

Line to Line Knots

By Beth Jappay



Visualize...last month:

I have been staring at my indicator for over 2 hours without success. Fortunately, my Audiobook is interesting-enough that I haven't been truly bored. Every minute or so I take a quick look around, looking for nervous water. I eventually spot surface disturbances indicating a large pod of fish heading my way. I recast my rig ahead of their anticipated route, and shortly afterward my indicator dips. I quickly set the hook and an enormous fish immediately performs a cartwheel 3' above the surface of the water, then takes off. The pile of line in my stripping apron (fortunately) doesn't tangle as it is yanked into the guides, and shortly afterward I am almost into my backing. Unable to use too much force (due to very light tippet) it takes me about 15 minutes to successfully land the 10 lb, 28" native rainbow trout.



I love Klamath Lake!

If you have been following my column for a while you have previously heard about my Klamath Lake experiences. I try to spend a few weeks there every summer. The fishery is remarkable for large (but spooky) native trout, and the most successful fly fishermen are comfortable distance-casting indicator rigs with long leaders and light tippet. The lake is large and shallow and the fish grow rapidly due to abundant food. In the summer months they will retreat up the Williamson or Wood Rivers, or congregate at shoreline cold springs to escape the warming of the lake. Since the fish are large and travel in pods, and since the lake is shallow it has the most obvious and abundant examples of nervous water that I have ever come across.

What is nervous water?

When fish are swimming their tails move water. When fish are large or numerous and are not too deep there is often a visible surface disturbance. Spotting nervous water requires experience and is one of the most important tools I have in my stillwater toolbox. Sometimes (like last month) I even look for nervous water prior to every cast. If I were to give an estimate, I would say this skill accounts for 20-40% of my successes. When fishing with others I will make an effort to point it out (I love teaching), but it is not something I have written much about as it is difficult to describe with the written word or demonstrate with still photography. However, last month I was seeing such wonderful examples and had video recording equipment in my RV...so I decided to capture what I was seeing and try something new with my writing. What a great opportunity to first describe what to look for and then show it visually!

Absent river turbulence or heavy wind all fishermen can spot a rise ring or splashy rise, but the experienced fisherman will also look for more subtle signs than can be obviously seen in the absence of rising fish. When looking for nervous water, what to watch for depends on the condition of the surface of the water. The easiest situation is when the water's surface is still, such as a windless day on a lake or a slick stretch of a river, when ripples in a reflection are more obvious. It is often assumed such ripples are due to the wind, but if the ripples are *localized* within a stretch of shoreline they are not due to wind. My first video clip starts with the easiest nervous water to identify—ripples in a mirror-like water surface. It also shows a large pod of big fish (big fish cause larger and slower waves) moving in a directional manner. Additionally it discusses how to distinguish nervous water from waterfowl ([link](#)).

Spotting nervous water when dealing with wind is more difficult but can be incredibly rewarding. I enjoy fishing in mild to moderate wind as fish are less spooked and more likely to bite. The trick is to look for patches of water with bigger or smaller waves. If you look closely you can see that waves from fish 'beat' at a different frequency than waves from wind. [Here](#) is a clip that shows examples of nervous water under various light and medium wind conditions.

I always look for evidence of fish around a structure such as a rock or a dock. This can get tricky, since waves generated from wind or passing boats can create a reflection off of the structure that can mimic nervous water. In this situation the idea is to look for waves that change over time or differ from nearby similar structures.

Klamath Lake has cold springs entering the lake along the eastern shoreline, and the fish will spend much of their daylight time underneath one or another of the docks along the shoreline. The pods of big fish will move from one dock to the next, so I constantly scan for nervous water in order to pick which dock to fish in front of. This [next clip](#) shows examples of what I look for.

Fish can be startled and stirred up by birds, boats, and bad casting, so often pods of fish can be spotted moving away from these sources. Therefore scanning wakes from boats and closely observing water around birds can be productive. Differentiating nervous water from waterfowl can be tricky; more than once I have thought I spotted a pod of fish only to be disappointed by a resurfacing duck. [Here](#) are a few examples of moving nervous water.

Another of my favorite fisheries is Pyramid Lake, where the fall fishing is all about spotting schools of Tui Chub and stripping streamers through them. These "bait balls" can sometimes be spotted by looking for feeding pelicans or seagulls. They can also be inferred by spotting surface slashing of the big Lahontan cutthroat. I have occasionally noticed bait balls as a big cloud on my fish finder. However, schools of smaller fish that are feeding on the surface of the water create a characteristic type of nervous water. In this situation the generated waves are smaller, and the rise rings are smaller as well. [Here](#) is a clip I made after spotting a large pod of yellow perch, which are a similar size to Tui Chub.



Hopefully I have now convinced you of the value of learning to spot nervous water. The first step is to be aware of the phenomenon. The next step is to actively search for it in a variety of situations. A great way to train yourself to spot nervous water is by looking for rising fish, then paying attention to the water disturbance surrounding those rises. Once you are comfortable spotting it, I recommend routinely scanning for nervous water when deciding where to cast or to anchor up.