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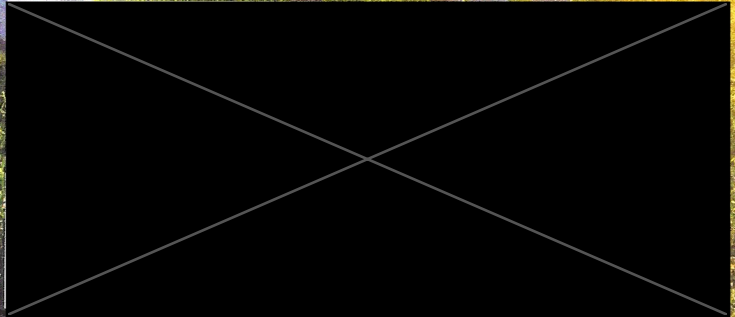
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A photograph of a man in a hat and dark shirt fly-fishing in a calm lake. The background is a lush green landscape with a dense forest of evergreen trees under a clear sky. The water reflects the surrounding greenery and the sky. The title 'Fly-Fishing 101' is overlaid in a white, cursive font.

Fly-Fishing 101

Explore a magical,
meditative angling method.

Story and photos by Dana Benner

I'm not one of those people who fishes for sport. When I fish, it's usually to put food on the table. If you're of like mind, you'll find that fly-fishing isn't exactly the most efficient way to make that happen.

But, I've found there's something mystical, almost Zen-like, about using a fly rod. When you make a cast, watching your line and the fly land like a feather on the surface of the water nearly seems like magic. Even watching others do it is enjoyable for me. Fly-fishing, when done properly, is like ballet, a back and forth between human and fish.

Despite that, if you're looking to fill the freezer, I wouldn't rely strictly on fly-fishing. Yes, you'll catch fish, but there are better means to feed your family. For me, fly-fishing is more of a way to connect with the fish, the water, and the surroundings.

In this article, we'll look at what you need to get started, discuss the importance of proper instruction, and cover basic gear. Fly-fishing is a long, curvy, never-ending road, one I'm still traveling. Come along and enjoy the ride.

Getting Started

The precursor to what we now call "fly-fishing" was documented in 13th century Europe, but fishing with "lures" of tied feathers was common among many of the Indigenous nations of North America long before the arrival of Europeans. It wasn't until the 15th century that the art of fly-fishing evolved, mainly as a sport practiced by "gentlemen" of the upper classes. From there, the method ultimately spread among the masses and has been practiced by all kinds of anglers ever since.

I became fascinated with fly-fishing when I was a young boy drowning worms for trout at a local stream. Somewhat downstream was a man with a fly rod, making cast after cast to a ripple around some rocks. When he did hook up with a fish, it wasn't a brutish fight, but rather a "dance," with each partner giving a little. Though I didn't start fly-fishing until much later, that image has always stayed with me.

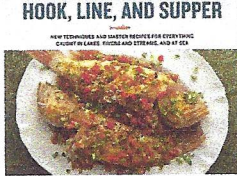
As with all outdoor pursuits, you'll need the proper gear for fly-fishing. This gear can get pretty expensive, depending on how involved you want to be. Many

people will rush out and spend hundreds of dollars on fly-fishing rods, reels, line, flies, and other assorted stuff, only to find that fly-fishing isn't for them. For that reason, I highly recommend you spend the time, and possibly the money, to take lessons. In many cases, the instructors will have gear for you to use, so you can try it before you buy it. In the long run, working with an instructor will be money well-spent.

I had the benefit of learning from one of the best fly anglers: the late Jack Hanley. Jack believed in learning by doing. After my first lesson, Jack took me to the coast of Maine, where he had me would-be casting for striped bass. At first, I thought he was being cruel, but I soon realized this was the perfect training ground to get my casting down. Unlike trout, striped bass don't spook when the line slaps the water. So it was here I learned the fundamentals of casting, striping line (pulling the line back in), and how to hook and fight a fish in (yes, I did manage to catch one).

Sadly, we're not all blessed to know someone like Jack. There are many fantastic fly-fishing instructors out there, so I encourage you to find one near you.

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Recently, while in Montana, I had the chance to work with a young man named Liam, the fly-fishing instructor at Bodhi Farms, located at the base of the Gallatin Mountains outside of Bozeman.

The very best instructors start off with the mechanics, and Liam is no different. He discusses rods, reels, and how they work. He also covers line (did you know that there are four parts of the line?), which is important, as it's your ultimate connection to the fish.

Rods

Rods, and their matching reels, are dependent upon the area you're fishing and the species of fish you're targeting. What's typical for my area in New Hampshire may or may not be suitable in Wyoming, Colorado, or Montana. Those used for stream trout are probably not the ones you'd use for bass or pike.

Rods are defined by numbers, with the lowest numbers being the smallest. For example, when fishing creeks and streams in New Hampshire, I may use fly rods in the #4 to #6 range. According to Liam, in Montana, the rods used generally run either #5 or #6. The larger the fish you're likely to encounter, the

larger the rod you'll need. For northern pike, I'll normally use a #7 or #8, and for striped bass, I'll use a #8 or #9.

Line

The first line on the reel is the backing, and if you ever get down to the backing, you're probably in a world of trouble. Next is the main line (either floating or sinking). After the main line is the leader, and finally the tippet. All of these lines are attached with a series of knots. Liam spends a good deal of time on the knots, as they're the weakest parts of the line.

The main line, like rod size, needs to match the fish. It'll also dictate where in the water column you fish. If the fish are feeding on surface insects, you'll want to keep your fly on the surface, so a floating line is what you'll want to use. If the fish are feeding on bottom dwellers, such as insect nymphs or crayfish, you may want to use a sinking line to get your offering to where the fish are.

Tippets and Leaders

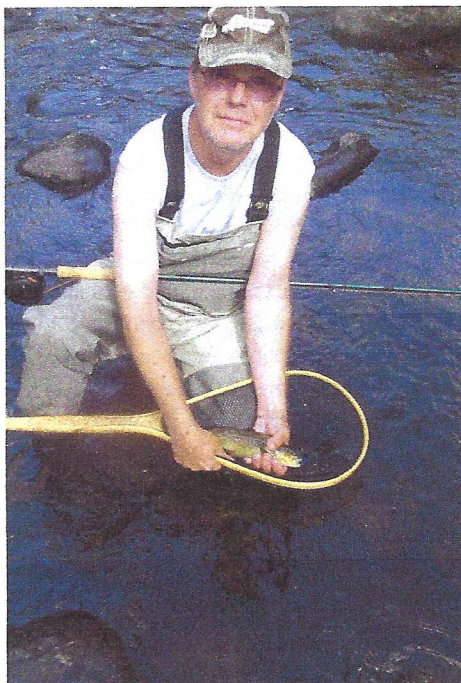
Simply put, the tippet is where the fly is attached, and the leader is what attaches the tippet to the main line. Leaders are stronger than tippets and are also nearly invisible. Many fish, including trout, have teeth. The leader will help keep the fish on so you can use the rod and the main line to bring in the fish to your net.

Many fish, but especially trout, are suspect of anything on the water. When presenting a fly to trout, you won't want them to detect anything but the fly. Tippets are nearly invisible, but also a weak part of the line.

Flies

There are literally thousands of flies, and, like lures, most seem to be designed to catch more anglers than fish. Flies are divided into **wet**, **dry**, and **streamers**. Simply put, wet flies mimic insect nymphs and other bottom dwellers, dry flies mimic flying and terrestrial insects, and streamers mimic baitfish.

Every body of water and its surrounding area has its own "special"



Left: The author with stream brown trout. Right: Using a fly to fish a shallow stream in Vermont.

flies. Without getting too complicated, what follows is what I believe are must-have flies for Northeast waters and what Liam considers the must-haves for Western waters. Of course, every angler is going to have their own favorites.

Northeast

- Wooly Bugger (multiple variations)
- Bead-headed and plain Olive Dun
- Grasshopper
- Clouser Minnow
- Elk Hair Caddis

West

- Zebra Midge
- Copperhead
- Wooly Bugger
- Grasshopper
- Caddis (multiple variations)
- Parachute Ant

With flies, there's no such thing as one size fits all. Sometimes, the big fish want small flies, so having multiple colors and sizes for each fly is a good bet.

Nets

Often overlooked, having a sturdy, hand-held net is a must. Remember that your tippet is the weakest part of your line, yet it's where the fish will be attached. Your fly will be hooked into the lip of the fish, so there's not much holding it. The trick is to bring the fish in close enough to allow you to net it. Again, it's all about timing and finesse. We all lose fish, it's part of the "dance," but you'll lose fewer of them if you have a good net.

Casting

Casting is where the art of fly-fishing meets the acquired skills. Casting a fly line is like nothing you've ever experienced. Where casting bait or lures is all about power, casting a fly is all about technique. You're using the physics of motion to get your line, and hence your fly, out to where you want it. This is where learning from an instructor really pays off. All the gear in the world is no

good if you can't properly get the fly to the fish. It's easy to develop bad habits, and a good instructor will help keep that from happening. I can't teach you how to cast in an article, so make sure you get proper instruction and practice.

Retrieve

Hand in hand with casting is the retrieve. Unlike other forms of fishing, the retrieve in fly-fishing isn't controlled entirely by the reel. Fly-fishing reels are meant to hold line. They're not full of gears designed to battle fish. Instead, the fly angler "strips" the line (pulling it back by hand). The speed at which you do this will be dependent upon the type of fly you're using, the fish you're after, and the water you're fishing. It's not until the fish is on that you'll use the reel to bring in excess line.

Remember that the key isn't to muscle the fish in. Doing so may result in pulling the fly free or the tippet breaking. If the fish wants to fight, then let it fight against the rod. If the fish wants to "run," let it. Just keep your rod tip up and some tension on the line with your fingers. Knowing when to reel in line and when to let the fish run takes practice.

Final Fishing Notes

There's no way anyone can teach you how to fly-fish from a magazine article. What I hope is that you'll be on the hook to learn more. Every fly angler, no matter their skill level, is always learning something.

Fishing, of any style, shouldn't be as complicated as the manufacturers and TV "experts" want you to believe. Fly-fishing is a method of finesse and grace, and it takes practice. It's a true art form, and like any form of art, the more you do it, the better your results, but you won't get better unless you get out there and learn from your mistakes. 🦈

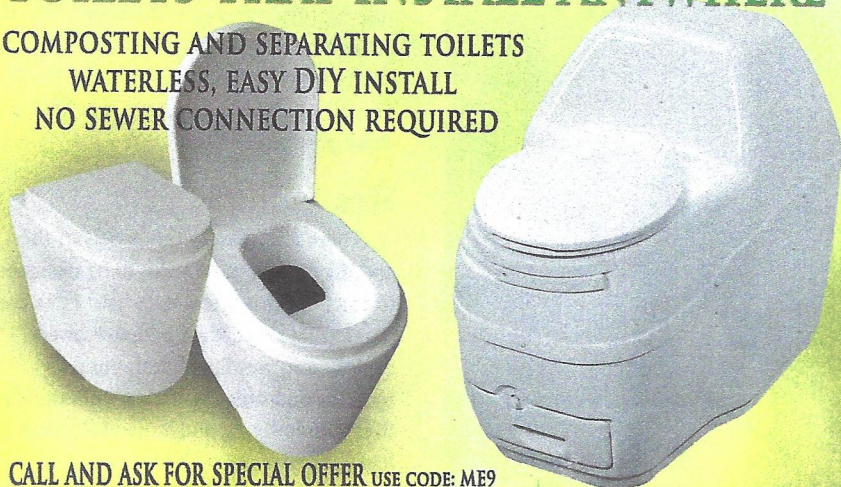
Dana has been writing about all aspects of the outdoors and sustainability for over 35 years, with his work appearing in regional and national publications.

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