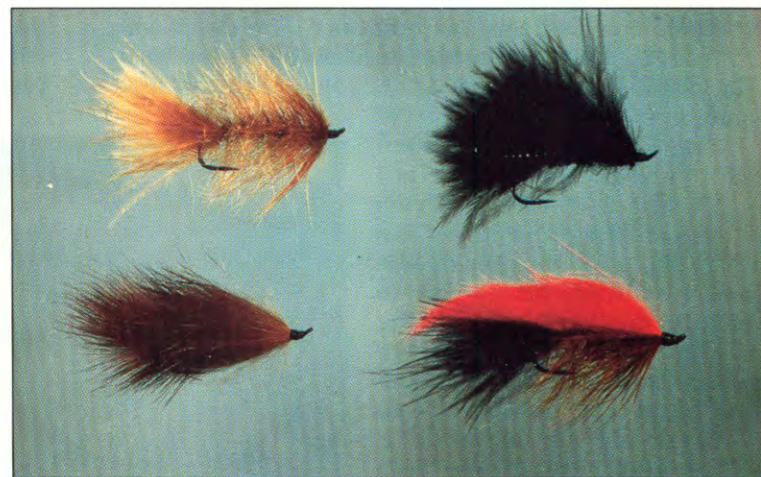




The author releases a char taken on a sculpin pattern fished with one of his streamer techniques.

STREAMER STRATEGIES



RALPH CUTTER PHOTOS

The author's favorite patterns include (clockwise from upper left) the Woolly Bugger, Marabou Leech, Goblin, and Bunny. A purple Bunny (opposite page) with a guitar-string weed guard avoids snags when you fish it along the stream bottom.

Ways to work the bottom with the right streamers

RALPH CUTTER

OVER THE YEARS OF GUIDING and teaching I've browsed through hundreds of fly boxes, and virtually all contained at least one streamer with its telltale slip of leader dangling from the hook eye. When asked, the owner of the box would usually admit that he used the streamer once or twice then put it into retirement because it "didn't work."

In truth, that streamer was never really put to work. Nothing in a fly box comes close to offering the diversity and deadliness of a well-presented streamer. Whether on a Montana spring creek, an Amazon blackwater lagoon, or the chalky flats of a Caribbean reef, a streamer can deceive the wariest (and largest) of fish.

Many people don't use streamers because of the mistaken belief that streamers target only the largest fish and preclude the possibility of catching a lot of "regular" fish. While it is true that streamers consistently account for many truly huge fish, small fish will take incredibly large streamers. I'm always amazed as I watch three-inch trout in my aquarium routinely attack, kill, and eat one-inch guppies. Translated into angling terms, this means a 12-inch fish can (and will) take a four-inch streamer.

What is a streamer? I'm not sure. Several years ago while tossing a size 12 Bird's Nest nymph pattern to fish feasting on *Siphonurus* nymphs, I observed a nice trout surging through the weedy shallows in obvious pursuit of baitfish. I cast the nymph its way and after a few strips was fast to a 17-inch brown. During release, the trout coughed up two speckled dace fry. The Bird's Nest was a perfect imitation and in the course of a single cast had been transformed from a nymph to a streamer.

Woolly Buggers are streamers; however, I've used them to imitate dragonfly nymphs at Crane Prairie Reservoir, crayfish on the Walker River, and lamprey eels on Pacific coastal streams. If it looks like a streamer, acts like a streamer, and catches lots of fish, it's a streamer.

Streamer Design

OPEN ANY FLY-FISHING CATALOG and prepare to be overwhelmed by the sheer numbers and types of stream-

ers; there's one for every conceivable purpose and even a few for which I can't figure a purpose. From the intricately detailed Widemaker to the satisfying mess called a marabou leech, streamers run the gamut of extreme realism to ultimate impressionism.

In the desire to express one's artistic ability, or perhaps on the off chance that it will be purchased by a wide-eyed angler, many streamer designs have been developed that are detrimental to the effective pursuit of fish; sculpin imitations with heads of deer hair are a good example.

I've spent many dozens of hours in scuba gear observing the antics of sculpins in their natural environment. I've had pet sculpins that would eat earthworms from my fingers and would nearly leap out of

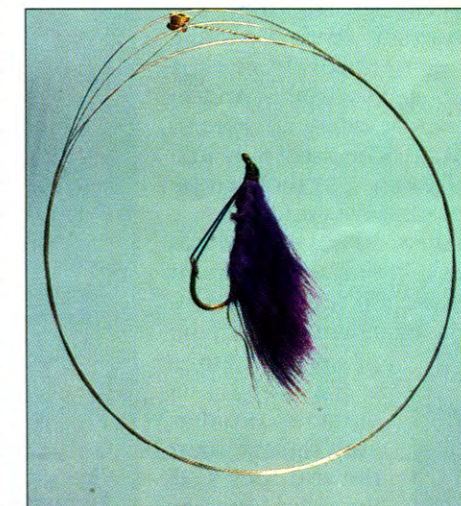
the aquarium for a tadpole. Through this long-term relationship, I've concluded that sculpins are not open-water fish and that after the first few weeks of drift, they spend their entire lives within several inches of the streambed. Deer hair floats like a cork and thus is counterproductive on a streamer meant to imitate a bottom dweller.

Woolhead sculpins were developed to provide the bulky silhouette of a sculpin's head and pectoral fins without the

liability of being buoyant. The problem with woolheads is that they soak a lot of water and become heavy to cast. The best sculpin heads are made by simply turning a few winds of soft saddle hackle around the head of the fly; the illusion of bulk is provided without the attendant problems of deer hair or wool.

Are bulky heads even necessary? Absolutely not. Sagehen Creek in the Truckee River drainage has a population of sculpins reaching densities as great as six adults per square meter. The trout in Sagehen are highly keyed to sculpins but time and again refuse realistic sculpin patterns in favor of impressionistic Woolly Buggers and Zonkers. I've pressured some of those trout severely, fishing streamers past them several times a day for days on end. Those fish became acutely selective to presentation, but never did they shift pattern selectivity to that of a realistic tie.

Fly color has long been open to debate; the old adage "Bright flies for bright days, dull flies for dull days" contains a lot of merit. When you are dredging deep, dark water or fishing during low-light periods, nothing can compare with a black streamer for visibility. A small amount of flash created by a few strands of Crystal Hair or Flashabou often works wonders, perking the attention of indifferent trout. Gobs of brightly reflective material will catch fish, sometimes



in impressive fashion; however, Silver Sparklers and the like usually put trout down.

In discolored water, patterns with highly contrasting materials are often significantly more productive than monohued imitations; for instance, a Goblin (basically a dark olive Woolly Bugger with a bright orange hair strip pulled over the back, Zonker-style) is consistently a top producer during periods of runoff, but it fails miserably when the water clears.

It is normal to find weighted streamers, but heavily weighted streamers look dead underwater. They clunk amidst the rocks, drop like a stone between strips, and snag incessantly. Heavily weighted streamers are invariably hard, and I'm positive that many fish are lost (or never detected) when they mouth and immediately reject a hard fly. Though streamers are usually best fished right on bottom, there are situations when the streamer is most effectively worked just under the surface, through shallow riffles, and in and around weedbeds and snags. A weighted streamer is a liability in these situations. The most versatile streamers are tied without weight so split-shot can be added or taken away as the situation dictates.

Where snagging is a real problem, a long tag end can be left on a Duncan knot and the split-shot squished onto that. The lead will strip off in the event of a snag and save the fly. When using two streamers in tandem, I weight the

point streamer and make sure its tippet is considerably lighter than the dropper's. If the point streamer snags, it will break off, thus saving the dropper (a sacrifice fly).

You can reduce snagging by using

weedless streamers. Keeled flies (imitations where the hook rides upside-down) offer snag protection but are unacceptable because of their propensity to hook fish through the eye or brain. Monofilament loops work well only if the mono extends directly over the point of the hook. The best weed guards can be easily made by folding a piece of .009" guitar string in half then tying the ends of the wire near the eye of the hook so the folded segment of guitar string just envelopes the hook point. For 90 cents you can buy a lifetime supply of guitar string (to make it black, simply dip the wire in a bottle of instant gun blueing).

In a nutshell, a general-use streamer should be dark, lightly weighted (if at all), and impressionistic. The less it resembles a specific food form and the more it counterfeits "life" in general, the better. Woolly Buggers, marabou leeches, and Bunnies run far ahead of the pack followed by Zonkers and Matukas. Nothing else comes close.

RALPH CUTTER is a freelance writer from Truckee, California.

WAYS TO WORK THE BOTTOM

STREAMER PRESENTATION

WHILE WORKING IN ALASKA, I watched my guide partner, Brad Estelle, tie a soggy Skoal Bandit to his leader and proceed to entice a large rainbow to chase down his "streamer." In the hands of a skilled angler, even a marginal pattern can be turned into a living thing that trout want to eat.

A good streamer with lots of built-in life takes even the novice angler a giant step toward hooking fish. The following techniques are described in a pure form, but these techniques are usually used in combination.

1. Dragfree Drift. As the name implies, this is a presentation in which you avoid adding action to the fly but do everything you can to *prevent* drag from disrupting a dead-drift. Except for exceptionally fast and deep water, a floating line with an eight- to ten-foot leader works well. Floating line is easy to control, and the monofilament leader isn't nearly as vulnerable to drag as are weighted lines.

To get a dragfree drift, position yourself directly across-stream from the target. Cast well upstream to allow the streamer to sink to the desired level. Keep as much line off the water as possible by raising the rod tip and stripping in line as the streamer drifts toward you. If needed, mend the line that remains on the water to avoid drag. As the fly passes you and drifts downstream, lower the rod tip and feed line to the drift. Make several passes through the lie with an unweighted streamer, then add enough split-shot to get the fly to scrape bottom.

This technique is particularly effective where a riffle drops into a pool or at the discharge of a spillway or penstock. My guess is that fish associate the drifting streamer with a life form that was stunned or killed by the turbulent waters.

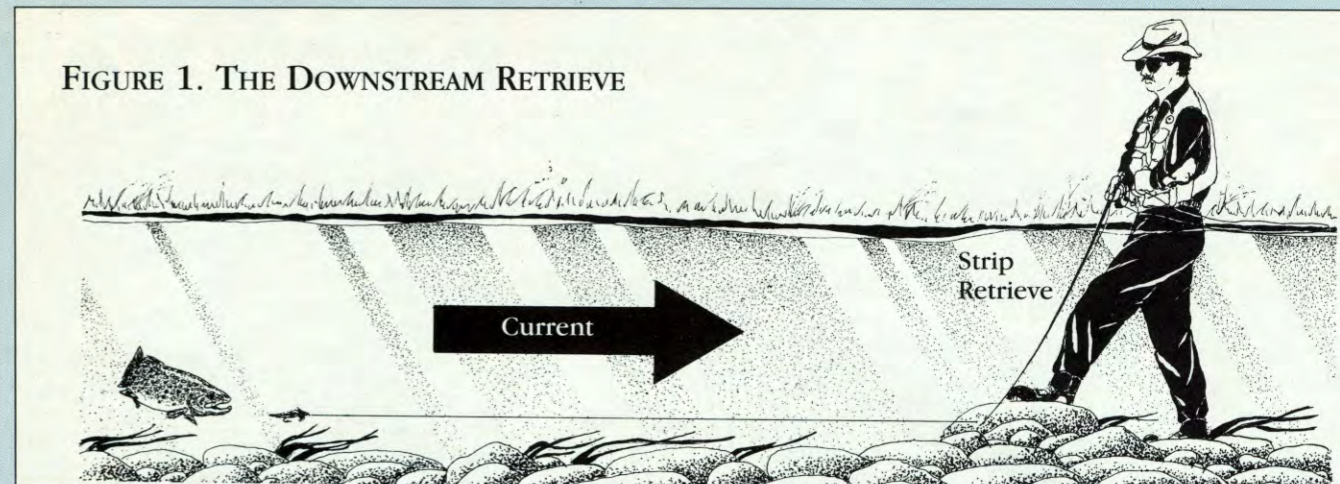
2. Klamath Swing. This technique is the easiest to perfect but has never produced like the drag-free drift or the downstream retrieve. The Klamath Swing can be accomplished with either a floating or sinking line. Because the strikes are on a taut line, a heavy tippet is a must.

Cast quartering down and across-stream; the more you cast directly across the stream (rather than down), the deeper the streamer will drift. A reach cast is great in this situation, but a quick mend toward the far shore should give the streamer a chance to sink a bit before it begins to swing.

As the current picks up your fly line, the streamer will ferry across-stream and end up directly downstream of the rod tip. Strikes usually occur at the start of the swing or just at the end as the fly begins to slow.

Allow the fly to hang in the current for a few seconds and strike on even the most subtle bump. (I've seen trout com-

FIGURE 1. THE DOWNSTREAM RETRIEVE



pletely inhale then reject even fast-moving streamers without telegraphing their presence to the angler.) At this point you may wish to sling the fly into another drift by using a water haul, or you might want to swim the streamer for a while. I usually elect to play games with any suspected fish before beginning a new drift.

As you play with the streamer, keep in mind that any fly will always come to rest directly below the rod tip. By simply switching an extended rod from one hand to the other, you can easily swim the streamer back and across 20 feet of river. By mending toward stronger current, you can speed up the streamer; mending into the slower current causes the fly to slow down and sink deeper. Make your streamer come alive by altering the speed of its "swim," by twitching the streamer a few feet upstream then letting it drift back down, or by pulsing the fly by bobbing the rod tip.

3. The Downstream Retrieve. This is a killer technique that effectively mimics the true behavior of a wounded or fleeing bait-fish (see Figure 1). Just about every animal I can think of will take the path of least resistance when being pursued (chukar defy logic). Deer run downhill; doves fly downwind; and fish swim downstream. Almost all streamer anglers violate this behavior by stripping their imitations *upstream*.

Where possible, simply cast upstream and strip the streamer back to you. If you own an old worthless rod, try setting it up with a sinking shooting-taper, then take it and a handful of streamers to a place where the water is deep, dark, slow, and cold—lunker country. Wade into the river as deep as you dare, launch the fly upstream, then bury the rod in the water so that the rod tip is just off the river bottom. Strip the fly toward you; the only place it can swim is directly along the river bottom. Simply deadly. Have fun trying to lift the rod

out of the water with a large trout tugging your line.

4. The Big Bend. It's the finest method I know of for fishing an undercut bank (see Figure 2). Position yourself so that you're facing the undercut bank, beaver lodge, or overhanging alders. Then:

1. Cast the streamer far upstream so that it lands as close to the bank as possible.

2. Mend the line so that it lays parallel with and as close to the bank as possible.

3. Point the rod tip back upstream toward the fly (feed slack line through the guides so that the pointing motion doesn't ruin your nice mend).

4. With the rod tip at water level, strip like crazy. The fly

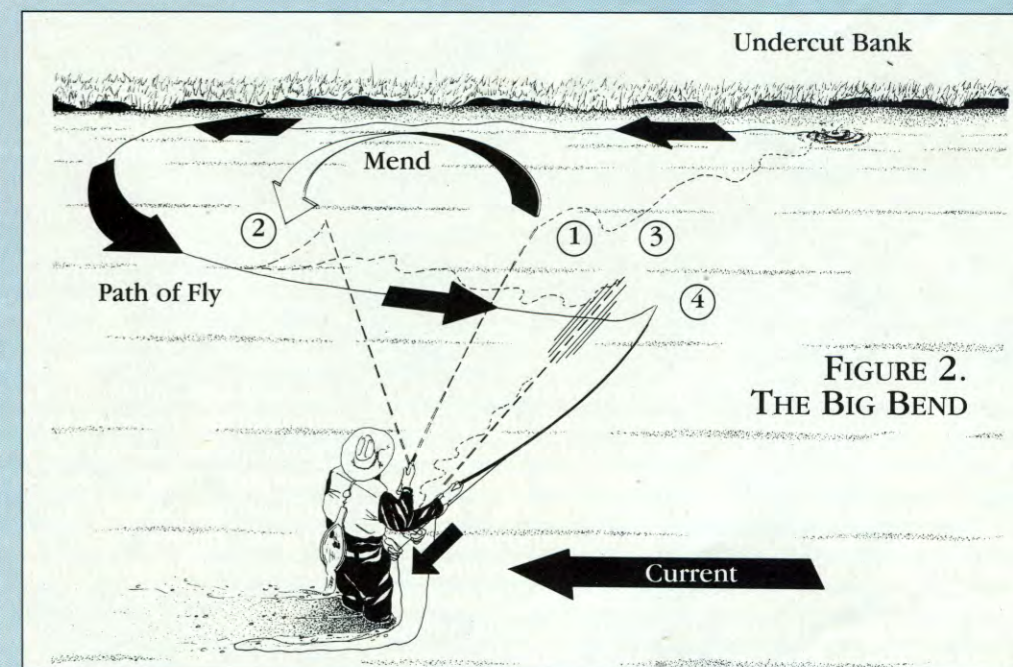


FIGURE 2. THE BIG BEND

will dart downstream, right along the undercut, just begging to be slammed by any trout lurking in the cover.

BY PUTTING STREAMERS TO WORK, you *will* tag much larger trout than ever before. It will be tempting to make wall hangers from these guys.

Please don't.

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