

CHANGE LEVELS

ANGLING IS A GAME YOU can't lose, if that's any consolation. I mean, the trout may refuse your fly on ninety-nine casts out of a hundred, but you always get to try again. You might even catch a fish, in time, and the fish will never catch you.

Suppose that you have waded into the best position you can reach near a rising trout, made your best cast—and watched the fish reject your fly. There is a good chance that some vagary of the current made your fly drag. Perhaps you could not see its slight unnatural movement, but the trout could. The next step, in this case, is not just to change from a little gray dry fly to a little tan dry fly. Instead, pick a new design, one that fishes at a different level. Try an extra-high-floating dry fly or a near-surface nymph, for example. Either of them might let you get away with a little drag.

This is supposed to be fun, so experiment with the high-floating design first—the kind that drifts with the whole hook out of the water, point and all. The flies called variants, spiders, and skaters all float high because they use big hackles. Better still, try the fore-and-aft design, which has a tightly wound hackle at each end—small in the front and just long-fibered enough in the rear to cover the point of the hook. Trout take this fly with more confidence than the big, bushy kind.

The advantage of any high-floating design is mobility. When it threatens to drag, you can give it a twitch, let it resume a natural float, and twitch it again. You can even dance it over the water like a crane fly in a mating ecstasy. Trout may wake up and pounce. Unfortunately, they may also slash at the fly, miss it, and then repent their reckless behavior. Fish are not very adventurous, when you get down to it, and they don't want us to enjoy ourselves either.

All right, then. Try a near-surface nymph next. Trout feel safer assassinating nymphs. On my own home stream, easily half of the events that look like rises are really the tips of tails coming out of the water—a sign that the fish was tipping down at the front for subsurface food.

This is finicky fishing. You cannot get away with strike indicators, split shot, big hooks wrapped with lead wire, or any of that heavy-metal stuff. Instead, use a tippet 3 feet long and .005 inch in diameter. At the end, tie on an unweighted nymph in size 16, 18, or 20. A slim body of pheasant-tail herl or hare's ear almost always works, and you want just a wisp of

hackle or a few fibers of hair at the front to keep the fly from sinking too fast. Grease the tippet with flotant down to within a few inches of the end, but then soak the nymph in your mouth. (What's good enough for a trout is good enough for you.) Get the fly in the water a yard upstream from the rising fish, and watch as if you had a Scot's accent—verry carefully.

If the trout moves at all, or opens its mouth, tighten your line quickly and gently, because a violent strike will pop the leader. Do it right and you get to chase up and down the stream for 5 minutes after a fish that is trying to break your \$200 rod. All of us anglers agree that this is fun.

If you eat the trout, which is good for your health, remember to check its stomach contents first. Not always, but usually, you will find that a fish feeding on the surface was also taking natural nymphs that happened to drift by a couple of inches deeper. And because those insects were floundering, the trout was willing to accept an imitation that may have been dragging slightly—**DATUS C. PROPER**

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