greater than that of the water the flies were in. The fast moving flies never have a chance to sink as they are quickly pulled downstream by the indicators. Both of these presentations look most unnatural to the trout.

Just as aligning the flies and indicators in the same line of current

is critically important, it follows that knowing when this alignment has occurred is equally important. Observing where the flies land in relation to the strike indicator is very helpful in knowing when a good drift is possible on any given cast. It is easier to see a large fly hit the water than a smaller fly and this is one reason why the large stonefly nymph is such an effective top fly in a two-fly rig. It is simply easier to tell where it is in relation to the strike indicators.

Once a good cast aligns the flies and indicators in a current line, it is up to the fisherman to make sure that drag does not ruin the drift. Drag occurs when the fly line pulls or hinders the indicators from floating down the river. Remember that the current speed at the bottom of the river will be less than the current speed of the surface, so as the flies sink the indicators will need to be moving slower than the speed of the surface current for a good drift to occur.

One key to being able to get a good dead drift is being able to recognize drag. Obvious signs of drag are the indicators moving downriver faster than the bubbles or foam on the water's

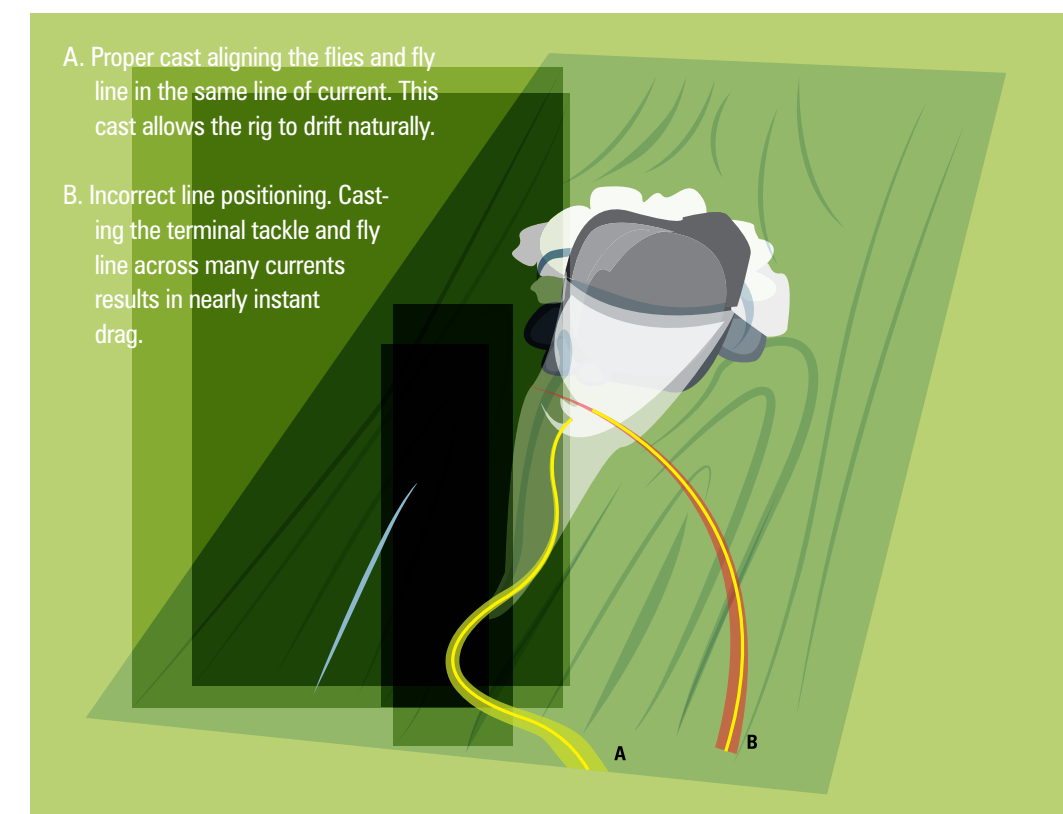
surface, or a vee or wake being made by the indicators. Another sign that something is amiss is when the drift begins in one current seam and ends up in a different one, or more subtly, a drift that begins out in the river away from the angler that creeps closer to the angler throughout its float.

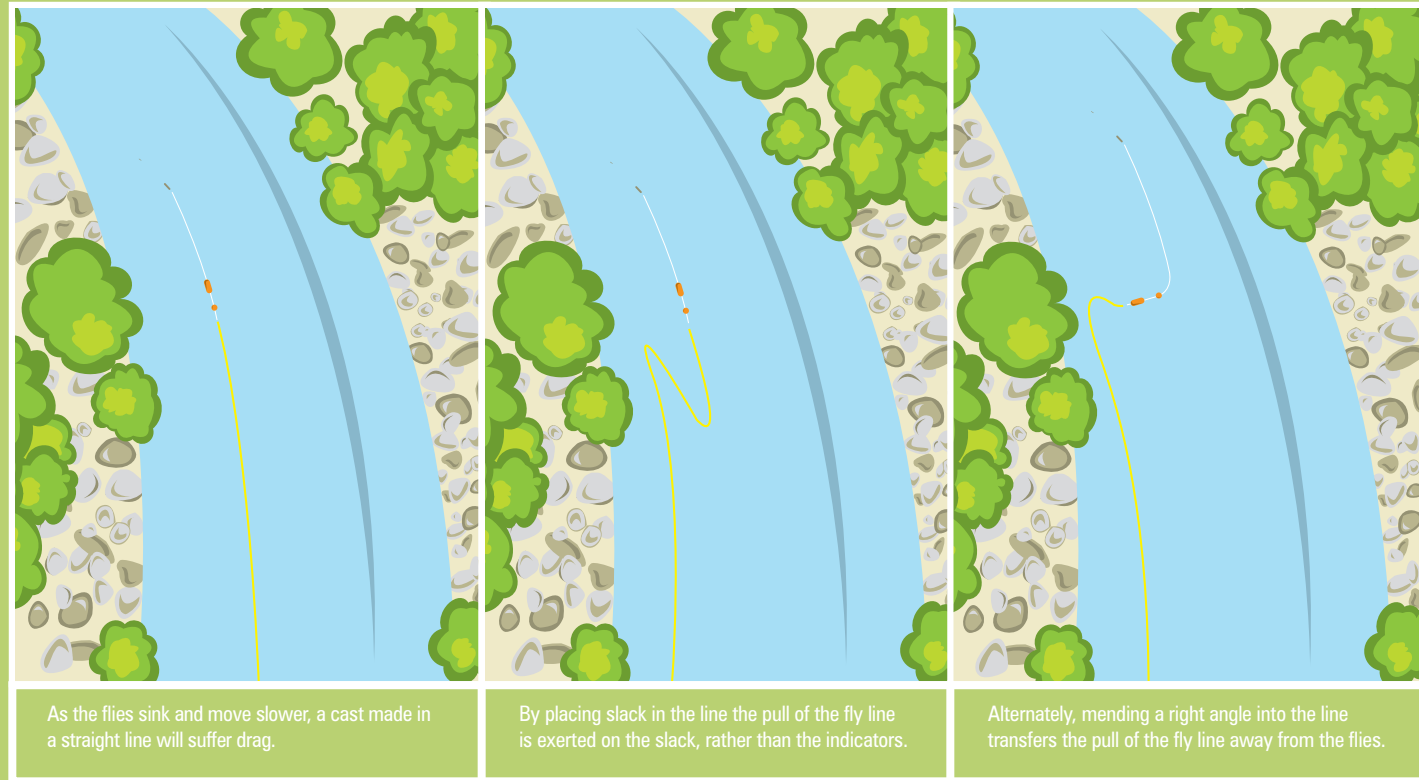
Line Control

LIFTING THE LINE (high-sticking) and mending the fly line are two ways that anglers can keep the fly line from interfering with the drift. They can be used alone or together. High-sticking can be a very effective way to avoid drag on short up and across stream presentations. A perfect high-sticking drift is easiest to achieve when the fly line is never allowed to touch the water. This is done by keeping the rod tip high at the completion of the forward cast. The rod tip is simply extended outward, held as directly above the indicators as possible and remains right over them throughout the drift. Remember to use your arm as an extension of the rod. With a 9' rod and an outstretched arm, quite a long drift can be achieved.

A. Proper cast aligning the flies and fly line in the same line of current. This cast allows the rig to drift naturally.

B. Incorrect line positioning. Casting the terminal tackle and fly line across many currents results in nearly instant drag.





As the flies sink and move slower, a cast made in a straight line will suffer drag.

By placing slack in the line the pull of the fly line is exerted on the slack, rather than the indicators.

Alternately, mending a right angle into the line transfers the pull of the fly line away from the flies.

High sticking only works when the act of lifting the fly line does not pull the indicators out of their line of drift. With short casts this isn't a problem, but when longer casts are made, high sticking becomes less effective. The weight of the fly line sagging between the rod tip and indicators can actually drag the indicators on longer casts. When this occurs, it is far better to mend than high stick.

Mending the fly line should always be done with the purpose of taking tension off of the indicators to allow them to drift naturally. One of the great things about nymphing is that unlike dry fly fishing, mends can be forceful as there isn't a worry about drowning the floating fly. Mending can be as simple as lifting up the line and repositioning it up or downstream of the indicators. More complex adjustments can be made by not only repositioning the line but also casting slack at the indicators to allow longer drifts.

All effective mends have one thing in common. The flyline must be lifted from the water before it can be repositioned. This is done by raising the rod

tip in the vertical plane above the water before making a horizontal movement to reposition the line. Again, using an extended arm will greatly help. Try to avoid disturbing or pulling the indicators with mends as this impacts the drift of the flies. Also of utmost importance is mending before drag sets in, rather than trying to mend a drift that is already dragging. Once drag sets in there is little that can be done, besides casting again and setting up the next presentation. Mend early in the drift, mend before there is drag and mend the whole fly line down to the indicators for the best presentations.

While there are many variations of mends, it is good to draw attention to a few that are helpful in certain nymphing situations such as when fishing upstream and when working narrow seams. A mend is often needed when nymphing directly upstream, most often in bank-side pools where trout would be spooked if the holding water was high-sticked from the bank. A longer cast is made, so the flies land at the head of the pool and drift back through the entire run toward the

angler as line is retrieved. The fly line lying on the water will eventually exert a slight pull on the indicators and flies as the flies sink and move slower than the surface current. A solution to this problem is a mend in which line is cast towards the indicators to form an angle on the water's surface, which places slack in the form of an S curve in the flyline near the indicators. The pull of the fly line is then exerted on this slack at the end of the leader, rather than directly from the fly line to the indicators themselves. Often this must be repeated a few times throughout the drift as slack is slowly used up.

Another helpful mend that involves casting line at the indicators will be useful when fishing narrow seams of slow water, such as rock slicks that are surrounded by much faster current. A tight line to the indicators would result in almost immediate drag. By casting slack fly line on top of the indicators, the pull of the current is exerted on this slack, rather than on the indicators themselves.

More traditional pools call for a very simple mend. Just lift the line

lying on the water downriver of the indicators by raising the rod tip and reposition the line upriver of the indicators with a gentle sweep of the rod, just like flipping over a burger on the grill. Remember to lift the line up off the water as completely as possible before attempting to move it upstream.

Some pockets can be difficult to get good drifts in and it may take a few tries to get the cast, mends or lifts done correctly so that the flies get a good drift. Trying to achieve a good drift in many types of water is what makes nymphing fun and challenging. Getting longer drifts in more difficult spots is the mark of a skilled angler.

Detecting Strikes and Setting the Hook

WITH A GOOD DRIFT and the right rig, fish will eat the flies. Recognizing takes can be tough at first, as the indicators may move very subtly. Takes are rarely felt as the slack that allows a dead drift makes it impossible to feel the flies being eaten. Watching the indicators at

all times is the first step to getting hook ups. Quickly setting the hook at any hesitation, unnatural movement, or upstream pause of the indicators is the key.

Wading anglers should always set the hook by pulling sharply downstream of the indicators. This has two big advantages over a traditional hookset back over the shoulder. A quick downstream set keeps the flies in the water. The indicators should move but the flies stay in the river. This keeps the flies out of any brush behind the angler and really helps to prevent tangles. More importantly, a downstream hook set creates a direct line of tension between rod tip, indicators and flies. Remember that the flies will be upstream of the indicators on straight leader when the trout's take registers as a hesitation in the indicators.

Many anglers pull upstream to set the hook once the indicators have drifted below them. This does little more than move the indicators upstream towards the flies, imparting

little or no tension on the drifting flies.

Conclusion

As you can see, there are several simple, easy to learn nymphing techniques that contribute to ones success while nymphing:

- How to set up a rig for the water to be fished.
- Casting a straight flyline that turns over weighted nymph rigs.
- Recognizing good drift and improving the line control skills needed to achieve this.
- Detecting subtle strikes and quickly setting the hook.

Once learned and used together, these techniques allow an angler to have great success fishing nymphs in any environment. By tailoring nymphing rigs and presentation to the shallow pocket water nature of the Madison and Gallatin Rivers, visiting anglers can enjoy more success and ultimately have more fun fishing these fine waters.

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