

SPECIAL FEATURE:
IMPROVING YOUR SKILLS

SIGHT FISHING

for
Stillwater Trout

STEVE RAYMOND

Three ways to dramatically improve your success rate on stillwater trout

I CAUGHT MY FIRST stillwater trout on a fly more than 50 years ago, and I've been learning ever since. The learning process is subtle. You try things and sometimes they work and sometimes they don't, and you remember the things that work and try them again. If you keep this up long enough, one day you look back and discover that your whole method of fishing has changed. At least, that's what happened to me.

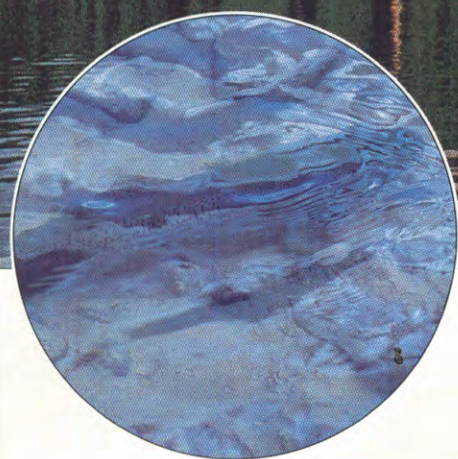
Like most stillwater fly fishers, I started with a long fly rod, a sinking line, and wet flies, and I covered the water in all directions. Now I use short rods, floating lines, and dry or "damp" flies, and I fish only to visible trout whenever possible. These tactics yield results far more consistently than any others I have tried—and they're more fun. Some anglers think these tactics are unconventional, but they work for me. I think they will work for others, too.

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Simple Fundamentals

THE FUNDAMENTAL PREMISE behind these tactics is simple: Casting is a waste of time unless you have a specific target—a trout you can actually see. If you don't, you're fishing empty water, or water that's empty most of the time. Once you see a trout, the best way to catch it is to make a quick, accurate cast with a floating line and your choice of dry fly, emerger, or nymph. Do this, and your success rate will increase a hundredfold.

Sometimes locating fish is simple.



R. VALENTINE ATKINSON/FRONTIERS PHOTOS

You look in the water and there they are, just cruising around. More often, though, you'll see them only when they rise, and sometimes you won't see them at all. Each of these three situations requires a different response.

Cruising Fish Are Visible

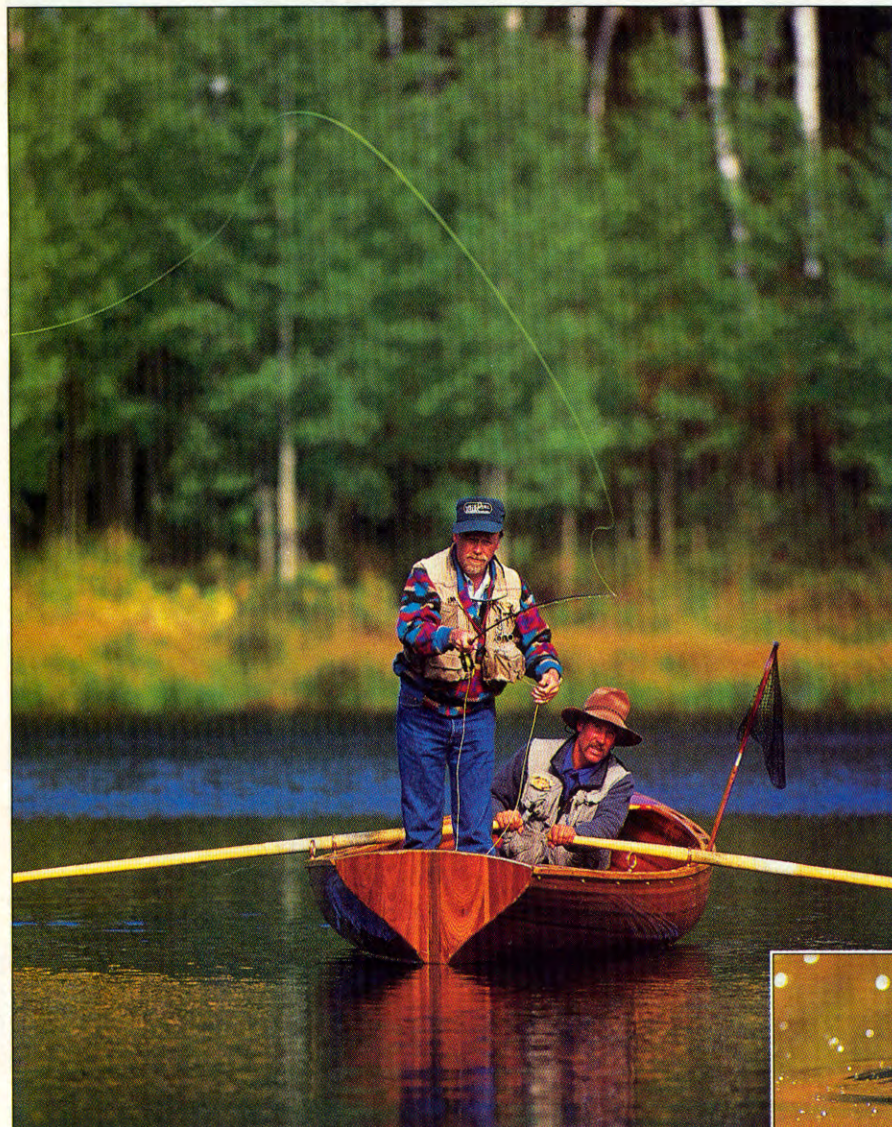
THIS SITUATION, UNFORTUNATELY, is least common, but it offers the best opportunities. It occurs only under favorable weather conditions in shallow, clear lakes with reflective bottoms. A light-colored marl bottom is best, but in some lakes, trout may be visible over weedbeds in strong light. The angle of the light must be just right, cloud cover must be minimal, and the wind must be either absent or very light—a combination that doesn't occur often. When it



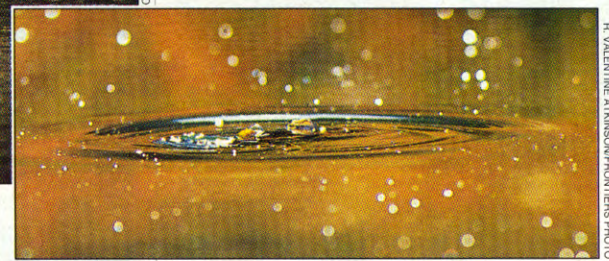
The key to stillwater fishing is seeing the fish or structure that may hold fish. A boat or pram provides a better observation platform than a float tube or kick-boat, and a pair of polarized sunglasses can reduce glare and help you see into the water. Look for a fish's shadow on light-colored lake bottoms. Inset left: (top) a fish viewed without polarized glasses; (bottom) the same fish viewed with polarized glasses.

CHRISTINE FONG PHOTO

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From a stable boat or pram you can see more cruising fish and present your flies quickly to rises in any direction.



does, you should fish as you would on a bonefish flat: Watch for a fish to come along, and cast only when you see one.

Often the first thing you see when a fish approaches is the fish's shadow on the bottom, rather than the fish itself, but that's enough to reveal its location and direction of travel. Keep your eyes on the fish and try to get your fly in front of it before the fish disappears. This is not always easy, because trout are extremely shy in clear water and strong light, and they spook if the fly lands too close. Practice is the only way to

determine how close you can get without spooking the quarry.

Let's say, hypothetically, you've established ten feet as a minimum distance. Each time you see a cruising trout, try to place your fly ten feet ahead of it. Since trout in ponds and lakes often change direction, there's a good chance your target will make a sharp turn well before it covers the distance to your fly, which means the fly will go unseen. If that happens, pick up your fly and lead the trout ten feet in its new direction. Keep this up, and sooner or later the trout will see your fly and take it.

This method is more efficient than any other because you are *always* casting to fish. Theoretically, that means you can make every cast count, which is never the case with other methods. And when you can see trout cruising around in a lake, you begin to understand the odds against you when you can't see them and are forced to fish blindly. The chance of a trout seeing your fly under these circumstances is always small and can only be overcome by making hundreds of casts. [Making repeated casts in an area can spook unseen fish and make them flee. THE EDITORS.] When trout are visible, the opposite is true. I've had many successful days when I cast less than a hundred times.

Fish Rises Are Visible

WHEN YOU CAN'T SEE fish in the water, but you can see them rising, you need a different approach. This situation is encountered more often than seeing cruising trout.

When trout in lakes go on the feed, they cruise very rapidly and change direction frequently. When a

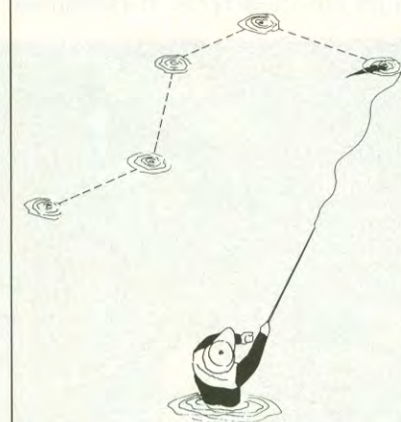
trout rises and momentarily reveals its location, you must get your fly over it *right now* to have any chance of catching it. At best, you have a couple of seconds before the trout leaves the neighborhood.

Once again, the point is to get your fly over a fish, not empty water. To get it there fast enough for the fish to see it, you must respond *instantly* when you see a trout rise; the necessity for speed and accuracy cannot be overemphasized. If you're late or your fly lands wide, you're fishing empty water; but if your fly gets there fast enough and lands in the right spot (in the fish's view),

your chances of hooking it are better than ever. Of course, your fly must be a good imitation of whatever is hatching.

To know what's hatching, scan the water's surface for insects, examine waterweeds and bankside foliage for trout foods, and consult published hatch charts or guidebooks. Checking with other anglers and local fly shops is also helpful. Keep in mind that if there is no hatch, fish will often take a fly that represents the insects that hatched recently, even if that hatch has finished.

CASTING TO CRUISING TROUT



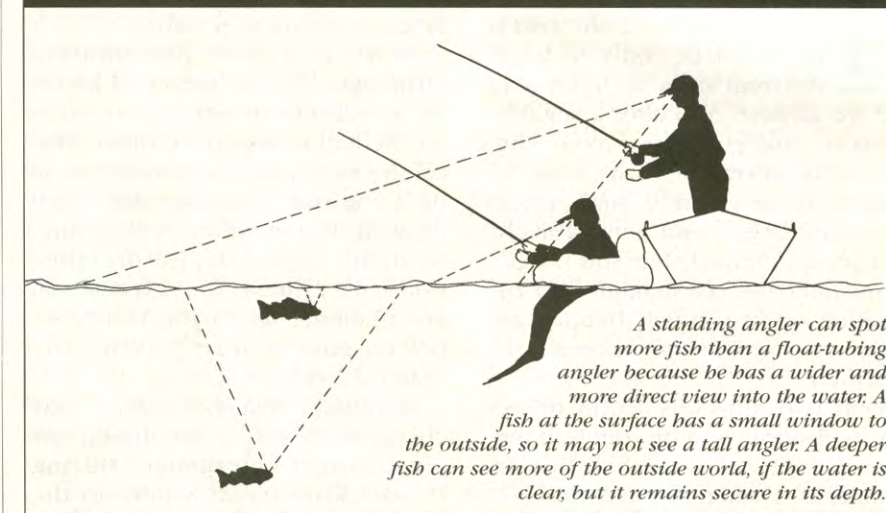
When you see a cruising trout, try to determine its path then present your fly a few feet ahead of it.

No Trout Are Visible

IF YOU CAN'T SEE TROUT cruising or rising, you're forced to fish randomly in hopes a trout will eventually see your fly. Your chances of catching fish on a floating line under these circumstances are slim, but there is one tactic that has often saved the day for me.

Find a spot where you've seen trout feeding earlier or that you know is good from past experience. If you're unfamiliar with the water, look for weedlines or shoreline structure, especially off the points of headlands; these are usu-

WINDOW OF VISIBILITY



A standing angler can spot more fish than a float-tubing angler because he has a wider and more direct view into the water. A fish at the surface has a small window to the outside, so it may not see a tall angler. A deeper fish can see more of the outside world, if the water is clear, but it remains secure in its depth.

ally productive spots. Put on a big, bushy, deer-hair dry fly—Humpies, Muddlers, or similar patterns work well—and skate the fly over the surface as fast as you can (See illustration on page 84). This can bring up curious trout that reward you with spectacular takes; it's also a good way to smash tippets. This technique won't always work, and even when it does, it's much less efficient than casting to visible trout. But what the heck, it's still floating-line fishing.

If you try this and it fails, put away your floating line, get out a sinking-tip or a sinking line, and start randomly fishing the depths. All I can say is good luck.

Boats and Prams

THE MOST IMPORTANT ELEMENT of this fishing is what keeps *you* afloat; it should be a good observation platform. Float tubes and pontoon boats are poorly suited for this purpose. The reason is obvious: When a trout rises close to the surface of a lake or stream, its window of visibility shrinks dramatically. The same thing happens when an angler gets close to the water's surface—he can't see much into the water. For all practical purposes, this makes tubes and pontoon boats useless as platforms for viewing fish.

They are also nearly useless for

fishing to rising fish. If you're in a float tube and a trout rises behind you, the fish will be somewhere in the next county by the time you can kick your way around to face the rise and make your cast. Change-of-direction casts and double-hauls are similarly difficult. Also, float tubes and pontoon boats require the use of long rods, which take more time to cast—often a fatal handicap when you're trying to cover the rise of a fast-moving trout.

A small, stable boat or pram is better suited for viewing trout. You can stand up in such a boat and greatly increase your window of visibility into the water. Even if you can't see cruising trout, you can pick out bottom features that may tell you where they are likely to be. Good polarized sunglasses are critical for this.

A boat also allows you to cast in any direction. If a trout rises behind you, all you do is wheel and deal. Change-of-direction casts and double-hauls are easy, and you can cover rises much faster.

Float tubes are good for blind casting or trolling, and they are handy for packing into remote lakes when there is no other way of getting out on the water. But if you're serious about using a floating line in stillwaters, get a boat.

Continued on page 84

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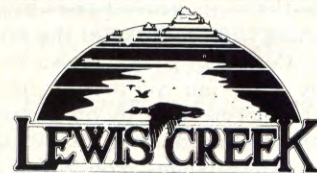
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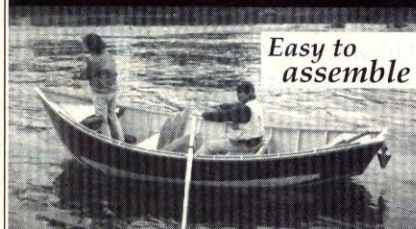
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SIGHT FISHING...

Continued from page 61

Tackle

USE THE SHORTEST FLY ROD YOU CAN manage for this stillwater sight-fishing. Short rods have smaller casting arcs than long rods, and they generate higher line speeds; both features save time, and allow you to cover rises more efficiently. Short rods also permit faster changes in your casting direction.

My three favorite rods for floating-line fishing on lakes and ponds are 6, 6³/₄, and 7 feet in length. All are designed for weight-forward, 6-weight floating lines, heavy enough for all but the strongest winds. When I fish from a boat with one of these little sticks, I can cover a rising fish in any direction almost instantly, and landing a fish with one of these rods is more fun.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to find short 6-weight rods. Rod manufacturers seem fascinated by new technology that allows them to make rods longer and lighter than ever before. Such rods undoubtedly have practical applica-

SKATING A FLY



If you cannot see trout cruising or rising, find a spot where you've seen trout before or where there is shoreline structure such as points or weedlines. Skate a large, bushy deer-bair dry fly over the surface as fast as you can. *Humpies, Muddlers, and similar patterns can bring tippet-smashing strikes.*



Short rods, with their smaller casting arcs and high line speeds, can help you get your fly to rising trout faster. For most stillwater trout sight fishing, a 6-weight rod, floating line, and 9- to 11-foot leader works well.

tions, but maximum-efficiency floating-line fishing on stillwaters definitely is not one of them. If you want to try these methods with a short rod, you may have to hunt for one, have one custom-made, or build your own. I built one of my favorites; the others were custom-made for me.

I use 9- to 11-foot leaders with 3-pound-test clear Maxima tippets. If the water is clear and the fish spooky, I lengthen the leader or switch to a lighter (1-pound-test) tippet.

The final element you need to be a successful stillwater angler is concentra-

tion. Always fish with *intensity*. Concentrate on what you're doing. Stay alert. Watch for subtle changes in the activity of trout, insects, or birds. Try to absorb everything that's going on around you and fit yourself into it. Not only will your success improve, but your enjoyment and understanding of the whole fly-fishing experience will be greatly enhanced.

STEVE RAYMOND, author of *Kamloops, Steelhead Country, The Estuary Flyfisher*, and other books, lives in Seattle, Washington.

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