

Tactics for tricky trout

Never having had a sniff of a formal lesson before, **Roger Field** treats himself and hires a guide – or four. Magical waters, invaluable advice and a final tally of fish much bigger than hoped for make it a worthwhile venture. Photographs by **Jake Eastham**

IT'S June, the sun is beating down and I'm standing by the Itchen as Gilly Bate runs through her pre-fishing safety brief. I've been fishing for years but, apart from watching others and putting up with ribald abuse disguised as advice as everything turns to bird's nest soup, I have never had a formal lesson. That is about to change as I am to make four trips with four different instructors on four chalkstreams, all in the interest of improving my upstream dry fly-fishing.

And now Gilly, one of very few female guides, is warning me to wash my hands after handling a stockie as rats feed off their food pellets and there is a risk of Weil's disease, before scooping up a bit of river-bed and showing me the contents in a basin. That is one of Gilly's mantras: understand the fly life and keep changing your fly until you find one that works.

Next she checks my kit. Orvis' water at Abbot's Worthy, while not small, is only wide in one spot and she reckons my much-loved 9ft 5in Hardy Smuggler is over-gunning it somewhat. Her rod of choice for this stretch of catch-and-release water, where the fish are much spookier than most, is her Orvis Helios 8ft 6in 4#.

When it came to the leader, every guide was in agreement. While it is the cheapest part of the set up it is, in many ways, the most important. The money spent on expensive rods and reels is mainly designed to get that 9ft or so of nylon, with fly attached, to land and lie naturally on the water.

Each guide used a tapered leader as the best method of getting the fly to turn in the air and present properly. And, when the end broke or got shortened after use, simply added an extra 18in or so of new tippet. On tippets, some preferred the softer copolymer and others the thinner, more brittle fluorocarbon. Most were happy for me to use my "normal" 6lb Rivege Grand Max, although Gilly thought it too heavy and attached a 3lb tapered leader, assuring me that it was strong enough. She, and all the other guides, spread "mud" along the end section, which is critical to minimise line glare in all but poor light.

Armed and ready, we went fishing. There were plenty of fish, but they were staying deep.

Then there was a heavy rise under the far bank. I cast and dropped the fly in the zone and the fish took with an impressive swirl, and the leader snapped. I didn't stop ribbing Gilly for the rest of the day.

Gilly revealed that a surprising number of her clients only fish rarely and cannot cast effectively to any great distance. If you can cast farther, it will be to fish that are less used to seeing artificial flies and which will be more "catchable". If you cannot cast to these fish then one tip is to go to the far ends of the beat. Many fishermen never venture much beyond the hut, so these fish are often left unmolested.

The sun was bright and the fishing difficult until, after trying a number of flies, Gilly tried a French Partridge and then we were in the money. She told me – roll-casting to get at a fish well under a large tree – that being a girl, some clients don't take her seriously until they have seen her cast. Third roll of the rod and she had her fish, elegantly demonstrating why those clients are now dedicated to her.

FIRST CAST, BEST CHANCE

Then it was to a damp and overcast afternoon on the Dever, a feeder stream of the Test which is guided by Howard Taylor, for fish-stalking at its finest. If Gilly's fish had been volatile, these fish were so spooky that the slightest mistake saw them in flight. Howard's mantra is that your first cast is your best chance, so you have to get everything perfect. Once your quarry has seen the fly it will be less interested thereafter.

I learnt to cast well back from the water. He explained that while you might be stalking the bigger fish in the middle, it can be the unseen fish under the near bank that will notice the shadow of your line or feel the ground vibrate and run, scattering the other fish with it.

I was doing the right thing much of the time, although there were moments of laughable inaccuracy when Howard suggested that a bit – ok, a lot – more target practice on the lawn would come in useful. When it came to the strike and retrieve, I reduced him to growls of frustration. I wasn't lifting the rod sharply enough which meant that fish were able to spit out the fly. And on a couple of occasions I let the line slacken as I tried to get the fish on to the >



The fish at Orvis' water (right) might have been flighty but they proved no match for Gilly Bate and the writer. Gilly (left) is one of very few female guides



Looking at some of the river-bed contents in the basin



Strike hard and never let the line go slack



Howard Taylor believes that the first cast is the best

reel rather than play it by hand, losing four or five good fish. It is tricky enough to get these fish to take, so to do the hard work and then lose them is near criminal.

Nevertheless, I caught as many as I had lost using olive patterns and, on one occasion, seeing wasps by the bank, a home-made wasp pattern. Howard also uses a 4#, a Hardy, as he needs to fish as delicately as possible on these waters, but requires a 9ft rod to “clear” the fringe on the edge of the bank.

DOUBLE WHAMMY

Later, on the Anton – another feeder stream to the Test which is run by John Russell and Roxtons – Dieter Dent opined that a 9ft 5/6# was the best general purpose rod for most chalk waters. Lighter rods may be more delicate and fun but when the wind blows they can become unworkable.

As a guide who has, as he put it, fished everything, he recommends having two rods rigged up – one with a spinner pattern and one with a sedge – so, come the evening rise when replacing flies in poor light is too much for older eyes, you can swap rigs and keep on fishing. As the rain lashed down outside the hut we discussed the importance of being equipped for all weathers. Many of his clients, especially the younger ones, now favour climbing boots over gumboots. But as they head off in the morning into long, dew-covered grasses, their trousers are soon sodden. He approved of my solution – thigh waders which work as gumboots but can be pulled up when you want to crawl down the bank or walk through nettles.

With dry fly (the only weapon allowed) and the trout sitting deep, Dieter headed to the far end of the beat where he knew there were fish. And here, for the first time, I thought we were going to blank. Dieter’s favourite, the Yellow Humpty, induced follows and rises but no takes. My Daddies and Black Ants were treated with similar disrespect. I played every trick in our joint books. I cast while Dieter changed flies on the second rod: “Like double-gunning,” he grinned. Eventually he tried a slight, subsurface fly and we had the answer. Two fish on the bank and honour satisfied we made our bedraggled but happy way home.

CONSISTENT AND PERSISTENT

And finally John Russell came along to my normal beat on the Test, above Stockbridge to see what I had learnt. John reckons that the biggest mistake is to overcast, putting the line over the fish and spooking it. The answer is to fall short and creep the fly up to the fish.

If you want to catch a fish, he advises to look for a rise or a feeding fish and ignore those that are sulking deep in the water or that have been moved off station by your fly. If you want to catch a particular fish, then work on it. It is even possible to create your own “hatch” by consistently dropping one type of fly on its nose. It might take – eventually.

Driving home with a final tally of 15 trout I was left to ponder an observation of that day’s fishing partner. It wasn’t that I was fishing so differently, it was just little things I had changed – a new focus on having the right fly and the leader looking as perfect as possible on the water. The result – well over twice the bag I would normally hope for. I had my guides to thank. Charming, enthusiastic, and full of knowledge lightly worn, they also introduced me to stretches of magical water I could never otherwise have hoped to fish on. ■



Understanding fly life is crucial



Be prepared to change tactics



Little changes in technique reap rewards



Being able to cast farther means reaching fish that are less wary of artificial flies

THE FISHING GUIDES

Gilly Bate call 01264 349519 or email fishing@orvis.co.uk

Howard Taylor call 01425 403209 or email howard@upstreamdryfly.com

Dieter Dent tel 01264 810526 or visit www.holburylakes.co.uk

For Anton availability tel 01488 689701 or email john.russell@roxtons.com





TOP TIPS

- Check your kit before you go. Be comfortable and take waterproof equipment.
- Polaroids are essential and also protect the eyes.
- Use a tapered leader and cover the end section with mud.
- Your first cast is your best one - so be prepared.
- Never overcast.
- Cast to the active fish, leave the sulkers.
- Keep changing the fly until you find the one that does the trick.
- Any drag will spook a fish.
- Stalk the fish; it is too easy to clear a pool.
- Find the unfished parts of the beat.
- Be prepared to change tactics.
- Strike hard.
- Never let the line go slack.
- Ignore the reel.
- Bring the fish in as fast as possible.
- Change or recondition the fly after it has caught a fish.
- Early and late is best - both for seasons and time of day.
- Writer's tip: check the gamebook for what flies are and are not working.
- Spoil yourself and hire a guide.



Dieter Dent (left) eventually tried a slight, subsurface fly, which caught the two fish (far left) after much trying



John Russell believes that persistence pays if you want to catch a particular fish