

Getting to the bottom of things . . .

Sinking-Line Tactics for Streams

GARY A. BORGER

LAUREL RUN AND STONE CREEK WERE not noted for their big trout, but there were good fish in Whipple and Stone lakes, man-made impoundments on these small mountain brooks. As a student at Penn State, I had access to both waters, and I fished them whenever I could hitch a ride over Tussey Mountain.

I stood on Whipple Dam and pitched the dragonfly nymph out into the dark water. As the sinking line settled, I chatted with the bait fishermen next to me. Fishing was slow and none of us took any trout that cold

GARY BORGER has contributed many articles to FFM, and he is author of *Nymphing*, recently published by Stackpole Books, Cameron and Kelker Sts., Harrisburg, Pa.

April morning. At midday I walked down to the field-stone bridge just below the spillway. To my surprise, I saw perhaps a dozen good trout flashing among the stones in the deepwater tail of the bridge pool. I replaced the gray dragonfly on the leader with an amber stonefly and eased down to the water. The line dropped downstream under the bridge and next to the near-shore abutment where the currents struck and curled under; it sank quickly in the down-welling water. I started the retrieve with a slow hand-twist followed by a pause, then a quick strip. The sudden tug of a fifteen-inch rainbow startled me, but the fish had hooked itself, and I brought it to net. The same tactic took several more trout from beneath the bridge and later was successful

in the spillway pool at Stone Lake. Some years later, Ed Mueller of Indianapolis, Indiana, told me he called this start-stop retrieve the "strip/tease."

The strip/tease is a basic strategy for fishing with a sinking line in either lake or stream because it mimics the movements of many of the fish's food items. In streams it is limited to use in those areas where the current will not cause much line drag. First to come to mind are calm pools and flats. Present the line across and slightly upstream to allow it time to sink.

After casting, keep the rod tip low, about a foot or so above the surface. Work the fly back along the bottom *slowly*. Take in a few inches of line, pause for a few seconds, then take in a bit more line. Occasionally give the line a quick strip of about a foot, pause, then resume the slow retrieve. Fish often pick up the fly when it's resting, so be alert to the feel of the line. The low rod tip will aid you in this regard since by keeping it low you will have a more direct pull on the line when the strike occurs. To assist further in detecting strikes with this method keep the line under a finger of your rod hand.

Retrieve by drawing the line over the finger. If a fish mouths the fly, you're not only more apt to feel it, but all you do to set the hook is clamp your finger against the grip and raise the rod. Again, the low tip is important since it permits a long pull with the rod that will enable you to lift the belly of the line smoothly and set the hook. If you set the hook on a phantom fish (as all of us do occasionally), simply drop the rod tip, strip in the slack and resume the retrieve.

The strip/tease is quite useful in winter and early spring when fish are sequestered in the deepest parts of the stream. Cold water means they will be sluggish and will move slowly to take the fly. By presenting the

imitation on the bottom and offering it with a slow, natural and easy-to-capture movement, the angler increases his chances of taking fish.

Motion is probably the least understood of the four characteristics that trigger selectivity in fish (the others are the food organism's size, color and shape). Naturals on the bottom move slowly, if they move at all. Occasionally one will move quickly as it darts from one piece of cover to the next. These are the movements the strip/tease is designed to imitate, so don't hurry through the retrieve just to make another cast. Many anglers never learn to execute this method properly because it requires not only a very slow retrieve but constant alertness. With patience and practice, however, this tactic offers sustained angling satisfaction.

BECAUSE EVEN THE SLOWEST POOLS have some current, and because the object is to keep the fly on the bottom, a high-density sinking line is best for fishing the strip/tease technique. A high-density sinking line sinks fast and stays down.

Leaders should not be excessively long—six to eight feet. Tippet size depends on fly size; but remember, when you set the hook, the drag of the water on the sunken line will make it difficult to judge the actual pressure you're exerting. A four-pound tippet may break like spider's webbing if you're not careful. As soon as you feel the resistance of the fish, ease off.

It may seem to you that all the water in a stream is moving in a downstream direction and that riffles are fast and pools are slow. Spend a little time watching a stream, however, and you'll spot areas other than pools where the current is slow and areas where the water actually moves upstream. The strip/tease can be effectively employed in these areas.

Sinking Lines

High density and high-density, extra-fast-sinking lines for the fly-fishing techniques described are available from a variety of manufacturers under the following brand names.

THE EDITORS.

Manufacturer	High Density	Extra-Fast-Sinking Weight-Forward, High Density
Scientific Anglers/3M	Hi-D	Hi-Speed, Hi-D
Cortland Line Co.	444 Type 3 Extra-Fast-Sinking	444 Supersink Type 4
Berkley and Co.	Specialist Extra-Fast-Sinking	Specialist Extra-Fast-Sinking
Masterline	Chancellor Series Fast-Sink	Chancellor Series Very Fast Sink
Sunset Line & Twine	Formula XS	Cannon Ball (lead-core)
Orvis Company	Fast-Sinking, Class 3	(Class 4, available 1980)
Gladding Corp.		Super Aqua-Sink

Sinking Lines for Streams . . .

Downstream of a boulder, for example, is a quiet water pocket. Fish hold at the edges of the pocket and watch the currents. By casting straight downstream over the top of the boulder you can get your fly into the pocket and on the bottom. Don't stand immediately in front of the boulder because fish often hold just ahead and to the sides of such obstructions. Stay fifteen to twenty feet upstream. When the line gets down, very carefully slide it over to one side of the rock, but don't let it slip off. Retrieve the fly along the edge of the pocket until the leader starts to come out of the water, then allow the line to slide off into the current at the boulder's edge. Work the fly back up around the stone, and then let it hang at the upstream edge for a few seconds before lifting the line and recasting.

While high-density line works well for this tactic, weight-forward, high-density, extra-fast-sinking line is even better. These lead-coated, heavyweight lines cast much like any other fly line, but they sink very fast. Some manufacturers sell the high-density, extra-fast-sinking line in 30-foot heads, or as a weight-forward line. Although a 7-weight line is the lightest weight line offered by the manufacturers in this category, by clipping off 3½ feet or 6½ feet from the 7-weight line, you can produce a 6-weight or 5-weight line respectively.

The strongest upstream flow of water occurs in the reverse currents at the heads of pools. Depending upon pool size and main current speed, these reverse flows may be only a few feet in diameter, or they may be small rivers in their own right. Food organisms caught in the rotating water ride the current around and around, and fish move in to feed on the concentrated fare. A particularly good spot to find feeding fish is where the reverse flow curls into the main downstream current. To probe the bottom in such spots, stand upstream and cast the sinking line into the reverse current. As the line comes around, it will sink and should be on the bottom when it reaches the confluence line. The fly can then be twitched to the surface. This is an excellent streamer and wet-fly tactic. The tumbling fly that suddenly changes direction, speeds up and heads for the surface triggers the predatory, chase instinct of the fish.

DOWNWELLING WATER FREQUENTLY OCCURS where the currents slide along banks or other objects. This was the situation described earlier on Laurel Run. Such flows pull the sinking line to the bottom very quickly and hold it down despite an upstream retrieve.

The plunging water of a falls can offer a similar opportunity. At the base of small dams, where the falling water has gouged holes three to ten feet deep, the biggest fish hold along the bottom under the foaming white turbulence. Casting upstream to these fish is totally ineffective because the line is carried swiftly downstream and forced to the top by the strong upwelling currents just downstream of the falling water. An effective technique is to stand next to the dam and cast parallel to it so that the sinking line drops into the plunging water of the falls. It will shoot to the bottom and stay there as you work the fly back.

In large, very deep plunge-pools (such as occur beneath hydroelectric dams) the fish will be scattered. Because of the strong upwelling turbulence found in such places, a high-density, extra-fast-sinking line is usually necessary to get to the bottom. Cast and retrieve as you would for any other large pool.

In pools, flats and runs of medium-to-large streams, full-sinking lines can be used to present the fly along the bottom on a swinging retrieve. Cast across, or across and slightly up, and permit the line to sink and sweep back across the stream. On the large rivers of the Western mountains, this tactic is used with big nymphs, wet flies or large streamers. Steelhead anglers employ this strategy, often using thirty- to forty-foot shooting-tapers backed with a heavy, limp monofilament for long casts.

The current at the head of a pool is often quite swift, having gained velocity in riffles or rapids immediately upstream. Fish will hold along the bottom just downstream of the lip of the pool and watch the overhead currents for food. The Brooks method (developed by Charlie Brooks) is the best technique for presenting a fly to these fish. Stand ten to fifteen feet upstream from the pool. Cast so that the fly lands twenty feet upstream from you and five to ten feet out into the current.

As the line sweeps downstream, lift the rod to take up the slack that occurs at the surface. The rod tip should be lifted about six feet above the water, but for casts longer than twenty feet, the tip should be lifted proportionately higher to take up the slack. Follow the line with the rod tip.

As the line passes your position, it will begin to tighten in the current. At this time lower the rod tip to feed the slack back into the line. Continue following the line with the rod tip. The fly should reach the bottom somewhere in front of you and bounce down the riffle and over the lip of the pool. The line will be fully tightened in the currents at this point, and the artificial will move down and across the stream until it hangs directly below you. The strike usually comes as the fly drops over the lip and begins to swing down and across. This method is also quite useful in heavily flowing runs. Try to locate the most likely holding lies for the fish and present the fly so that it starts to swing just as it reaches the fish.

High-density and high-density, extra-fast-sinking lines are necessary for the Brooks method. Leaders should be kept to four feet or shorter, and since this is essentially a tactic for use with big, heavily weighted nymphs, I prefer a tippet testing at not less than six pounds.

EVEN WITH RAPIDLY SINKING LINES, short leaders and weighted flies, it is sometimes difficult to reach the bottom in fast, deep water, and you may have to add lead. Split-shot and moldable lead putty are my favorites. Tiny microshot can be pinched on just ahead of the fly, strung out along the tippet or affixed to a dropper. Ed Van Put attaches the fly to the dropper and places the shot on the point, an arrangement that gives you a



Deep pools such as the one that produced this fish may require the use of a fast-sinking line in order to reach fish. Photo by the author.



It is usually difficult to mend a full-sinking line in fast water. The use of a sinking-tip or a custom-made lead-tip line (such as the one described by the author) will help solve this problem. Photo by John Randolph.

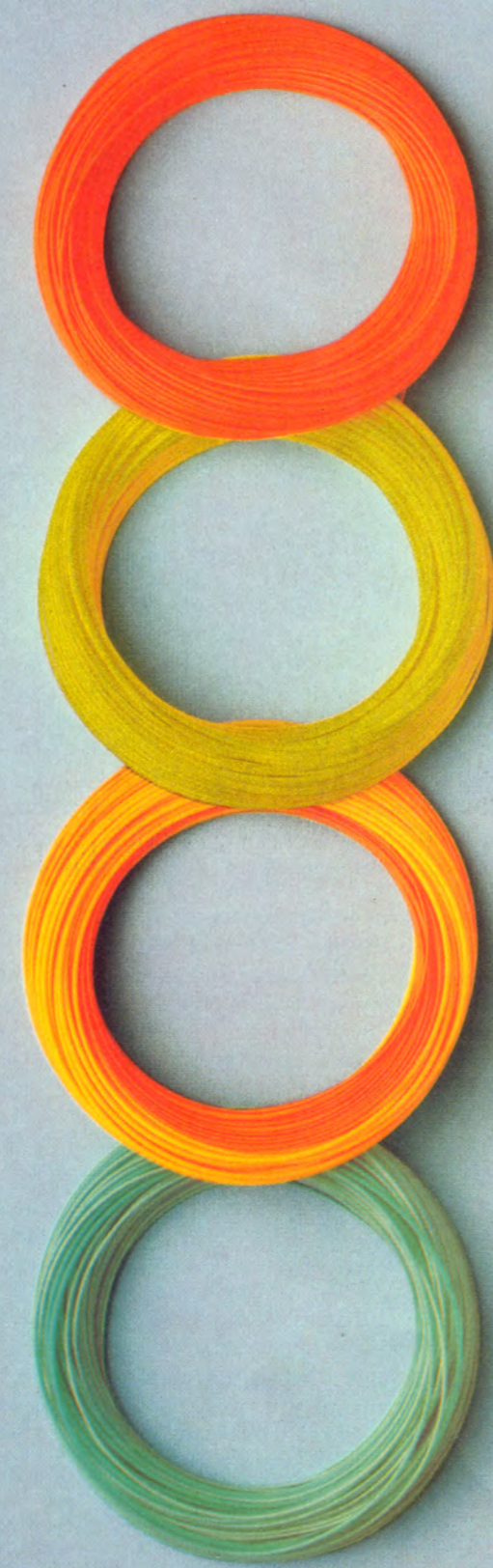
bit more sensitivity to the fish's take. Lead putty can also be molded over the knot where the tippet is attached, and due to its soft texture, it will not hang up on the bottom as often as shot.

Sinking-Tip Lines

Commercially available sinking-tip lines for the techniques described come in several designs under the following brand names. The table below does not include a variety of slow-sinking and intermediate lines suitable for other fishing situations and techniques. THE EDITORS.

Manufacturer	10-Foot Sinking Tip	10-Foot Fast-Sinking Tip	20-Foot Sinking Tip	30-Foot Sinking Head
Scientific Anglers/3M	Wet Tip	Wet Tip Hi-D	Wet Belly	Wet Head
Cortland Line Co.	Slow Sinking Rocket No. 1	Rocket, Extra-Fast No. 3	Rocket, Extra-Fast No. 3	Rocket Sink-Head
Berkley and Co.	Specialist Sink-Tip			
Masterline	Chancellor Series Sinking, Fast-Sinking and Very-Fast-Sinking (Not designated by length of sinking tip)			
Orvis Company	Sink -Tip, Fast-Sinking			
Sunset Line & Twine Co.	Formula MS (This is a full-sinking line that the manufacturer says is equivalent to 20- to 30-foot sinking-tip lines.)			
Gladding Corp.	Invincible Sink-Tip			

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Having problems hooking fish on windy days?

If you're fishing wet flies with a floating line, the wind is probably the reason. It can cause the line to belly, resulting in unwanted movement of the fly, which makes it harder to detect a strike and set the hook.

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One factor that comes into play in the choice of sinking rate is the speed of the current. In a moderate flow such as this an intermediate line may be all that's required to fish near the stream bottom. Photo by the author.

In some stream situations the line cannot be cast up and allowed to sink as it comes down. One such place is where very shallow riffles drop into a deep pool. To probe the lip of the pool, stand so the cast can be placed straight across-stream just where the riffles dump in. As soon as the line touches the water, make a strong up-stream mend so the line assumes a marked L shape; the fly should be at the toe of the L and downstream of the line. An in-the-air mend or curve-cast can also be used to achieve this orientation. As the line sinks and moves downstream, it rides down on the fly, forcing it quickly to the bottom.

The biggest problem with the use of full-sinking lines is that once down they cannot be mended. In heavy flows, such as rapids, this shortcoming makes it hard to keep the fly in the preferred current tongue. To overcome this difficulty I use a lead-tip line. The original construction called for six feet of lead-core line spliced to a Scientific Anglers fluorescent-orange, floating, shooting line. Lead-core is stiff and casts awkwardly, however, so now I use six feet of 15-weight, high-speed, extra-fast-sinking line. It weighs thirteen grains per foot — the same as lead-core — and is as flexible as any fly line. The heavy tip gets to the bottom fast while the thin shooting line can easily be lifted and mended. This rig is very useful in rapids where the angler must pick the pocket, fishing the fly deep for relatively short distances

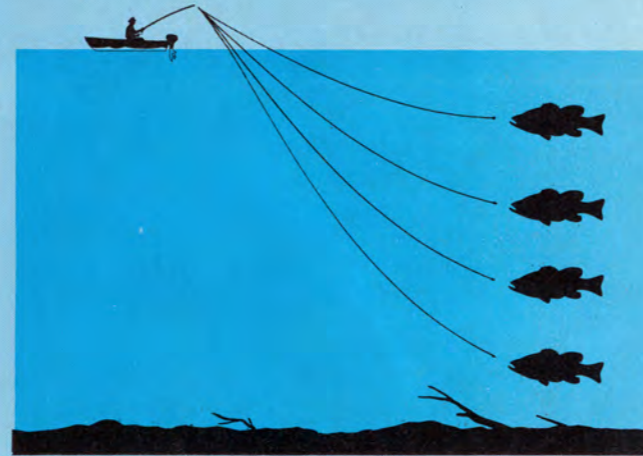
along the edges of boulders and other obstructions. It has also proved effective for winter and spring steelhead fishing in small-to-medium-size streams where the fly must be kept down, yet its drift precisely controlled.

In shallow riffles with scattered pocket water and in slow-water areas, two sinking-tip designs will get the fly down, but because most of the line floats, it can be easily mended and picked up off the water. Some sinking-tip lines are now available in fluorescent colors, a decided aid to mending and strike detection.

Three angling approaches to riffles are especially well handled with the sinking tips. The first is to present the fly up and across and allow it to dead drift, mending the floating portion of the line as necessary to prevent drag. Swing the rod with the line as it comes down and strike if it pauses or jumps upstream. Then when the line comes tight downstream, hold the rod stationary. Current pressure will cause the fly to rise to the surface and swing across the stream. This is the Leisenring Lift; it's a deadly way to fish nymphs, wet flies or streamers.

The second approach is the old down-and-across wet-fly tactic. As the name indicates, the cast is made down and across, not simply across. The line will belly and pull the fly straight across the stream, presenting it in full side view to any watching fish. Since the fly moves across stream, this is an especially valuable tactic for

The right fly line can make your day.

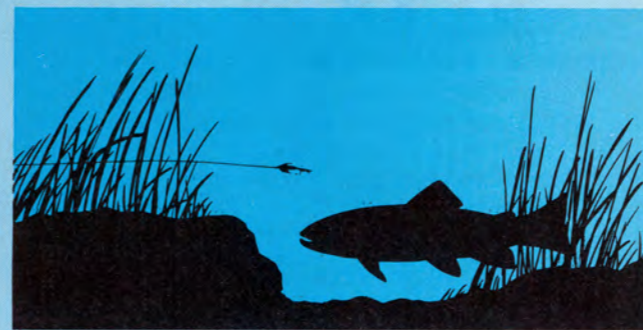


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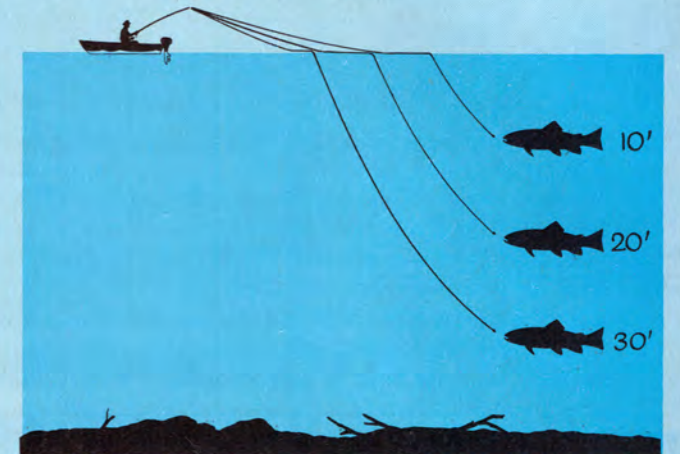


When they won't come up, you've got to go down.

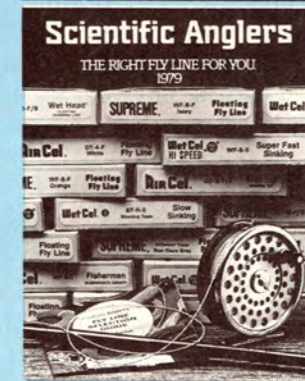
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Now we're not suggesting you abandon your floating line. It's still the basic line for most fly fishermen. But you know as well as we do there are many times when fish aren't feeding near the surface. So be prepared. The right Scientific Anglers line for the conditions you're fishing can really make your day.



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Besides an up-to-date listing of our equipment, this year's catalog contains something special. It's called "The Right Fly Line For You" and it's a complete illustrated guide to proper fly line selection. To get yours, check with your Scientific Anglers dealer or send 50¢ along with your name and address to: Scientific Anglers/3M Company, 3M Center, Bldg. 223-3S, Dept. FF-109, St. Paul, MN. 55101.



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fishing the upstream side of logs or other obstructions lying at right angles to the current. If the cast was made straight across, the bellying line would pull the fly down and across. Although useful for fishing nymphs and wet flies, this tactic is exceptionally fruitful with streamer flies. After each cast take one step downstream and present the fly again.

The third method is to cast upstream and fish the fly back. The shotgun tactic for nymphing can be nicely executed with these lines. Select a ten-by-ten-foot area about ten feet upstream and cast thirty or so times into that selected square (thus, the longest cast will be no more than 25 feet). Lift the rod back at the same speed as the line drifts down. When it is vertical, snap the rod forward to roll the line back upstream. After the ten-by-ten-foot area has been saturated with casts, move ten feet upstream and repeat the process. This is the best nymphing tactic for riffles.


Streamers, especially the Muddler, can be highly productive when fished upstream. After clinching the fly in place, pinch a microshot on the tippet immediately above the knot. Twitch the line back downstream just a bit faster than the current is moving. The shot will cause the fly to angle down between twitches, giving it a most provocative, bouncing motion. The sinking tip prevents the twitches from planing the fly to the surface.

Dave Whitlock uses a sinking-tip line to fish floating poppers for bass with smashing results. When the line

is stripped, the lure pops and dives. At the end of the strip, the popper floats lazily to the surface. Big browns prowling in stream pools at dusk and dawn are frequently excited into taking a floating minnow or mouse imitation when it's fished in this manner.

Sinking-tip lines also excel in wide rivers where the water is five to ten feet deep and the fly is fished up and across or down and across.

Most anglers, myself included, have for years overlooked the interesting possibilities of an intermediate sinking line. Dressed with a paste-type fly floatant, this ambivalent line rides along nicely in the film; ungreased it sinks very slowly. The belly can be greased and the front ten feet left ungreased to make a sinking-tip line that is great for nymphing just below the surface film. In the wind, the intermediate's small diameter allows easier, more precise casting than does the larger diameter of a floating line. If ungreased, it will sink below the wind-driven surface chop and help eliminate the line-bellying problem that is such a nuisance on windy days. And because it sinks so slowly, dry flies can be effectively presented with it. This past summer's experiences on streams in the Rockies, where wind is a constant companion, has earned this line my admiration.

Modern fly fishers need not restrict themselves to the surface of streams, for with the currently available array of sinking lines, they can expand their horizons, downward that is, all the way to the bottom. 

THERE WAS A TIME

when a well stocked fly fishing store or mail order house could satisfy most equipment requirements of its clientele. However, there has been a virtual explosion in the variety of lines, rods and reels that have been developed to meet the extended needs of today's anglers. Much of this wider demand has been accentuated by the application of flyrodding techniques to fresh water species other than trout and to a growing interest in saltwater flyrodding. As these equipment requirements have broadened, it has become more difficult for traditional sales outlets to adequately service this specialized demand. To fill this

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