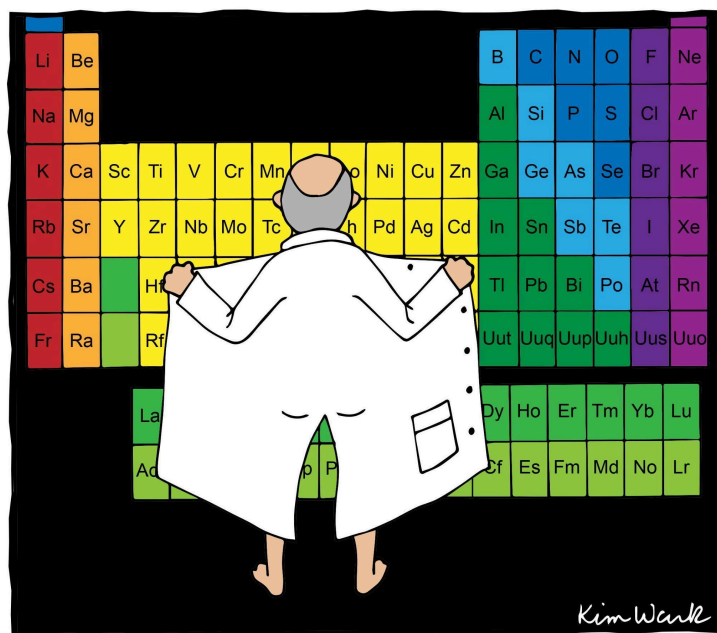


Naked Fishing

By Beth Jappay



Exposure to the elements.

CartoonStock.com

I confess, one reason I am writing about this topic this month is because I like the title and cartoon. “Naked fishing” or “naked nymphing” is a technique of subsurface fly fishing with a floating line and long leaders without an indicator. Typically the same flies are used with this technique as with indicator fishing (e.g. chironomids, nymphs, balanced leeches). It is mostly an advanced stillwater technique, but has its place in certain river situations as well. Inspired by reading Hal Janssen’s book “Stillwater Secrets”, I experimented with it quite a bit this spring fishing midge pupa on Blue Den’s lower pond. Some days indicator fishing seemed to work better, and other days naked fishing outperformed. I spent so much time trying to figure out why, that the owner told me he should put my name on that particular bench.

The goal with “naked” fishing is to ditch the indicator, so that casting is easier and fish are less likely to spook, yet still fish the pattern(s) close to the bottom of the lake (usually). It is considered the “go to” technique for targeting 15-25’ depths, where using indicators is problematic. The strikes are more difficult to detect, but on the other hand a fisherman who is skilled in this technique is much more likely to notice subtle takes while indicator fishing. The biggest trade-off is that it is more difficult to achieve a particular desired depth. The leader + tippet length can be as short as 8’ when sight fishing, but is more typically 16 to 22’. Such long leaders are tricky to cast, so longer rods, heavier-headed floating lines and a higher level of casting skill are a plus.

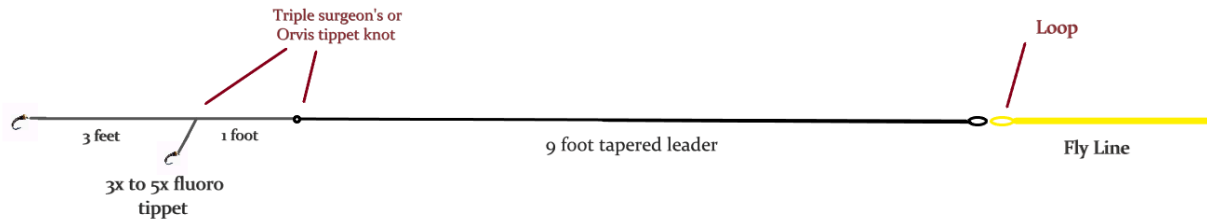


The leader

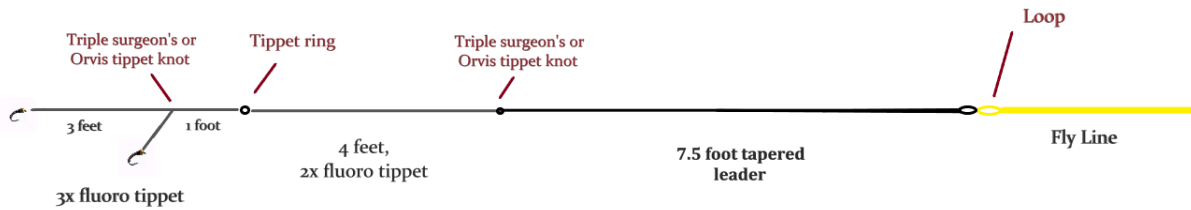
The most important consideration in naked fishing is the composition of the leader, which is instrumental in achieving the targeted depth. In researching this article, I have been having a dialogue with Philip Rowley. He has been refining this technique for years and was kind enough to explain his most recent thoughts for building his rigs. He prefers Rio's Elite Stillwater Floater fly line, but any line designed for indicator fishing will work. He uses a loop-to-loop connection to attach a store-bought nylon tapered leader, which could be 7.5 to 15' in length, depending on the desired depth. The tapered leader's butt section should be stiff enough to turn over the fly and allow the leader to unroll. Using a triple surgeon's knot or a tippet ring he will add fluorocarbon tippet so that the total length of leader + tippet ends up 25% greater than the desired fly depth. In other words, to target fish at a depth of 16 feet, the leader + tippet length should total 20 feet. Since nylon sinks 2.5 times slower than fluorocarbon and since wider leader/tippet sinks slower than narrower (think tippet selection in euro nymphing), when fishing in deeper water he will switch to a leader with a shorter taper and make up the length difference with 2x fluorocarbon tippet. As discussed in last month's article about indicator fishing, Rio's Indicator Leader has only a 3' tapered butt section, and he prefers this when fishing below 18'.

Here are some illustrations of different fishing situations and rig suggestions:

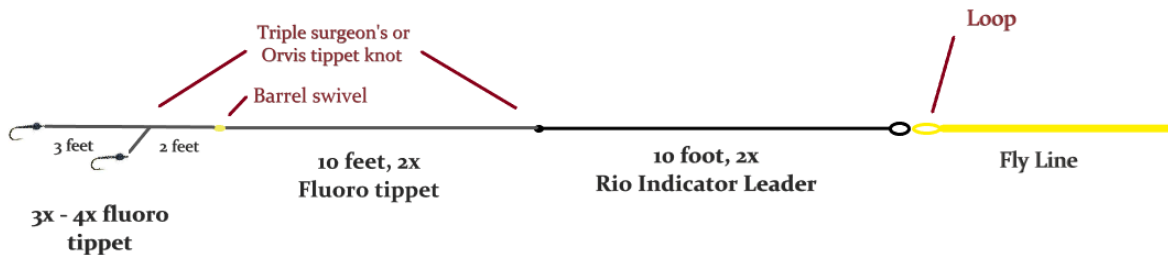
Water depth 10 feet, low wind



Water depth 12 feet, moderate wind



Water depth 20 feet, mild wind



The cast

Casting long leaders is tricky and it is easy to end up with piles and tangles. Here are a few casting tips:

- A longer and heavier rod is helpful (I consider a 10 foot 6-weight an ideal stillwater rod).
- The casting motion needs to be smooth—maintain a constant amount of tension and avoid the temptation to “pop” the cast (by breaking the wrist) to make the fly travel farther; this will instead cause a tailing loop and more tangles.
- Larger loops are less likely to tangle multiple flies and are best achieved with a wider casting arc—for example, stopping the back cast at 2:00 instead of 1:30 and forward cast at 10:00 instead of 10:30 (for a right-handed caster).
- Try to avoid too many false casts—they will only increase the likelihood of tangles. Limit false casts to only one or two and instead rely on shooting the line on the delivery cast (final cast).

- If enough line speed is generated on the final cast (having a good haul is very helpful) clamping down on the slipping line at the end of the final cast will straighten the leader and tippet.
- Long leaders won't cast well if they are limp. Limit fine (e.g. 5x or 6x) tippet to the last few feet only and consider using a tippet ring or tiny swivel for its attachment.
- Multiple flies are more likely to tangle when casting long leaders. Closely watch and count the splashes as the flies land (this is even more important when indicator fishing). If there are too few splashes or if they are too close together, immediately retrieve the line and check the flies.

The retrieve

In order to achieve the targeted depth in stillwater fishing, the flies need to be lightly weighted with a small tungsten bead or 5-6 wraps of 0.015 lead wrap. After casting, immediately pull in enough line to get rid of slack and get in contact with the flies. At this point patience is required to let the flies sink. Use a countdown, or even better watch the second hand of a watch (a typical countdown would be 30 to 60 seconds). Then start the retrieval with a couple of quick three inch strips. This often triggers an immediate strike. If it doesn't, start a very slow retrieve—for example slow 1" strips, or a hand-twist retrieve that swivels around one finger instead of the usual three. Watch the line to judge the speed—it should be so slow that it doesn't straighten a floating line's typical memory curves. If the fly line is creating ripples or a wake, the retrieve is too fast. A common adage is "if you think your retrieve is slow enough, cut it in half".

The take

Strike detection is one of the most difficult aspects of this technique.



If sight fishing, watch for a flash of white when the fish's mouth opens and set the hook immediately after it closes. Or if the fish visibly moves to the side or changes direction, pause for a beat and then set the hook.

Here is a great [Orvis YouTube video](#) that shows what to watch for when sight fishing and naked nymphing.

Other indications of a take in descending order of sensitivity would be: a straightening or dip in the leader, a straightening of the fly line, a dipping of the end of the fly line, and finally feeling the take. If a strike is detected during the retrieval, immediately strip-set, as this set only moves

the fly a short distance if the hook-up is missed (allowing the fish another chance at the fly). Continue with a rod lift if the strip-set is successful.

Fish will often take the fly while it is dropping down to the desired depth after casting. Closely watch the tippet and then the leader as the fly pulls it under. Both should disappear at a steady rate. If the disappearance accelerates or hesitates, set the hook by lifting the rod.

Dealing with wind

Lake fish will typically face into the wind; in addition, wind will affect a floating fly line. A savvy stillwater fisherman will use these to his or her advantage.

Low wind options:

- 1) Letting the boat drift with the wind and fishing [Loch style](#).
- 2) Casting directly upwind from a double-anchored boat or pontoon, then retrieving the fly by keeping a tight line.
- 3) "Wind drifting" by casting (from an anchored boat) 45 degrees upwind and letting the wind swing the fly to directly downwind from the boat (then retrieving the fly). This technique requires multiple small mends to prevent a belly developing in the line.
- 4) Casting directly downwind and slowly retrieving the fly.

Moderate wind options:

- 1) "Wind drifting" is still possible, but casting should be done at a less acute angle to the wind, for example 30 degrees instead of 45 degrees. The cast should incorporate a reach mend and subsequent line mends will need to be larger and more frequent. Longer rods and using a midge tip line are both helpful in this situation.
- 2) Casting directly downwind and slowly retrieving the fly.

Advantages of naked fishing

When should you "go naked"?

Sight fishing—success when sight fishing depends on line control and making a gentle presentation, a difficult task with an indicator.

Clear water—"educated" fish will notice that orange ball floating on the surface, especially when the water is still and shallow.

Skittish fish—even if the cast lands gently on the water, the sound and surface disturbance of an indicator smacking the water's surface will often scatter fish (and it may be some time before they return).

Imparting vertical movement—by stripping and pausing we can impart a rising and falling action to the fly that is not possible with an indicator.

Targeting fish under trees/bushes—if a surface indicator is going to hang up, take it off.

Deep water—indicators can block flies from sinking deep enough in lakes and deep river pools. In addition, landing a fish is problematic when fishing deeper than 12' with an indicator. Naked nymphing works particularly well at 14' - 18' targeted depths.

Still wind—when the lake's surface has a mirror-like appearance, the landing of or movement of an indicator is more obvious, and retrieving the fly will impart more movement to the fly than an indicator.

When indicators aren't working—consider removing the indicator before changing flies.

Sometimes fish prefer a moving instead of static pattern.

When indicators are interfering with casting—larger and heavier indicators in particular make casting more difficult and flies more likely to tangle. Wind will amplify this, as will using multiple flies (for more information you can check out [my prior article](#) about indicators and fishing with multiple flies).

Disadvantages

Control of the retrieval speed is key to this technique, as are concentration and experience.

Depth control is more difficult—depth control with naked nymphing requires adjusting the length of the leader, the diameter of the tippet, the weight of the fly (or flies), and the speed of the retrieve. This is quite the juggling act, requiring trial and error and experience (which is why this is an advanced technique).

Strike detection is tricky—see above.

Longer leaders are more difficult to cast—especially with wind. See above.

Requires a fixed casting platform—absolute control of the retrieval speed is key, so double-anchoring or casting from shore is important (unless fishing loch style)..

If you are interested in learning more about this technique, I highly recommend [this](#) YouTube video of Phil Rowley's discussion during an advanced online chironomid course.

Want to try something new when fly fishing? Consider going “naked”!