

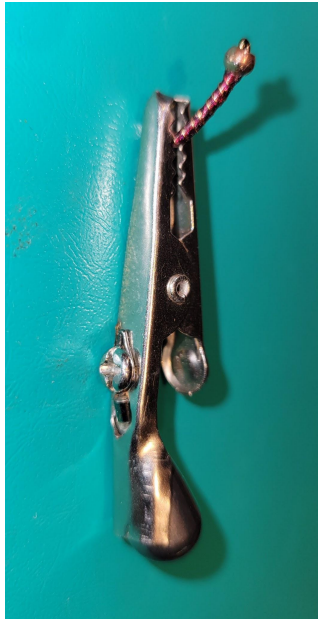
Indicator Fishing

By Beth Jappay

I had other plans for this month's article, but when Brian Chan's excellent presentation last month was marred by equipment malfunction, we missed out on his dialogue on indicator fishing. More than one club member subsequently expressed his disappointment or had questions about indicators for me. My last article about indicators was three years ago and I have acquired a lot of new information and experience since that time, so I decided to write an updated article focused on stillwater indicator fishing. Only after the article was completed did I learn that the YouTube recording did have that audio! The most helpful information I found online was in a couple of [Phil Rowley YouTube videos](#) (I am using some of his slides), and Brian and Phil collaborate quite a bit.

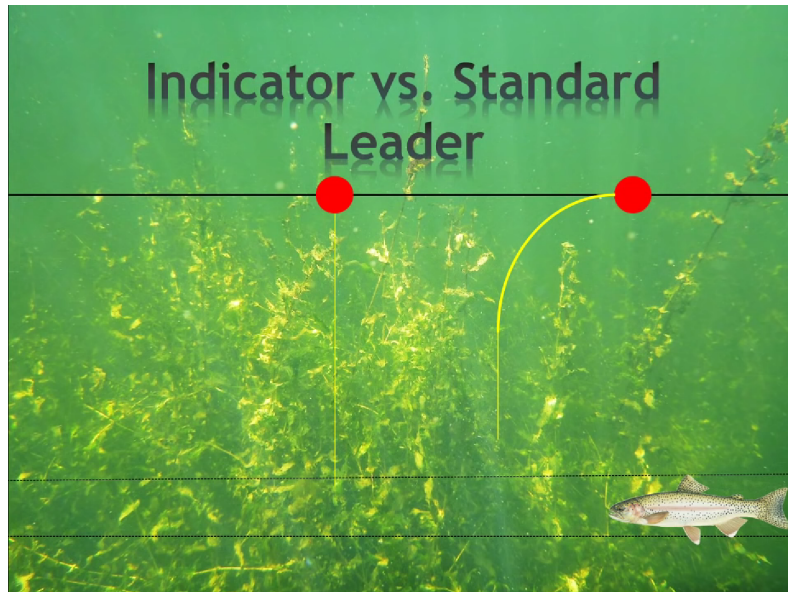
Setting the depth

In stillwater fishing one of the most important determinants for success is getting the fly to the right depth, and using an indicator is one of the simplest and most effective ways to achieve this. They work best for depths up to 15', making it simple to fish in this range without employing count-downs and multiple full-sink lines. Absent a hatch with surface activity, experienced stillwater fishermen will start off trying to place their fly about 12 - 18" above the weeds or lake bottom. There are a couple of ways to determine what depth to target, and the easiest is with a depth finder, which also has the advantage of seeing if there are fish in the area. Another common method is to clamp a hemostat or forceps onto the point fly and lower it until it lands on the bottom, and then clamp the indicator a foot or so below where the leader then exits the water. I recommend using inexpensive forceps if you use this method. Phil demonstrates this technique in the above link.

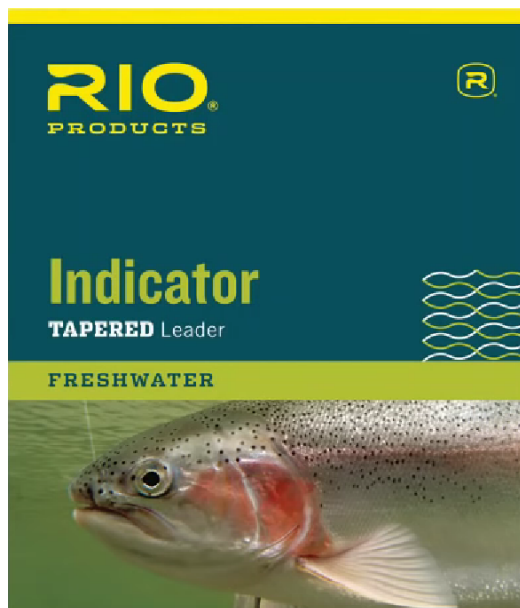


I like using a weighted alligator clip, an idea I picked up from the Ernie Gulley talk a couple of years ago. I bought a pair of electronic alligator clips at a hardware store and a pair of ½ oz. tungsten bullet weights from Amazon. I opened up the wire of the weight and the end of the alligator clip, then used the clip's screws to secure the bullet weight. I keep one in my pocket when fishing lakes. Clamping the fly **across** the bend of the hook is the most secure.

The leader



Unlike dry fly fishing where a tapered leader assists in turning over the fly, with indicator fishing tapered leaders should be avoided. Having a taper where the indicator is attached will make it difficult to adjust the depth, and having a taper below the indicator interferes with keeping a direct connection between the fly and the indicator as the curve in the line that results from a tapered leader will raise the fly above the intended depth and interfere with strike detection.

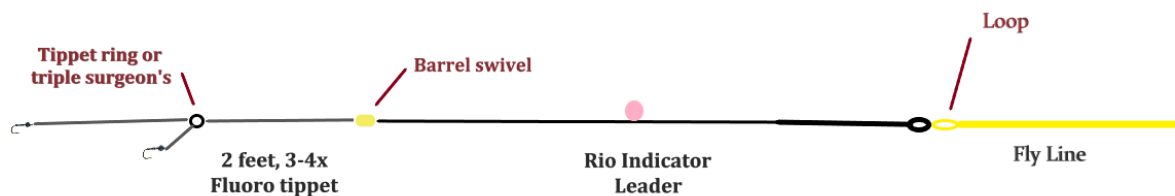


Both Phil and Brian Rowley advocate using Indicator leaders. Rio's product is 10' long, has thicker diameter nylon at the loop (which protects the fly line's loop), and a 3' tapered butt section that assists in turning over the leader. The rest of the leader is level and is available in 5 sizes—2x to 6x. Scientific Anglers has a similar product that is 12' long and is available in 3x and 4x.

Rig Examples, shallow and medium depth

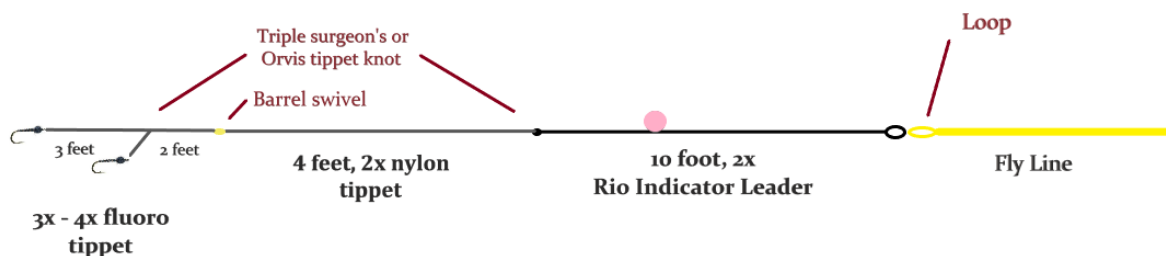
For shallower depths attach a barrel swivel to the indicator leader, then 2' of fluoro tippet to the first fly.

Targeted depth 5-10 feet



For mid-depth water, keep the distance between the barrel swivel and first fly constant, and make up the difference with varying length of 2x nylon tippet.

Targeted depth 10-15 feet



Non-slip indicator options

Here are some common indicators for fishing shallow areas (under 12').



Thingamabobber

Pros—inexpensive, easy to put on

Cons—tends to kink the leader. Slips on thinner leader.



Jam-Stop Thingamabobber

Pros—less likely to slip

Cons—tends to kink the leader, sometimes hard to put on



Air Lock

Pros—Somewhat easier to cast and more sensitive detection compared to Thingamabobber. Can be configured to slide on the leader for fishing over 10'. Biodegradable.

Can be configured to a 90 degree angle.

Cons—easy to drop/lose pieces. Heavy when casting.



Oros

(this is Brian Chan's favorite fixed indicator)

Pros—light, easy to cast, easy to apply

Cons—harder to see, can't suspend heavier flies



New Zealand Indicator

(this is my go-to indicator)

Pros—Very easy to cast. Lands with the least splash and therefore less likely to spook fish. Can detect more subtle takes. Can slip through guides for fishing depths over 10'.

Cons—Wool often gets waterlogged and has to be dried or changed. Can't suspend heavier flies.

Indicator distance

Most rigs are easier to cast if the indicator is closer to the end of the fly line. This is particularly true on windy days and when fishing at over 15' of depth. However some spooky and educated fish will not take a fly when the fly line is too close to the indicator, something I learned from Benson on Klamath Lake. There I was most successful when I placed the indicator 10-12' away from the end of the fly line (it is possible to cast this rig with a New Zealand indicator).

The cast

Not only are indicators more difficult to cast but we often fish them with 2 or 3 flies, increasing the likelihood of tangling. The situation is even worse when longer leaders are used. Large loops are the key to casting these rigs. Here are some casting tips that will result in fewer tangles and a much more enjoyable day:

- A longer and heavier rod is helpful for both casting and subsequent mending (I consider a 10 foot 6-weight an ideal stillwater rod).
- Larger loops are less likely to tangle the indicator (especially with multiple flies) and are best achieved with a wider casting arc—for example, stopping the back cast at 1:30 instead of 1:00 for a right-handed caster.
- Both the roll cast and the [Belgian cast](#) are good wide-loop choices.
- 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.
- Try to avoid too many false casts—they will only increase the likelihood of tangles. Limit false casts to only one or two.
- Closely watch and count the splashes as the indicator and flies land. If there are too few splashes or if they are too close together, immediately retrieve the line and check the flies.

The retrieve

When indicator fishing it is important to maintain a good connection between the rod and the indicator. The wind or current can move the indicator closer, and a constant hand-twist retrieve may be needed. More commonly wind and/or current will cause a belly in the line requiring small, frequent mends. Otherwise there are three main choices for a “retrieve”:

- 1) Let it sit
- 2) A slow hand-twist retrieve, or
- 3) A medium-speed 8-12” pull with long pauses.

I recommend experimenting with all three on every outing—often the fish will have a strong preference for one, though this can change just hours later.

The take

I have watched videos of fish sucking in and quickly spitting out flies without any visible movement to the indicator, something that becomes more likely as the leader lengthens. Quickly lifting the rod is key for setting the hook (the rod lift should be similar to a back cast). Watch for any unnatural movement of the indicator, which could be as subtle as a slight dip or moving sideways to the wind. Remember...hook sets are free, so when in doubt, set the hook!

Dealing with wind

A small amount of wind is very desirable when indicator fishing, as it will impart a life-like movement to the flies and can help the flies cover a larger volume of water. It also helps to hide trout from predators, and they will feel more comfortable taking a fly. On the flip side, stronger winds can excessively push both the indicator and fly line. Keeping in mind that lake fish will typically face into the wind, a savvy stillwater fisherman will use wind 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 using a hand-twist retrieve to keep a tight line (this technique has the most natural drift).

- 3) "Wind drifting" by casting (from a double-anchored boat) 45 degrees above directly downwind, and letting the wind swing the fly to directly below the boat. 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:

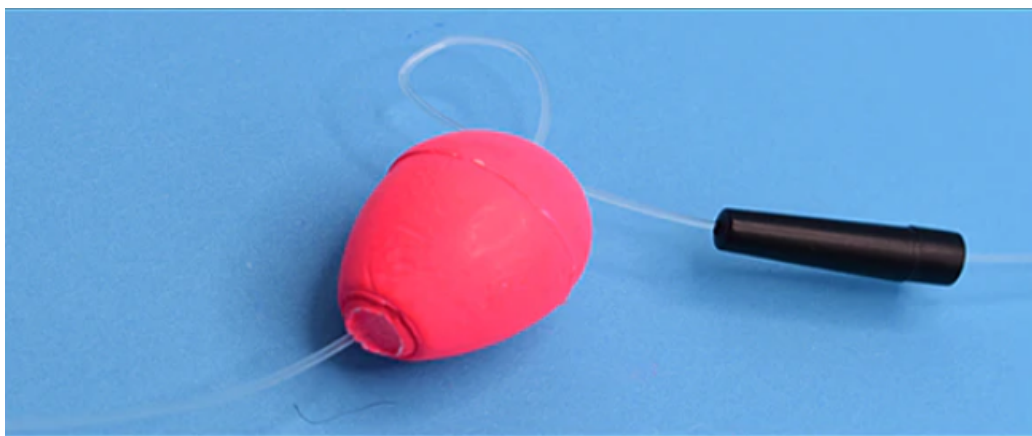
- 1) [Loch style](#) fishing can still be done with an underwater parachute or "drove" to slow down the drift.
- 2) "Wind drifting" is still possible, but casting should be done at a less acute angle to the wind, for example 30 degrees from downwind instead of 45 degrees. The cast should incorporate a reach mend and subsequent line mends will need to be larger and more frequent. Both longer rods and switching to a midge tip line are helpful in this situation.
- 3) Casting directly downwind and slowly retrieving the fly.

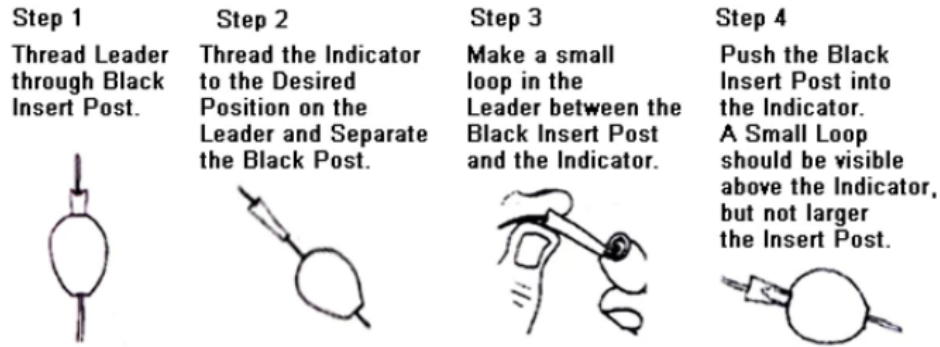
When winds are more severe, I switch to a full-sink line (and often have to leave the water shortly thereafter due to motion sickness).

Deep water indicator fishing

It is very difficult to land a fish when the distance between the fly and the indicator exceeds the length of the rod. I usually get around this by carefully reeling my New Zealand indicator up through the guides. On the downside, sometimes I end up excessively tiring the fish, and this indicator will not work with heavier flies or when adding shot.

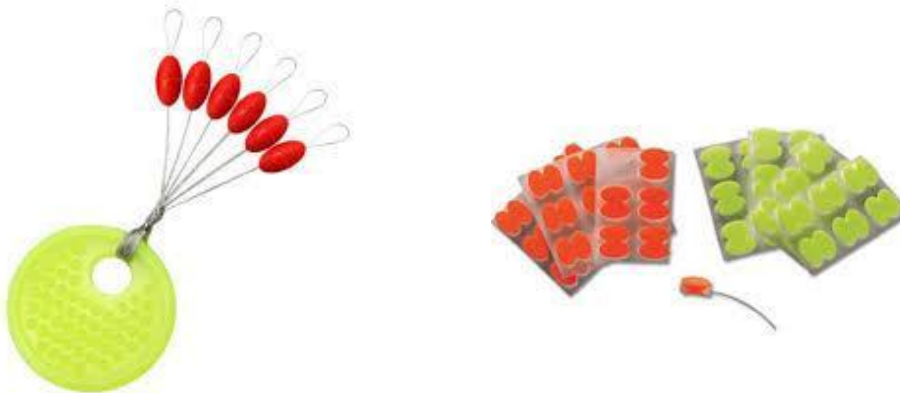
Ernie Gulley (in his 2021 talk) advocated carefully adjusting an Air Lock indicator so that once it was reeled up to the rod tip, further reeling pressure would slide it down the leader. Both Phil Rowley and Brian Chan (and most stillwater fishermen) use a quick-release or slip-strike indicator in this situation:





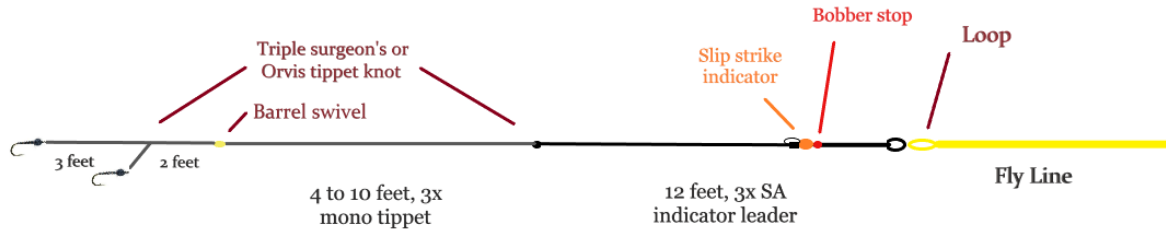
Both this type of indicator and the very long leaders used in this situation create a host of new problems requiring new solutions:

- Strikes are both less likely to be detected and require a much quicker set for success.
- Nylon tippet tends to stretch, and a long length of nylon may stretch so much that this indicator won't release. Phil Rowley uses braid between his fly line and the barrel swivel. Brian Chan uses the rig below.
- The flies have a tendency to catch on the indicator's peg while casting. Threading the indicator so that the peg is facing the fly (i.e. upside down) helps this problem.
- Once the most productive depth is determined, it is useful to mark the line so that the indicator can be returned to the same position if it is deployed. Phil Rowley uses a bobber stop for this purpose, but I have heard of stick-on indicators being used as well.



- If the indicator is released by casting, it is sometimes difficult to detect (marking the line as above helps).
- These rigs are **much** more difficult to cast. It helps to keep the indicator 3' from the fly line and to not attempt to cast for distance. Roll casting is safest.

Targeted depth 18-25 feet



Advantages of using a [micro barrel swivel](#)

- Decreases tangles
- Adds weight to keep the rig straight
- Reduces peg loss with line breakage
- Bypasses tippet incompatibility
- Can act as an attractant (especially if silver)
- Sizes #12 (20 lb) to #16 (6 lb) are good choices for this application

Other deep water options

For targeted depths of 15 - 25', "naked" fishing is a good option, and will be the topic of my article next month.

For targeted depths over 25', dangling the flies directly under the boat on a Type 6 or 7 full sinking line is a good option.

In summary

Indicator fishing is an important arrow in a stillwater fisherman's quiver. Not only is it a great choice for the inexperienced or physically-challenged caster, in some lakes (like Klamath) and with some hatches (like midges) it will outperform other methods of fly fishing. Having trouble staying on task watching the indicator? Listening to Audiobooks works for me.