

Leeches

By Beth Jappay



"Leeches don't bother me—I'm a lawyer."

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This past January I signed up for an Aquatic Entomology course given by [Rick Hafele](#) and [Philip Rowley](#). Rick has a PhD in entomology, has written several books and was a club speaker last year. Philip is well-known as a stillwater fly fisherman and a fly tier and is also an author. We had 7 two-hour Zoom sessions, most of them dedicated to a single category of insect important to trout. I was overwhelmed by the amount of useful information and wanted to have it on hand while fishing. I ended up spending 3-4 hours after each session creating a Google document consisting of the information given and incorporating screen shots of the best slides. Since I haven't done anything that intense since graduate school, you can tell how impressed I was. I am keeping these Google docs downloaded on my phone so I can refer to them while fishing this year.

This was their first roll-out of this course and afterward Philip asked for feedback and suggestions for future sessions. I let them know that I especially learned a lot from their videos

of insects' movements and would have liked to see more of that. After all, fly fishing (especially stillwater fly fishing) involves imitating not only the natural insects' appearance but also its movement.

For the past several months the fly fishing book I have been concentrating on is "Stillwater Fly-Fishing Secrets" by Hal Janssen. The information I so far have found most useful is **how** to best fish the patterns I have in my box, something I feel is weak in my skill set. So to deepen my understanding (and for you all's benefit) my plan is to research and write about various stillwater bugs and their patterns, emphasizing how to fish them and drawing on what I have learned from the Hafele course, Janssen's book, and other online sources. Last week I fished Hartland Lake (OFC) with tremendous success on wooly buggers, so I decided to start with leeches.

Leeches



These invertebrates are basically aquatic worms, are prevalent in most stillwaters and are available as food for fish year-round. Leech patterns are good searching patterns. Most leeches consume decaying organic matter; only a few are blood suckers. They take on the color of what they eat, so black, brown, tan, olive, and rust colors are the most productive. Leeches are sensitive to light. On bright days they tend to hang out at the bottom of the lake, mostly above a depth of 20'. On overcast days and during early morning/late afternoon hours they are more

likely to be found in shallower waters. They are sometimes found swimming freely in the water column, even a few feet under the water's surface; this happens more often during warm summer days, heavy insect hatches, and in the spring when they migrate from deeper to shallower water in order to reproduce.



Leeches have a year-long life cycle, and the baby leeches emerge from their cocoons several weeks after mating (early summer). Here is a throat sample loaded with micro leeches.



Micro leeches may be under an inch in size, but larger leeches can be several inches in size and can really scoot when swimming. Leeches swim by elongating and contracting their bodies and moving them in a sinuous, undulating motion; their movements are better duplicated by natural materials such as marabou, rabbit, and pine squirrel. Here is a [link to a video](#) showing a leech moving on a lake bottom, and [here is another](#) showing many swimming in a current.

When threatened, leeches will curl up in a tiny ball, which may explain the frequent “short strikes” many experience when fishing leech patterns. The best way to deal with a short strike is to pause the retrieve. This has the effect of folding in the marabou tail when the fly sinks, imitating a curling leech as well as giving the fish a second shot at the fly. When trout eat a leech it’s often a very slow and casual take, so be alert for a slow tightening of the line. There are broadly four different approaches to fishing leech patterns:

Floating line sinking fly method



Flies used with this method should be asymmetrically-weighted in order to reproduce the leeches’ undulations. Examples would be bead head flies and balanced patterns. If using lead or lead-free wire, start the wrap just behind the eye instead of further back on the hook.

If aiming to fish the pattern near the bottom the leader+tippet length should be ~1.25 times the depth of the water. A tippet size of 3x-6x is recommended, and consider using fluoro for the last 3' to disguise it. A loop knot will give the fly greater movement. When fishing near the bottom it is important to give the fly enough time to sink before starting the retrieve. Watch the leader closely while the fly is descending as fish will frequently take a fly during the drop (the leader should disappear at a set rate; if the sink suddenly stops or accelerates, then set the hook). Slow pulls of 1-3" with occasional pauses of 3-5 seconds is a good retrieve to start with, but try different retrieves if you are initially unsuccessful. While fishing, watch the end of the floating fly line or midge tip line closely. If it dips or the line straightens, set the hook by pulling the line towards you (strip set) or moving the tip of the rod to one side (a rod lift will sometimes create slack that will allow the fish to escape). Avoid a vigorous set as it will move the fly so far it will be hard for the fish to find it again. Do not wait until you **feel** the take before you set the hook or you will miss a lot of hook-ups. If there is a take but no hook-up (aka "short strike"), **do not** immediately retrieve the line to cast again. Wait patiently, then resume a slow retrieve. Remember which retrieve you were using that triggered a strike.

Floating line with indicator



This is a great technique for fishing the fly in the mid or upper water column, and typically works better on overcast days and in early morning/late afternoon. Use a balanced pattern tied on a #10 to #16 jig hook, and tie it on with a loop knot. Philip Rowley prefers gold, orange, and chartreuse beads. For ease of casting use the smallest indicator you can see (I use small beads on my balanced patterns so I can still use a New Zealand indicator). This set-up can be retrieved slowly with a hand-twist retrieve or slow strips, or

slowly trolled. A light wind/chop can add action to the fly, but I don't recommend this set-up in a moderate to heavy wind. [Here](#) is a link to an article I previously wrote about fishing with indicators.

Fast sinking line with floating flies



This is the idea behind booby flies ([here](#) is a link to the article I wrote about boobies 3 years ago). The advantage to this style of fishing is the ability to keep the fly close to the bottom of the lake without having to deal with a

countdown. The distance above the bottom is determined by the length of the leader (my leader is typically 2.5' to 4') and the speed of the retrieve. The best action on a booby fly is a slow hand twist retrieve or troll, or a slow retrieve with short strips. In contrast to using a sinking fly with floating line, when a booby fly is stripped it dives instead of ascends. As I discuss in my article, I experience more missed strikes fishing booby flies than any other subsurface fly fishing method. I attribute this to both the foam of the booby getting in the way of the fish inhaling the fly, and to the sagging of the sinking line and the "hinge" where the line connects to the leader. It is important to use a short strip set and to be patient to allow the fish a 3rd, 4th, or even 5th chance at the fly.

Intermediate full sinking line with unweighted or lightly weighted patterns

This method is a good alternative to boobies when the water depth is over 10'. Full sink lines have the advantage of keeping you in better contact with the fly, increasing the percentage of hook-ups. I most often use my clear intermediate "slime line" when I am targeting a depth of 5-12', but will also use my Hover line for fishing shallower depths. The depth of the fly is determined by counting down prior to retrieving when casting, or by the length of the line out and speed when trolling ([here](#) is the article I wrote 2 years ago about trolling with a fly). Changing the weight of the fly itself is another way to change the depth you are targeting. After casting, I immediately remove slack with a hand-twist retrieve to get in contact with my fly. I watch the line as it is sinking and will set the hook if the line suddenly straightens or otherwise acts unexpectedly. Both weighted and unweighted patterns can be used. Phillip Rowley advocates using balanced patterns in this situation (stripping a balanced pattern makes it pitch/jig, and the upward-riding hook is less likely to snag on weeds) and I plan on playing around with this combination during the coming year. A good retrieve to imitate a leech's movement is a series of slow 1-3" strips with frequent pauses; a 12" long and slow strip with a pause would be a good alternative.

Patterns: There are lots of leech patterns to be found on the internet, but here are some additional standouts:

The **Marabou Leech** (a Hal Janssen pattern) is a segmented tie of marabou. Weighting the front of the hook with wire wraps helps to impart an undulating motion when it is retrieved. Here is a [link to a YouTube video](#) of Philip Rowley tying this pattern.



The **Waste Troll Leech** is an intriguing [Philip Rowley pattern](#) that incorporates filoplume feathers from pheasant rump via a dubbing loop. He feels those particular feathers on a front-weighted hook give a very realistic movement. I plan on tying a few of these up for the coming season.



The **Wooly Buggy**. A basic and productive pattern that is an easy tie.



The **Simi Seal Leech**. This is one of my favorite patterns, and I use this tying technique for my balanced leeches. Denny Rickards' variation on this pattern uses a marabou tail and adds hackle (which would make it a seal bugger). Philip Rowley's favorite color combo is black/blue with blue wire ribbing—a color combination he calls “bruised”.



The **Bunny Leech** uses rabbit strips to achieve its wonderful realistic movement, but this pattern is typically difficult to cast without a heavier rod. It is a good pattern for bass, brown trout, and pike.



All of these patterns can be tied with a bright orange or red spot on the front—the “egg-sucking leech” variation. Both Rick Hafele and Philip Rowley tie their leech patterns on #10 - #12 (and occasionally #8) 2x - 3x hooks.

Leech patterns can also be very productive on slow-moving streams, so make sure you have some in your box!

