

The Whitlock Nymphing System

The first of a two-part series in which the author reveals his complete system developed over several decades of angling.

DAVE WHITLOCK

THE NYMPH, not much more than a small pinch of fox-squirrel hair on a barbless #14 hook, somehow managed to hang tight for several shakey, nerve-tingling minutes of water-slicing runs, a wild tail walk, a countless head-shaking bottom rubs. Now the rod's pressure had its final job—beaching my catch. The magnificent rainbow showed its wide crimson side as it swayed back and forth then rolled to rest on the fine gravel. The trout's long mouth opened and closed rapidly to gulp and flush the oxygen-rich flow of water over its gills.

I could not help but utter a few soft words of friendly re-assurance to this beautiful wild creature as I slackened the leader's pressure and reached to remove the nymph from its upper jaw. Before my fingers could touch the hook the trout's moving jaw dislodged and washed the nymph out and away from my fingers into the gravel. So I just passed my wet hand over the trout's head and along its smooth, cold, speckled length. How perfect it looked and felt. What a special experience the capture and release of any wild creature is!

Holding it just above its tail, I moved the big trout into a bit deeper water. Upright now, the fish began to swim into and up and across the current. It was gone now as surely as it had come to my nymph, free and wild. What a neat way to enjoy a big trout, I thought—with a method and tackle as sensitive as the dry fly and as sure a bet as a streamer. Nymphing is just that special to me!

DAVE WHITLOCK, author and artist, recently published *Dave Whitlock's Guide to Aquatic Trout Foods* and the *L.L. Bean Fly-Fishing Handbook*.



The author's system takes the mystery out of nymphing.

Nymphing, a broad description for fishing imitations of most immature aquatic insects and similar aquatic fish foods such as scuds, worms, snails, (pseudo-nymphs) is a fly-fishing method for most waters and seasons. For nearly 30 years now—since my fly-fishing friend and advisor, Thom Green of Tulsa, Okla., introduced me to nymphing on the White River in Arkansas—it has been my most consistent method of taking good fish through all four seasons wherever I have fished. I seldom nymph hook a fine trout and not think of Thom, Polly Rosborough, and Ted Trueblood for their influence and help in tying and fishing nymphs. Such natural aquatic foods are nearly always abundant and available for easy picking beneath the surfaces of streams and lakes every day of the year that the fish eat.

Nymphing now enjoys wide popularity among flyfishers in North America as the "in" way to catch the better trout a particular water has to offer. Not so just three decades ago

when I began nymphing. Nymphs were considered by most flyfishers to be just one niche above using worms or salmon eggs; wet flies and streamers were second and third to the dry fly. These well-established tackle standards, fishing techniques, and fly patterns allowed the newcomer to get a good start. Very little organized information had been published on modern nymphing tackle, methods and fly designs. I had all sorts of problems tying the right nymph designs, fishing them like naturals where and how the fish wanted them, detecting the takes, hooking and landing the fish. In the years since, I have studied and worked harder and longer to learn the method than any area of fly fishing in which I am involved. But the artificial nymphs have accounted for the majority of my better trout, landlocked salmon, and steelhead catches! Best of all, the system I prefer and find most effect is as easy and pleasant as dry-fly fishing.

Two Nymphing Methods

NYMPHS AND "PSUEDO-NYMPHS" (scuds, worms, leeches, snails, etc.)—significant trout and bass food—burrow into the bottom, crawl on bottom structures, swim or tumble near such structures and rise from such structures toward the surface to breathe, feed, and emerge in both flowing and still waters. To simulate these natural actions with a fake nymph, either of two lines are most commonly used: floating or sinking. Of these two I prefer the floating line method to accomplish the most effective system to fish nymphs. Sinking-tip or full-sinking lines hamper realistic nymph action and control as well as strike detection. A floating line with the appropriate rod, presentation, leader, and



DAVE WHITLOCK ILLUSTRATION

nymph density enables me to fish my nymphs effectively in most moving and still waters over a very wide scope of conditions and all seasons.

The Nymphhead Line

THE KEY TO ALL FLY FISHING and any specific system of fly design and technique is the fly line. My tackle system for nymphing employs a special floating line design (the nymphhead) to meet all the requirements of casting, presentation, fishing, strike detection, hooking, and fighting the nymphing fish—be it small or large char, landlocked salmon, trout, bass or other nymph-feeding species.

The nymphhead is a floating, shooting-taper line consisting of the following components:

1. **Backing**—100 to 150 yards of 12- to 18-pound test braided Dacron on the reel.
2. **Running line**—100 feet of 20- or 30-pound test flat nylon mono shooting line to the backing's end.
3. **Fly line**—the first 30 feet of double-taper or weight-forward floating or intermediate fly line. I generally prefer light pastel

colors. Dark grey, brown, or green are best for casting over very bright, shallow, smooth water surfaces.

4. **Leader**—a 6- to 7½-foot knotless tapered leader (2X, 3X, 4X) to the fly line's tip.

5. **Indicator**—A 1-inch piece of fluorescent-orange floating 9- or 10-weight fly line on the butt of the leader.

6. **Tippet**—a 24- to 60-inch section of 2X to 6X monofilament tippet material to the tip of the leader.

Putting a Nymphhead Together

THIS LINE SET-UP nearly eliminates the problems common to a full fly line attached to backing and leader that allows a big fish to hang up or break off during the fight. Each component and connection should be as smooth as possible:

1. The backing is attached to the reel with a Duncan loop knot.
2. I use Cortland Cobra flat monofilament running line in 20-pound test for 4-, 5-,

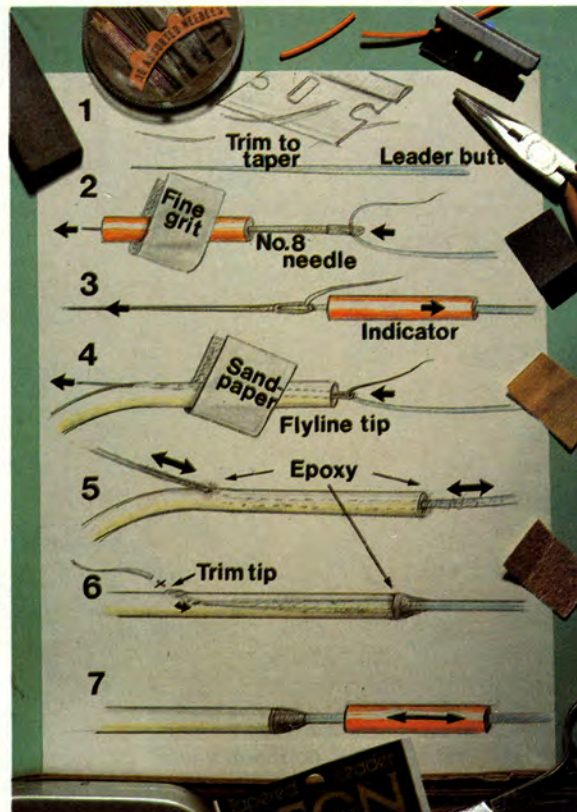
6-weight lines and 30-pound for 7-weight or larger lines. I attach it to the braided backing with a smooth epoxy-and-tying-thread splice. I prefer the red Cobra.

3. I join the running mono to the fly line with either an epoxy junction or a smooth needle knot. The popular loop-to-loop junction for shooting tapers is too bulky and troublesome going in and out of the rod's guides.

4. When I cut the fly line head I trim off most of the level tip back to where the taper begins, then measure 30 feet and cut again to give me a higher floating line tip and indicator, and the heavier line tip greatly improves the "tuck" cast. You might want to cut your nymphhead at 35 feet and trim it shorter in steps until you find the ideal length for your own specific needs and casting efficiency.

5. I attach the knotless leader butt to the fly line's tip with either an epoxy junction or a neat needle knot.

6. Slide the strike indicator over the leader tip with a size 7 or 8 needle and position it on the butt section.



The author's nymph-head line set-up offers smooth junctions and plenty of line sensitivity.

DAVE WHITLOCK ILLUSTRATIONS

NYPHEAD LINE NO KNOT JUNCTIONS

Flyline to Indicator and Leader

Oval (flat) mono to Flyline

Braided backing to Oval mono

7. Attach the tippet to the leader tip with a double surgeon's knot.

The nymphhead fly line casts, roll casts, mends, and picks up 50 feet just like a full double-taper or weight-forward floater. It allows me to make longer shooting casts—60 to 100 feet—with just one or two backcasts after the shooting mono fly line junction clears the tip top.

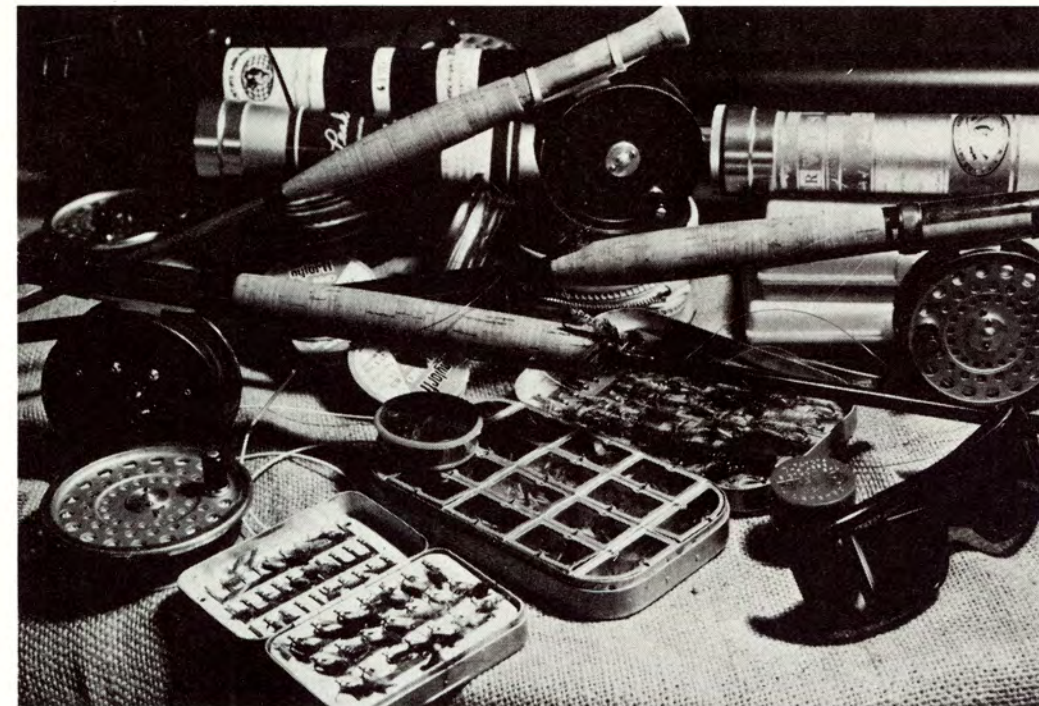
Each of the waters I fish, lake or river, demands casts to distant spots usually impractical with the conventional light-weight DT or WF floating lines. With the nymphhead a long cast simply requires a high, tight loop and shooting.

The shorter, less bulky fly line enables me to put 150 or more yards of backing on a reel made for 4- to 7-weight lines.

Strong, fast fish hooked with the nymphhead must really work to break the nymph off. Its 30 feet of fly line drastically reduces drag in the guides and surface film and the slick mono running line clears the reel, guides and water with smooth, nearly frictionless ease. The soft, flat Cortland Cobra shooting mono is relatively coil- and tangle-free even in cold weather. It also keeps my hands much drier during cold-weather nymphing than standard fly lines. When I hook a strong fish, smooth line junctions and the knotless leader prevent mishaps with rocks, weeds, brush, and rod guides.

The trouble-free, indestructible strike indicator moves up or down the leader's length to reach the various water depths at which I want to fish the nymph. The nylon-core, inch-long section of fly line easily "locks" on the leaders with a simple finger pull and twist of its end. Fluorescent orange seems to be the best color for visibility on most water and lighting conditions. (Another note on visibility: I use an easy-to-see, light-pastel fly line—yellow, ivory, tan or light green—for most of my nymphheads. However, when the water is calm, low and clear, a dark color—mahogany, green, gray—seems to frighten fewer fish than a light-color fly line.)

My nymphing leaders are soft-nylon monofilament and have a butt diameter of .018 inches to .020 inches. I use an extra long level tippet section of two to five feet for faster sinking, more natural movement, and lots of shock-absorbing stretch for handling rough, hard-fighting fish. Aeon knotless leaders and tippet materials are just perfect for my



DAVE WHITLOCK PHOTO

'A crisp graphite nymph rod gives me the touch of a safecracker.'

nymphing leader needs. Aeon is a bit shiney, so I dull its surface with extra fine, wet sandpaper. I also prefer to lightly tint the nymph leader and tippet with two- to three-inch variegations of Rit olive, gold and brown. So camouflaged, the leader does little to attract the fish's attention in bright light and clear water.

Weighted or unweighted nymphs do not require a dynamic leader taper to "turn them over and straighten them out" if that is how you want to present a nymph. For the majority of my nymph presentations I want them to fall on the water and sink under a very slack leader and tippet. A straight leader greatly inhibits a nymph from sinking and usually causes immediate drag in flowing water. The tuck cast or slack-leader cast works well for getting my nymphs down effectively.

I use the open Duncan loop or Uniknot for 90 percent of my nymph fishing to tie my nymph to my tippet. It helps my nymph to sink faster and move much more naturally in the water than either the more popular turtle or improved clinch knots. The Duncan loop does not affect the balance or "swim" or nymphs tied on turned-down, turned-up,

or straight-eyed hooks, but actually enhances their performance. When I use a large nymph with a very light tippet or encounter strong strikes in stillwater I leave the loop size about 1/3- to 3/4-inch long. This extra large loop acts like a miniature shock absorber for excess strike shock. I simply adjust the knot's tension so that it slips on itself at about 1/3 or 1/2 the tippet's breaking strength. Once a fish is unhooked the loop can be re-opened easily. I am so sold on this special nymph knot that I consider it a most significant part of my nymphing method.

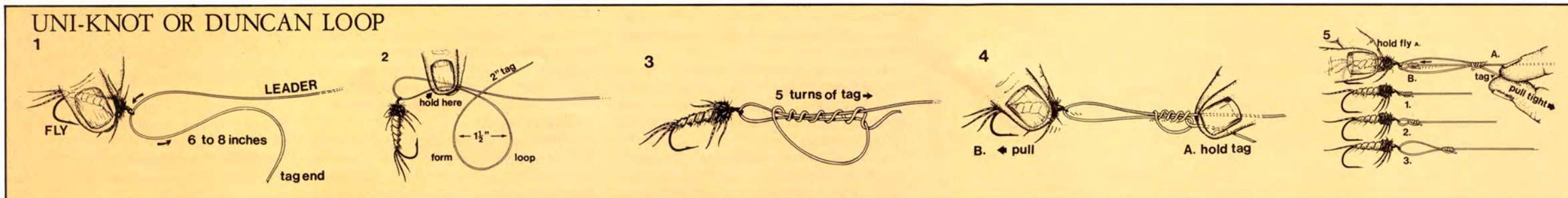
The Nymph Reel

A MEDIUM-SIZE QUALITY SINGLE-ACTION reel that holds the nymphhead plus 150 yards backing and has sensitive audible click drag with an exposed rim, will do very well as a nymph reel. During the past three years I have found that small, quality multipliers such as Shakespeare's Speedex series, do a superior job in keeping the fly line and fish under control. The multiplier has saved me a lot of time and fish, especially several big fish that I would have surely lost with a slower retrieving single-action fly reel.

The Nymph Rod

WHEN I BECAME A STUDENT of nymphing, a nymph rod was supposed to be a long, very willowly, slow-action rod of either glass or bamboo. I still own a fist-full of such rods, but time and experience has shown me that the slow action of traditional nymph rods was a handicap for pickups, casting, presentation, mending, strike detection, hook setting and handling fish. I now prefer a light 8 1/2- to 9 1/2-foot medium-fast or crisp-action graphite rod for nymphing. Such rods cast, present, mend, pick up and fish nymphs far better than slower rods.

They allow a smoother, more positive pick up, less false casting, more distance, tighter loops for "tuck" or slack-leader type nymph presentations and extremely positive line control or mending once the line is on the water. Though the key component of my nymphing method is the nymphhead fly line, the fly rod controls all the functions is this method. I mend much more when fishing with nymphs than even dry flies. Long, deep natural drifts where horizontal and vertical currents drag affects the nymph's path and speed require twice the mending that surface-floating flies require. A crisp graphite nymph rod gives me the touch of a safecracker. I can feel the fly line and nymph in the water better with the light stiff graphite rod. And striking with the rod is much more efficient and positive when a fish takes hold of the nymph because of the graphite's response.



Coming in the next issue of FFM: The flies and how to fish them in the Whitlock Nymphing System.

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