Drift:

The right move between *back and forward casts can make a world of difference in performance.*

JOAN SALVATO WULFF

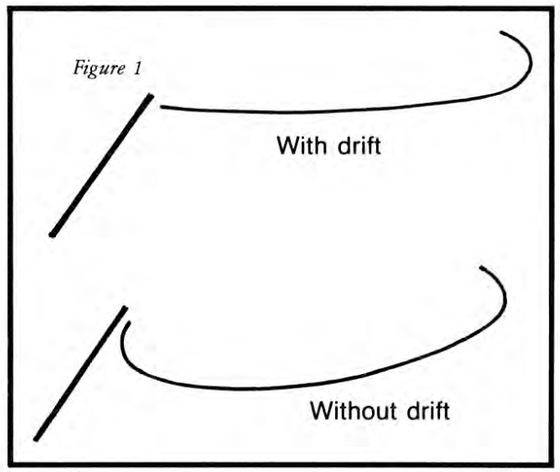


Figure 1

WHETHER WE ARE BEGINNERS at it or old hands, fly-casting adds immeasurably to the richness of our sport. It includes a sense of feeling that is missing from most other sports. In golf or tennis, for example, the object of one's stroke—the ball—flies away on its own. But in fly-casting the surge of power that we impart to the line can be felt even as that power diminishes. Some days we cast better than others, but every cast, every presentation of the fly, calls for precise coordination of eyes, hands and tackle.

The beginning fly caster is caught up completely in the mechanics of moving the rod back and forth, back and forth, striving to *sense* the timing on the backcast—even though he can't see what's happening—in order to deliver a presentable line and fly to the fish. With time his skill develops and he stops thinking about the mechanics. They become instinctive reflexes. If his mechanics are good, the beginner will develop into an accomplished caster with almost limitless capabilities, using his tackle to make casts he couldn't have imagined in the beginning.

My mechanics were good because of my tournament-casting background, and after making thousands of casts over the years, I suddenly recognized that the part of casting that made it so pleasurable was an unconscious motion *between* the backcast and forward cast. Within this motion I was able to feel exactly where the line was at all times. And I could change line direction without losing my timing. It was *drift*. I had been aware of its importance in tournament distance casting as far back as 1947, but I hadn't realized how much *drift* was contributing to all of my casting until I began to instruct and write about fly-casting seriously.

Drift is a move without power. It occurs immediately after power has been applied on the backcast and just before the forward cast begins. It is an integral part of backcast timing and fills the time during which most casters just *wait* while the line is unrolling. Drift is a *repositioning* that can give you perfect timing and increased distance and help you to solve the problems of presenting a fly under difficult wind or obstacle conditions.

If you can accept the notion that the forward and backward casts need not be made in the same plane, you are ready to explore the possibilities of this magic movement. To understand *drift* you must first understand where it fits into the mechanics of fly-casting.

Here, step by step, are the mechanics of the backcast:

Loading the rod: As the line is being lifted off the water and brought toward the caster its weight bends the rod tip. This is called loading. All of the line, except the leader, should be off the water in this first move.

Power snap: The leader is lifted off the water with a sudden snap of the hand and forearm—the elbow acts as a movable hinge, the wrist is nearly straight. This move is ended *abruptly* as the fly comes off the water. When the rod butt stops—*squeeze the rod hand to make it stop abruptly*—the tip flips over (the instant of turnover) to form the beginning of the backcast loop. Power has been transferred from the rod and hand to the line, and line speed is at its peak.

Drift: As the line loop unrolls, the rod follows through in the same direction so that the line's *constant* pressure on the rod tip can be felt. By being aware of this pressure the caster knows when to begin the forward cast. The rod/wrist attitude does not change during this basic use of drift.

As seen in Figure 1, a dead stop in the casting motion between the backcast and forward cast causes the line to sag next to the rod tip. This prevents you from feeling the pressure of the line. With *drift* the rod tip feels as though it is connected to the line. With experience you can feel every inch of the line as it unrolls on the backcast.

If you are a "dead-stop" caster and would like to experience *drift* easily, determine the time between the backcast and forward cast during which you usually wait. Now, instead of waiting, raise your hand four to six inches. You should get the "connected" feeling of drift.

JOAN SALVATO WULFF, formerly an international tournament caster, is a teacher, writer and fisherman who lives in the Catskills.

Forward cast mechanics are much the same as backcast mechanics. Loading is accomplished by moving your hand forward in a straight line. The *power snap* follows, and then what was *drift* on the backcast becomes follow-through on the forward cast as the line unrolls on the water. If you are false-casting, the follow-through is drift, because it repositions your hand and lowers the rod so that you can again start an upward backcast.

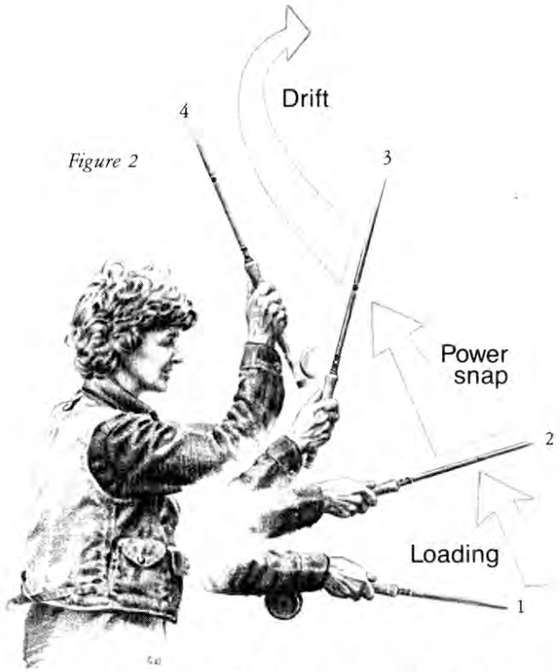
IN ADDITION TO THE MECHANICS of fly-casting there are three variable factors in each cast: stroke length, power and timing. *Stroke length* includes the loading of the rod and the power snap. It varies with rod length and the amount of line being handled, but the formula is simple: short line/short stroke; long line/long stroke. *Power* is generated during the loading of the rod and is transferred during the hand-snap in the same manner as power is transferred when a baseball bat hits a baseball. Power comes from your forearm and hand muscles as well as from the rod. The amount of power required depends on line length and wind direction. *Timing* is the element that puts it all together and makes it work. *Drift* ensures perfect timing by *feel* rather than by mental calculation. Timing, too, must be adapted to line length and wind direction.

Let's look at the drawings and diagrams of backcast mechanics when drift is used for repositioning. Notice that in the short cast—20 to 25 feet—(Figure 2) the hand and rod are *drifted* upward and only very slightly backward to follow the path of the unrolling line. In the longer cast (35 to 40 feet, Figure 3) the hand-snap is in a different place because of the longer stroke needed to lift the line off the water, and the *drift* is more backward than upward. A natural, slight backward movement of the upper body helps to keep the hand-snap from ending too far back and improves the angle of the line's path.

The longest cast (Figure 4) is different. Here we are picking up 45 to 50 feet of line and shooting as much more of it as we can. The forward cast trajectory must be on an upward angle great enough to allow a maximum amount of line to shoot before gravity and diminishing power end the cast. A haul is used to take the line off the water. The line unrolls much lower than it does in short casts, and *drift* takes the hand and rod backward. The tip ends up in a low position (see illustration). Line is shot *during the drift time* to get maximum load on the rod, and a second haul is made on the forward cast.

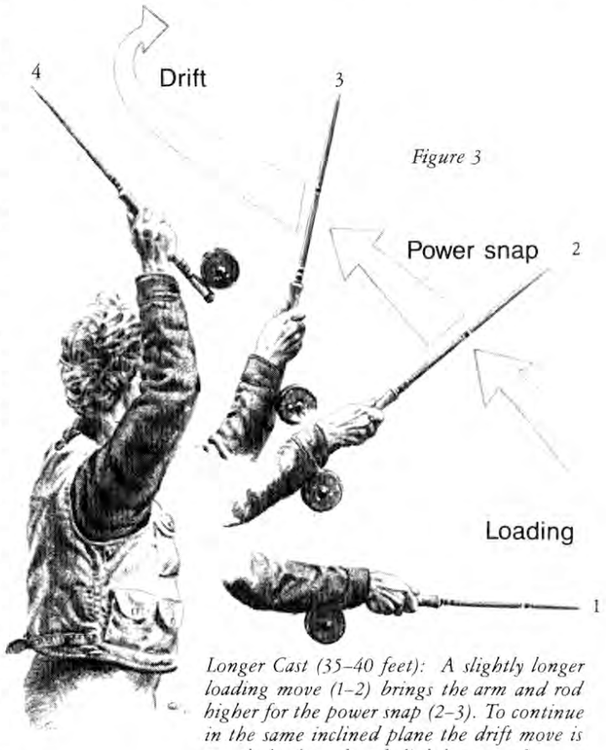
In each instance the forward cast starts from a different position than that in which the backcast ended—a better position! And it should *feel* like one. Drift will free your elbow from your side and give you the feeling that you can apply power smoothly. By starting the forward cast from a position farther back, you can make a longer straight-line stroke, during which you'll generate more power and build up more line speed than is possible in a shorter, more restricted move. When a stroke is too short, power must

Figure 2



Short Cast (20–25 feet): The backcast starts with the rod tip low to the water for the loading move (1–2) The power snap portion of the stroke ends in a sudden stop (3) forming the backcast loop and, while the loop unrolls, the arm drifts (mostly) upward and a little backward to reposition the rod for the forward cast (3–4).

Figure 3



Longer Cast (35–40 feet): A slightly longer loading move (1–2) brings the arm and rod higher for the power snap (2–3). To continue in the same inclined plane the drift move is mostly backward and slightly upward.

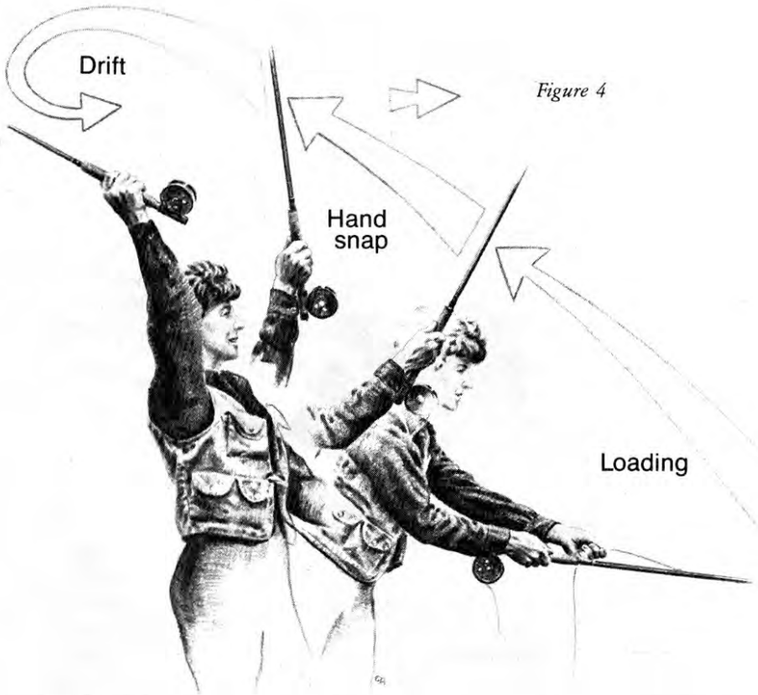


Figure 4

The longest casts: Leaning forward to get maximum lift, the body helps in the loading move to get most of the line off the water so the power snap, which takes it off completely, can be relatively small. During drift the rod is repositioned backward and downward so that the forward stroke can end at a high level.

Figure 5

Drifting sidewards when the wind is from the casting side can make the forward cast easier and the circular motion gives a feeling of completeness.

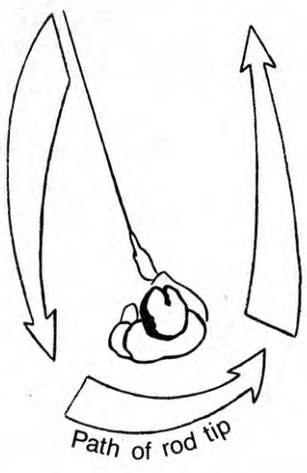
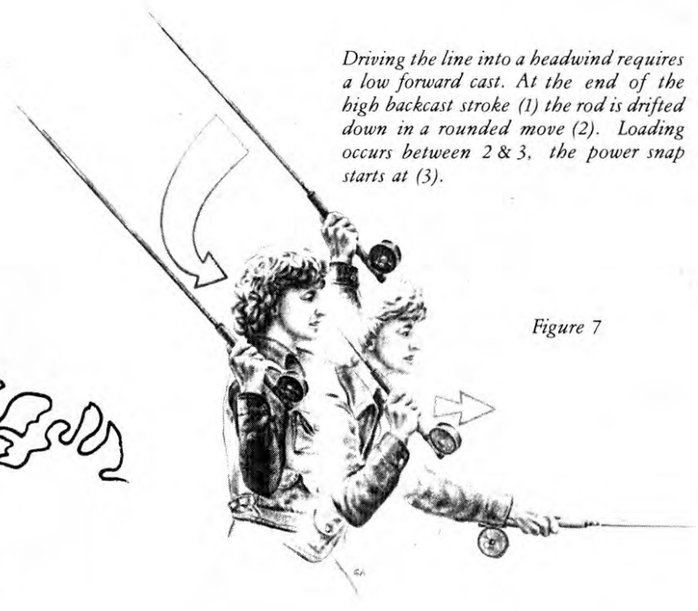


Figure 6

A sideward drift can shorten the backcast when obstacles such as these bushes are to be avoided. Arrows show path of rod tip, not hand.



Driving the line into a headwind requires a low forward cast. At the end of the high backcast stroke (1) the rod is drifted down in a rounded move (2). Loading occurs between 2 & 3, the power snap starts at (3).

Figure 7

Figure 8

Casting under branches

be delivered in a sudden punch that affects the form of the unrolling line and often causes tailing loops.

There are some variables that affect the use of drift. If on short and medium casts your hand-snap is made over a greater space than is necessary, you won't have room to drift and your backcast will probably be headed downward. The power-snap must be started and completed with the line moving on an upward angle, and it must be sharp. This is also true for long casts, even though the line's path will be at a lower angle.

On long casts the power-snap may be proportionately longer and drift may be relatively short. You also must recognize that you cannot drift into a rear wind. With wind from the backcast you need extra power on the backcast, not drift. Therefore, and also under rear-wind conditions, backcast timing is shorter than it would otherwise be.

LET'S LOOK AT SOME of the other casting problems encountered while fishing. The wind is blowing from the right and you are casting right-handed. You can make the backcast without feeling the wind's effect, but when you make the forward cast, the wind will have moved the line over behind you and you'll probably get hit with the fly. Many fishermen use a backhand cast but an alternative is to make your standard backcast, drift the rod tip to your left side (but still overhead) and then make the forward cast (Figure 5). The line will go forward on the downwind (left) side of your body. Move your hand slightly and keep it in front of your face at about forehead level. Keep the hand/wrist attitude static, and move the whole arm slightly to the left. The rod tip will move several feet depending on line length. When one move follows the other smoothly, the form of the cast will be elliptical: long sides and short, rounded ends.

A left-to-right drift technique can be used if there are obstacles, such as bushes, behind and to your right. A standard right-sided backcast will let the line come too close to the bushes for comfort. Bring the line in on the left, drift the rod tip to the right and make the forward cast. The line will not extend as close to the obstacle as when you cast conventionally. *Drifting sideward can help shorten the space you need for a backcast* (Figure 6, diagram from overhead —path of rod tip and path of hand).

The best defense against a headwind is a low forward cast. But you don't necessarily want to make a low backcast. Make a normal, upward backcast stroke, drift back and down, then drive forward with extra power so that the line will unroll just above the water where the wind is slowest and will affect the line least (Figure 7). Crouching the body can help.

Speaking of wind reminds me of Iceland, where 20-knot winds are common and you might be treated to several days of 40-knot winds as my husband, Lee, and I were on the Laxa Adaldal in 1972. One morning the wind was so severe from behind us that we couldn't make a backcast. We turned our backs to the river and, using our naturally more powerful forward stroke, cast *into* the wind. Then, during *drift time* we turned quickly back to the river and made the forward presentation with the wind helping. This maneuver saved the day.

Presenting a fly under overhanging branches can also be a problem, and drift can help to solve it. A vertical cast may unroll the line into the overhanging branch, so try changing your plane by turning your palm up and making an off-vertical cast. Make the backcast on an upward angle slightly above horizontal. Drift your hand and rod tip down below horizontal until the rod tip is on a straight line (180 degrees) from the target area under the branch. Time your drift with the dropping of the line. Put your eye back on the target, making a straight-line, forward cast from this low level, and the line will unroll parallel to the water and slip under those branches as pretty as you please—with a little practice (Figure 8).

THESE EXAMPLES SHOULD OPEN THE DOOR to experimentation. The nine-to-one-o'clock, single-plane casting days are a thing of the past for today's dedicated fly fisherman. The full sphere of possible motion can be used to solve casting problems. In order to make the best use of *drift* you must know the mechanics well enough to follow your sharp hand-snap with that magic move in continuous motion. Eventually you won't think about drift. You'll decide where you want to put your next cast and automatically reposition after the backcast so that you can do it with the greatest precision.

At our fishing school, when we gather for group portraits we don't say "cheese" or "sex." The photographer says "drift" and everyone *smiles*. May it do the same for you.

The Autumn Mayfly Hatch

DECEMBER 1983 $2.95/£1.25
14323

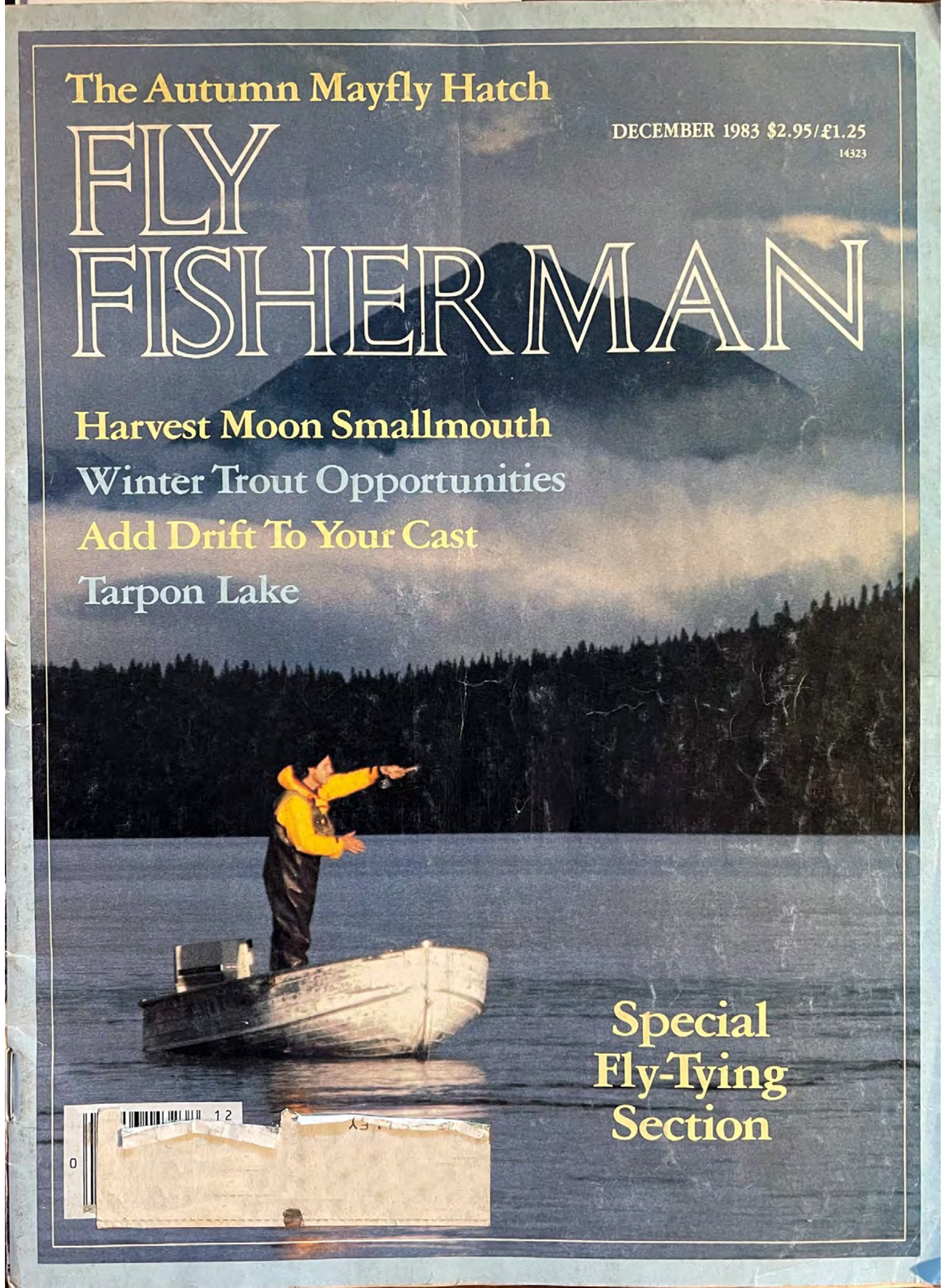
FLY FISHERMAN

Harvest Moon Smallmouth

Winter Trout Opportunities

Add Drift To Your Cast

Tarpon Lake



Special Fly-Tying Section