

Find fish comfort areas and learn to fish "the drop."



MICHAEL FONG PHOTOS

Secrets of the Summer Pond

MICHAEL FONG

SOMETIME AFTER JULY and into August, you can almost feel a kind of contentment surround a trout pond. Where earlier the fish had an enormous menu of food items to satiate an incredible appetite, a point is reached when at times feeding seems like a game. The damsel flies have almost all hatched, and as they flit and hover above the surface, rainbows and browns find great sport in snatching them from the air. As yet, no one has devised a cast to suspend a fly above a chosen spot, even in a moderate wind. In frustration, you may choose to use a dry of the damsel on the surface and catch a fish or three, but to call that success is a poor bandage for a wounded ego. Thankfully, there are trout around that are more serious feeders, and sometimes they prove to be the largest pond residents.

The Hat Creek area in northern California has much more water to fish than anyone would care to divulge, and much of it can be classified as still water. The members of the American Sportsmen's Club have access to

some of this water, and several ponds lie off Lost Creek, a tributary to Hat. Several seasons ago, I had an interesting afternoon on one of the ponds set aside for fly-fishing-only, but I use it only as an example since small ponds are abundant in all areas that support trout. This type of incident I have experienced many times on different waters and it illustrates an important issue.

It was late August, a good time to be in the hills away from the heat of the valley and the tourists that descend on the city by the Golden Gate where I live. I had never been to this pond, but the setting was familiar. Moss blanketed the shallows, and even in deep water vegetation reached for the sun and trailed long stems into the depths. The pink blossoms of the aquatic vegetation flourished everywhere and some had been faded by the same seasonal influences that had turned the carpet of moss along the shoreline a sickly yellow. After taking a few 10 to 12 inchers with small nymphs cast to deep water and retrieved slowly, it was plain to me that a fish worth

catching would not succumb to such an obvious ploy. It was time to play "walk around the pond."

The sun was almost straight overhead, an inopportune time to fish. With polarized glasses, however, I could easily see down through the surface for several feet, and by moving slowly and using the shoreline cover to conceal my presence, I could approach fish without being detected.

Halfway round the pond I found what I was seeking, all 23 inches of it, with a bright crimson stripe running the length of its body. Hiding behind tall cattails, I patiently watched to see if it could give me a clue on how to proceed. At first, it just rested motionless, but soon it began to move. The fish's swimming pattern was a triangular one, about 20 feet on each leg. Its path was deliberate, and I could see it open its mouth from time to time to take morsels. After several turns around the course, it sat still again, then it repeated the routine.

For this fishing, casting accuracy and the presentation

is everything. I like a leader of at least 16 feet tapered to 6X, or about three-pound test. To make the most delicate presentation, I prefer a #4 or #5 weight-forward floating line delivered on a nine-foot rod to clear obstacles in front (cattails in this case) as well as behind. I suppose you could choose most any fly with some success, but through the years a #16 Pheasant Tail Nymph has served me well, and it compliments the presentation perfectly. Its design is inadequate for swimming (it doesn't track well and often fails to remain upright), but it does provide an even, slow descent, and for this situation, which I call "the drop," there is no retrieve.

If the fish is wary, you ordinarily get one shot, but if you calculate correctly, that is all you need. Even with cover to mask your casting movements, never make the presentation if the fish can see the movement of the rod, for even the slightest reflected glare off the shiny finish can frighten the fish. It's best to make the cast when the fish is swimming away. In this case, the apex of the triangle was directly away from me, and once the fish made his turn and headed for the apex, I was in the blind spot behind his back. Placement of the cast was critical, most ideally deposited on the leg after his turn was made at the apex. In such cases the distance is determined somewhat by the speed the trout is moving. If the fish is sizeable, you have plenty of time because he will probably be in 30 inches to four feet of water, which allows for at least 15 seconds or more until the nymph reaches bottom and (if not taken) fouls in the vegetation.

Sensing the Take

EVEN IN THE BEST of viewing conditions, the take is so subtle that if you are not familiar with what to look for you may miss it. Two clues are worth a lift of the rod to see if the connection has been made:

1. Watch for the white inside the trout's mouth. The take happens so quickly sometimes that you must concentrate not so much on the fish as the spot where you placed the nymph. The trout can blend into the vegetation and almost disappear, or a momentary breeze can ruffle the water and obscure the flash. But if you concentrate, you won't miss it.

2. The second take is not so easily detected. Occasionally, because of the angle, you may not be able to see the mouth clearly enough to make a positive evaluation. The trout usually swims at an even pace on its patrol and the only time it varies its behavior is when it is frightened or when it sights food. You won't mistake the former, for you will surely experience it now and then, but the latter is straightforward. When the fish sees your offering or some other food item, it will generally pump its tail once or twice to catch the prey before it scurries off. The take always occurs after the beat or beats, when the fish is gliding. If, for some reason, you see the fish accelerate and then start coasting, you'd better set up.

If you've set up the confrontation properly and executed it well, the fish will be hooked and landed or you'll lose it in the thick vegetation. If the trout doesn't pick up the fly, do not make a pickup of the line until the fish swims away from you. Usually, you will have other opportunities if your first try was unsuccessful.



Float tubes provide the ideal approach on many summer ponds.

This time, luck was with me and the rainbow was finally netted in a ball of vegetation gathered during the fight. Although this took place on a small pond, the same tactics can be used on the backwaters of streams that sizeable trout frequent. Even if the fish is removed or decides to leave the area, another dominant trout usually takes up residence there.

For nearly guaranteed fishing success local knowledge of fish concentrations is the ticket. In a typical summer pond, the fish usually move about in search of food but always return to particular places to rest. Locating these places requires exploration, but once you find them, the reason for them becomes obvious—they are comfort zones created by underwater springs. To stumble onto such a place is like finding a pot of gold. Although the fish choose this area as a temporary "home" and leave to forage, they pounce on food items that fall into their living room.

Lake McCumber

LAKE MCCUMBER is a small reservoir located near Shingletown on Highway 44 that leads to the western

entrance of Lassen Volcanic National Park in California. In mid-summer, the lake becomes choked with weeds. The *Callibaetis* mayfly hatches are regular throughout the season and in the spring, the damselfly are numerous. The lake was formed by impounding North Battle Creek, and even with the original streambed all but buried under a layer of silt, cool waters seep from springs in several locations in the lake and where the creek enters. Last summer, I happened to locate such a spring, and it rewarded me with decent fish.

Because of the excessive weed growth that surrounds the perimeter of the lake in late summer, a belly boat is difficult to launch. To overcome this obstacle, my wife, Chris, and I often take a tube in our canoe and the one who will tube climbs aboard when we find a shallow

shoal. On an early September afternoon, I was in the tube paddling around looking for signs and finding very little. As I kicked along the edge of a vegetation line, the bottom began dropping away ever so slightly and I felt a definite coolness on my legs. A slight breeze ruffled the water and as I turned my head to see which way to go, I suddenly spotted about 25 fish in a little pocket just ahead of me. With as little disturbance as possible, I eased away from the spot and watched.

The midday mayfly emergence had ended an hour ago, but a few duns still drifted on the surface into the pocket, which measured about 20 by 50 feet. Without expecting to see much, I was surprised when a dun disappeared, followed by a large trout's back. Minutes later,

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Ponds and Lakes of Northern California

THERE ARE COUNTLESS ponds and lakes in northern California with productive stillwater fishing. Some of the lakes worth exploring are found south of Shingletown off Highway 44. Both Grace and Nora Reservoirs are artificial impoundments with big browns and average-size rainbows. Just to the east, on Highway 44 off Camp McCumber Road is McCumber Reservoir, a Pacific Gas and Electric Company impoundment mentioned in the accompanying article. McCumber has a small campground adjacent to the lake (a minimal daily use fee is charged).

Just inside the western entrance to Lassen Volcanic National Park, where Highway 44 meets Highway 89, lies Manzanita Lake. This natural lake hosts many fine insect hatches from late spring through early fall, and it contains browns and rainbows of substantial proportions. A full-facility campground with showers and an outdoor theater where slide shows are conducted by park rangers on the weekends makes this a very popular spot. During weekends in the height of the vacation season, camping spots can be difficult to find.

In the Hat Creek area, the American Sportsmen's Club provides its members with excellent stillwater opportunities. East of Burney lies Lake Margaret with its large rainbow and brook trout. Off Lost Creek on Highway 89 south of the junction with Cassel Road (also on property leased by the ASC) is a series of three ponds. One pond, also featured in the main article, is strictly managed for catch-and-release fly fishing. The for-

ebay of Baum Lake (accessed from Cassel Road) holds nice trout, as does Baum Lake, where the waters of lower Hat Creek originate.

Eastman Lake, where the Lava Creek Lodge fly-fishing facility is located, is a fine stillwater fishery. Its spring flows empty into the Tule River before becoming the major tributary of the Fall River. In the same area, Tule and Big Lakes contain large rainbows, but they are not heavily fished by fly fishermen.

Eagle Lake northwest of Susanville is by no means a pond. It's one of the largest natural lakes in California. This lake is known for its special rainbows that are measured in pounds instead of inches. The daily limit on Eagle is three trout, and fish exceeding five pounds are not uncommon. East of Susanville on Highway 44 is McCoy Flat Reservoir. Drained in the fall of 1985, McCoy should become productive again in several years. It has been drained periodically, but comes back quickly with large Eagle Lake-strain rainbows.

If you like to hike to your fishing, the opportunities in the Golden State are nearly endless. One of the nicest areas is the Trinity Alps Primitive Area, bordered on the south by the Trinity River and to the north by the Salmon River, both major tributaries to the Klamath. If you want an outfitter who stages relaxing trips, contact Herb Burton of Trinity Alps Angling Experiences, P.O. Box 176, Lewiston, CA 96052, (916) 623-6757.

Running north from the Salmon River to the Scott River are the Salm-

on and Scott Mountains, where there are more than 70 trout lakes. Fishing maps to these areas were once available through the Resources Agency of the Department of Fish and Game, 1416 Ninth Street, Sacramento, CA 95814, but they are now out of print. However, a price list for extant publications is still available. Fishing maps of other mountainous regions in California are still inventoried and are available for a small charge.

The Trinity Alps and the Salmon-Scott Mountains are similar in character, with jagged peaks and deep-cut valleys carved by glaciation. Most of the lakes are between 6,000 and 7,500 feet above sea level and lie in heavily forested basins. Although the region resembles the Sierra Nevada Mountains, the weather is much more stable and summer thunder storms so prevalent in the Sierras are uncommon. Perhaps more important, foot traffic is considerably less. Because of the shorter growing season, do not expect to catch many large trout. What you find here is lakes with good populations of fish that see only a handful of anglers.

For a novel experience, you can hire an outfitter who uses llamas for transportation into these areas, as Chris and I did several years ago. It was one of the most enjoyable outings we have ever taken and we highly recommend it for a family trip. The outfitter we used was Shasta Llamas, P.O. Box 1137, Mount Shasta, CA 96067, (916) 926-3959. I understand that now they have a guide who specializes in taking out fly-fishing parties.

Summer Pond . . .

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it happened again. Tying on a #16 light Cahill, I sent it on its fateful mission and it too disappeared. Feeling the hook, the brown cleared the water by two feet and made a bee-line for the middle of the lake. It was its undoing. If the trout had dived into the surrounding vegetation, the fight would have ended abruptly and I would have been minus a fly and a tippet. As it was, the brown, I guessed to weigh a bit more than three pounds, tired in time and was released.

There were a few other anglers on the lake at the time, and not wanting to advertise the find, I avoided the spot until the following day. I did take the time to make critical sightings with objects on the shore to line up my exact position in the event that winds moved the surface vegetation enough to make it impossible to relocate. In mid-morning, after the spinner fall and before the emergence began, I approached the spot again. Since there was no concentrated surface feeding visible anywhere on the lake, I assumed the residents were "home."

Holding off about 60 feet from the spot, I used another variation of the drop method and had my nymph taken on 12 of 15 casts. For this fishing a weighted nymph slightly heavier than a standard, unweighted Pheasant Tail is best. The one that I use most often is a mayfly imitation, called a Brown and White by those with whom I often fish. Before dressing it on a #16 hook, I place 2½ wraps of medium lead wire in the area that represents the thorax of the mayfly nymph. The tail is of brown hackle fibers; the abdomen is brown dubbing ribbed with copper wire to represent the segments; the wing case and thorax is brown hackle fibers atop mauve dubbing (which covers the lead); and the ends of the hackles are swept back to represent the legs.

Again, a long leader with at least four feet of 6X tippet works best. If possible, the knot between the tippet and the tapered leader should be the only one. This enables you to land many more fish because knots have the uncanny ability to pick up moss, which bunches up enough to create more drag than a three-pound-test leader can tolerate.

The Drop

THE CAST, which is more common to still-water fishing than stream fishing, should be made so that the line and leader turn over completely so all are on one straight line. Unfortunately, most fishermen cannot perform the cast, which is critical in this fishing. If you cannot perform the cast, simply cast as you normally would and remove all the slack from the cast by stripping immediately after the

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Summer Pond . . .

line and leader alight. You are now prepared to detect the strike.

With the surface tension of the water supporting the fresh leader, the weighted nymph starts to draw the tippet below the surface. If everything is in order, the fly continues to fall at an even rate, taking more leader with it as it sinks. If at the spot of entry the leader hesitates for even a second, starts to move diagonally, or suddenly speeds up, a fish has taken it. Those not familiar with this fishing will be amazed at the frequency of takes when fishing over a "pocket of fish."

After you fish for some time, the whole leader begins to sink and you'll find detecting strikes impossible. Of course, a floating line with even a moderate sinking tip defeats your purpose all that much faster. Monofilament absorbs a very small amount of water, which, along with the scum collected, causes your leader to start sinking. I clean the leader with a towel or cloth and dress it with Mucilin paste. Be sure to wipe off all excess so it does not attract debris and contribute to the problem.

Callibaetis Tricks

AFTER MANY YEARS of fishing over *Callibaetis*, you would think there should be some hard rules relating to its habits. Of course, there are, but new wrinkles appear all the time if you look for them. For the most part, the major emergences of this insect group take place in the middle of the day. But some also emerge in the early morning and some in the evening. Although the activity is not intense and not as many actually complete the metamorphosis, the movement of the nymphs must be significant because the trout feed vigorously on them at these times.

One early evening at McCumber, the wind began to die and fish started to appear on the surface and some seemed sizeable. Here and there different fish came to the surface. There was localized activity, however, and by using "the drop" again, I hooked many fish.

The key is to find concentrations of fish by surface disturbances and then to move after the schools to keep in touch with them. Often I had to let the nymph fall for 20 or 30 seconds before it was taken. If it wasn't taken, I used a hand-twist retrieve to bring the nymph toward the surface before letting it fall again, and this brought takes. Under these circumstances, a dry brought poor results, so I only used rise activity to locate milling pods of fish beneath the surface.

At twilight, this presentation loses its effectiveness, possibly because the nymph becomes difficult for the trout to see. In the last half hour, a dry fly is a better

alternative and a fine way to cap off the day.

To fish with confidence is to fish more effectively. If you find the drop method difficult to associate with any feeding patterns you have witnessed before, capture a few *Callibaetis* nymphs and place them in an aquarium or a clear-sided container for observation. You will see that prior to the actual metamorphosis the nymph makes many trips to the surface. On the first trips, the nymph swims rapidly almost to the surface and then spreads its legs and starts a slow descent. Finally, it lodges in the surface film and changes to the winged adult. It is not unreasonable to assume that the trout find the nymph as it is falling the easiest meal to secure in the total process, and that is what the drop method mimics.

In some regions where lake fishing is productive, winds are a problem and fishing a nymph using the drop is not possible. Fishing a dry, however, can be rewarding.

Not exactly a pond, because it covers 180 acres when full, McCoy Flat Reservoir lies northwest of Susanville off Highway 44 in northern California. Up until the fall of 1984, when it was drained, it fished extremely well and should again in several years when the Eagle Lake strain of rainbows used to plant the lake have had time to grow. Periodic draining of the lake has been the practice for some time, but due to recent protests, alternative solutions to downstream water rights may have been uncovered.

This is high desert country at 5,542 feet above sea level, and the wind nearly always blows in summer afternoons. In spite of this, the rainbows used to rise regularly for evening mayfly hatches. Until it was drained, two- to five-pound fish were common, and the chance for something larger always provided anticipation. Perhaps Eagle Lake was seldom fished because of its remote location, and the winds, which were sometimes strong enough to make fishing impossible.

If you came to know Eagle well enough, you soon learned to distinguish the rise of fish in choppy water and, better yet, that they take a high-floating dry. And if by chance you were there on a calm day and windless evening, the experience etched a place in your mind that would bring you back again and again, despite the threat of winds. As in all of fishing, there are no guarantees, and although summer ponds offer consistent sport, we are always at the mercy of the weather.



MIKE FONG is a contributing editor to FLY FISHERMAN. He lives in San Francisco, Calif.

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