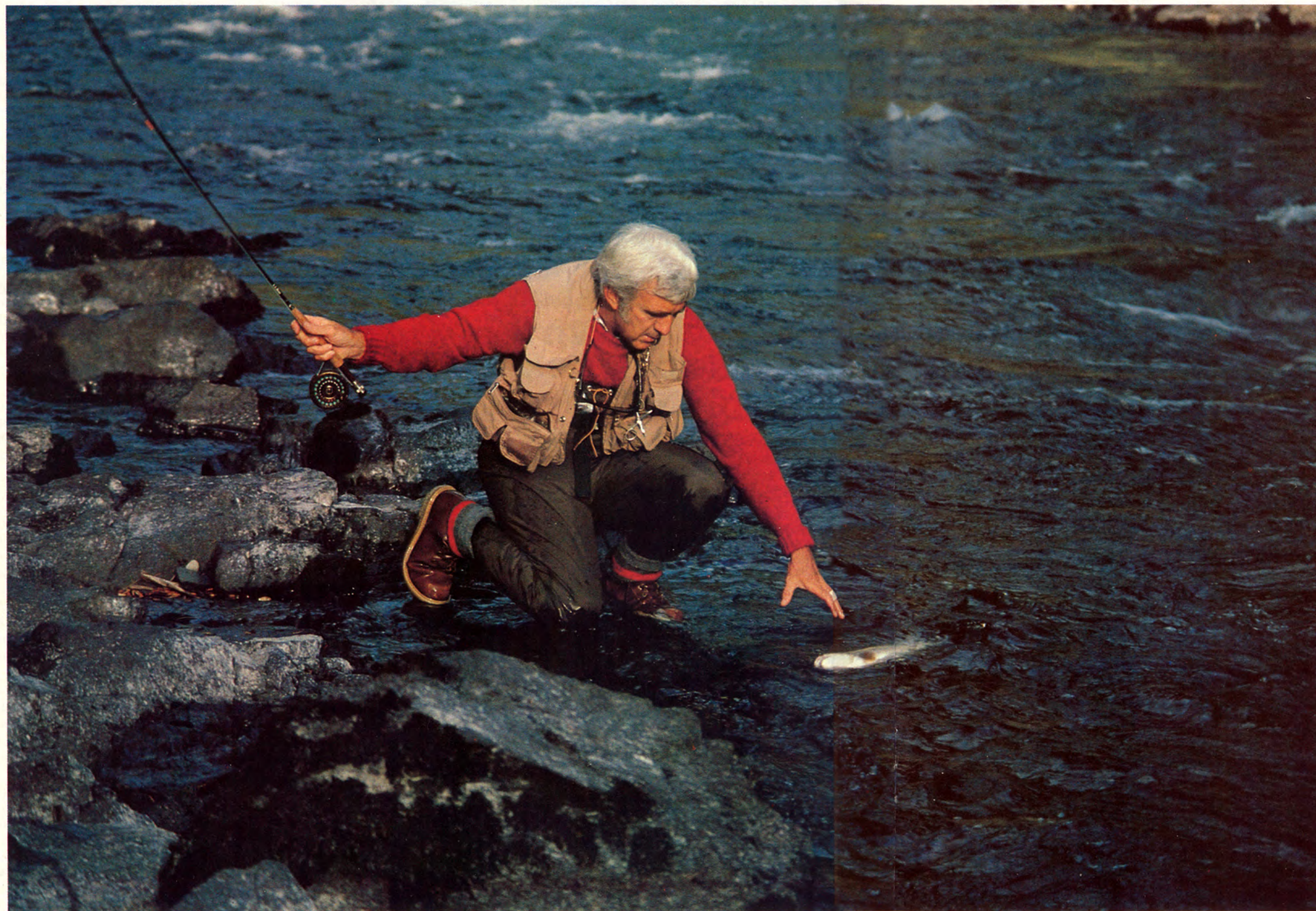


# Fishing Nymphs More Effectively

*Whitlock Nymphing System—Part II*



AUTHOR'S PHOTO

DAVE WHITLOCK

*(In the March 1983 issue of FFM, author, artist and angler Dave Whitlock discussed the tackle necessary for his time-tested nymphing system. In this, the second of his two-part series, Whitlock discusses the flies he uses, the philosophy and reasoning behind their design, and the techniques to fish them effectively.)*

**S**IMPLE, IMPRESSIONISTIC soft-bodied nymphs with sparse, soft feathers that suggest moving tails, legs, gills and antennae unquestionably are my favorites for imitating natural nymphs.

I am not opposed to well-designed, specific nymph imitations—I love to tie and use them myself—but in most cases the suggestive types work best. Most other nymph fishers with whom I fish catch the majority of their fish on such patterns as the Gold-Ribbed Hare's Ear, Dave's Red Squirrel-Hair Nymph, Polly's Casual, Ted's Otter Shrimp, Zugbug, AP Black, Troth's Stone, Dave's Sowbug and Gray Muskrat. These simple designs all look, act and feel alive and may suggest several choice foods to nymphing trout or bass. For instance, my favorite impressionistic nymph, the Red Fox Squirrel-Hair Nymph in #16 to #2, suggests scuds, sowbugs, caddis pupae, stonefly nymphs, burrowing mayfly nymphs, crayfish, crane fly larvae and damsel nymphs. After 10 to 20 casts the fly develops a distinct halo of loose hair over its body and gold rib. The more casts the fly survives, the better it seems to perform because of the "halo" effect.

The way the fly feels to a fish is one key to the soft nymph's success. A trout or bass will hold onto a soft nymph longer, allowing more time to set the hook. I am reasonably convinced that fuzzy nymphs may even temporarily "stick"

*Continued on page 62*

## Nymphing . . .

in the trout's mouth. They expel hard-bodied nymphs a lot faster.

I tie my simple nymphs in shapes, sizes and colors to simulate most of the aquatic nymphal and larval forms. I usually use one of three hook lengths—extra short (1X, 2X), medium (1XL, 2XL), and extra long (4XL to 6XL) to ape the lengths and body densities of naturals.

Nymph colors seldom need to be complicated or exotic. Most naturals change to blend with their environment. Mud, silt, sand, gravel, and bottom rubble are mostly combinations of tan, brown, rust, grey and black. Algae and aquatic vegetation add olive and green to the bottom. So my nymphs are usually tan, grey, brown, black or olive with a little of the other colors blended in. For example my scud-nymph is grey with tan and olive tints.

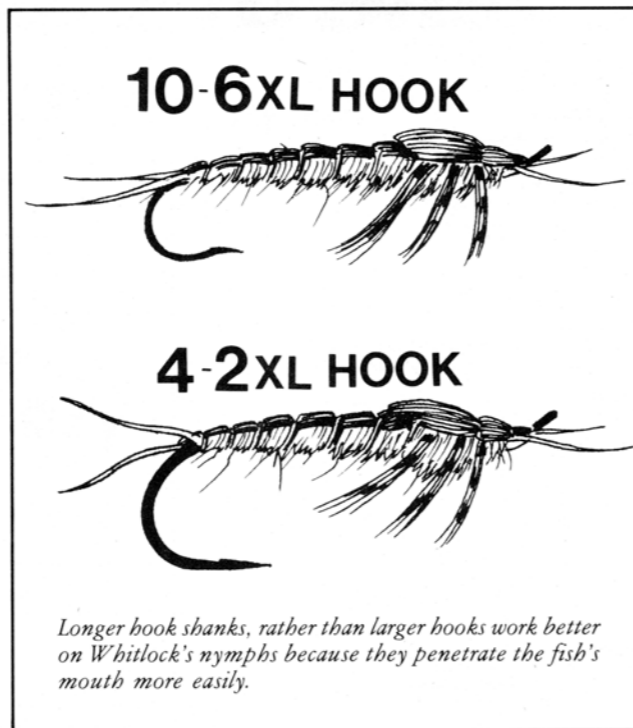
I prefer light- or medium-wire hooks with the barb bent down and points extremely sharp. I like straight or turned-up eye hooks and often heat and bend turned down eyes straight or up to suit my needs. Sharp light-wire, barbless hooks penetrate and hold better than heavier barbed hooks. I prefer to use longer hook shanks rather than larger hook sizes because smaller hooks take less effort to set in a fish's mouth. A #10, 4XL hook is better than a #6 regular.

My floating-line system depends on nymph shape, density and presentation to get the nymph to a feeding or relaxed fish. Floating and emerger nymphs are not weighted. An unweighted nymph tied with very absorbent, soft materials and soft, sparse appendage materials will break the surface film and sink fairly well, especially if it is presented with a good hard "tuck" cast.

For faster sinking nymphs, I use lead or copper wire to weight the hook shank. I generally weight my nymphs on the heavy side for my floating-line method. Fast-sinking nymphs save fishing time. I can easily correct my presentation to compensate for too much weight.

Occasionally I use split-shot or lead twist-ons on the tippet just above the nymph to sink it fast or very deep—in streams and lakes, I most consistently take more and larger fish by keeping the nymph on or near the bottom.

When fishing a nymph near weeds, I avoid irritating hang-ups by using a simple nylon loop snag-guard on



nymphs #12 and larger (smaller sizes do not perform well with the guard). The nylon monofilament should be 1/2 to 3/4 of the diameter of the hook's wire and should extend from the bend of the hook 1/2 gape below the point, under the nymph and up through the hook's eye. Maxima or Mason tippet materials are ideal for these guards.

### Whitlock's Nymphing Technique

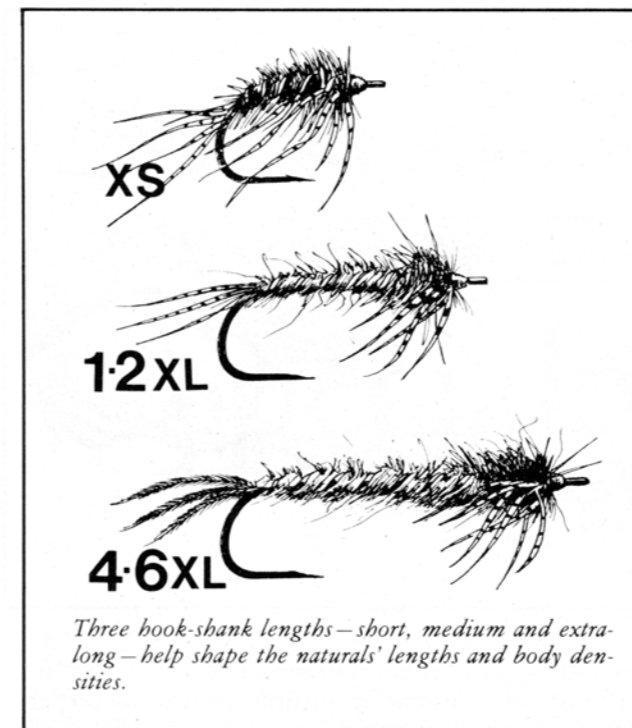
I CHOOSE NYMPHS TO MATCH the following conditions: water level, depth, speed, temperature, and clarity as well as the season, the fish, natural nymph forms available to them, and what I feel would be right based on past experiences. Unless there is a major emergence of a particular insect I try to select a nymph that will fish best under the conditions at hand.

I match the tippet size to the nymph size, usually 2X for #2, #4, and #6; 3X for #6, #8 and #10; 4X for #12, #14, and #16; and 5X or 6X for #16, #18, and #20. The nymph is tied on with a Duncan loop knot.

I prepare my nymph leader at streamside, coating the line's tip and the first 12 inches of butt section and indicator with a paste floatant such as Mucilin or Dave's Bug Flote to keep the indicator on top. I rub the remainder of the leader and nymph with some waterside mud to wet and deodorize them. It seems to me that a new artificial nymph must stink to fish: the more I use a nymph the better it catches fish.

If fish are showing, I cast the nymph like a dry fly to achieve the proper depth and drift to cover the fish. As with the dry, I try to keep the nymph acting as normal as possible. In such cases if a dead drift will not take the showing fish, I use an emerger (Leisenring) lift, usually with good results.

If no fish are showing, I fish the bottom with a dead drift,



covering as much water as I can with each cast. This method works best by tuck casting up and across stream with about 40 feet of line and leader. To make a tuck cast, cast a *tight fast* overhead loop. Just as the leader begins to unroll, check its progress with a short pull on the rod to cause the nymph to snap under the line and leader and strike the water's surface sharply. The leader falls slack over the nymph. The up-and-across angle allows the nymph to drift down past my position about 15 to 20 feet away. As the nymph passes I pivot and follow the line with my rod until the line, leader and nymph are fully extended downstream. I do not strip much fly line in as the nymph comes downstream. I control line slack by raising my arm and rod. Then I lower them to let the current carry the nymph downstream of my position.

With a good tuck or slack-leader cast the nymph sinks quickly as it comes downstream with the current. I know approximately where the nymph is by watching the floating leader butt and indicator, and I try to keep it drifting naturally with the current's flow.

Keeping the leader *downstream* of the floating line helps keep the nymph drifting at the same speed as the current.

### Using the Strike Indicator

THE INSTANT THAT THE NYMPH, leader and line settle on the water the object of my complete attention is my strike indicator. I never take my eyes off it until I pick up for the next cast.

As the nymph sinks and drifts downstream most fish, especially the larger wild ones, simply intercept and inhale the fly nonchalantly. The moment the fish takes, the indicator moves differently than it does in a normal drift.

The indicator may seem to slow down, twitch, dart upstream, stop or duck under. When *any one* of these hap-

pen, *however slight*, I react with a quick, short left-hand line strip and a brisk side-arm rod strike downstream of the hit. If the nymph is in the fish's mouth this will hook it; if not, the nymph is merely jerked several feet and continues its drift. After a few hours or days of using the strike indicator you will understand what I am describing. In time you will "read" the indicator so well that you will recognize whether it is a fish or obstacle your nymph has encountered.

Most anglers cannot respond *instantly* when the indicator shows a take. They see the indicator react but simply take too much time to strike. That pause is enough to miss most takes, for the fish usually spits out the nymph as soon as the line and leader begin to drag on its mouth.

Most of the fish I take are nose- or lip-hooked—not in the corner of the mouth as they are without an indicator. When a trout takes a dry fly it is usually lip- or nose-hooked because you see and react to the take. If you do not see the take, and the fish hooks itself, the hook will lodge in the corner of the mouth. When most of your nymph-caught fish are lip- and nose-hooked, that is solid proof that you *saw* the takes.

The indicator not only will enable any nymph fisher to take more fish but more larger fish even during non-feeding periods. To take streamers or dry flies, the fish must make a significant move to catch the fly. The natural drift of the floating nymphhead line allows you to force feed such reluctant trout or bass by putting the fly right on their noses.

### Stillwater System Nymphing

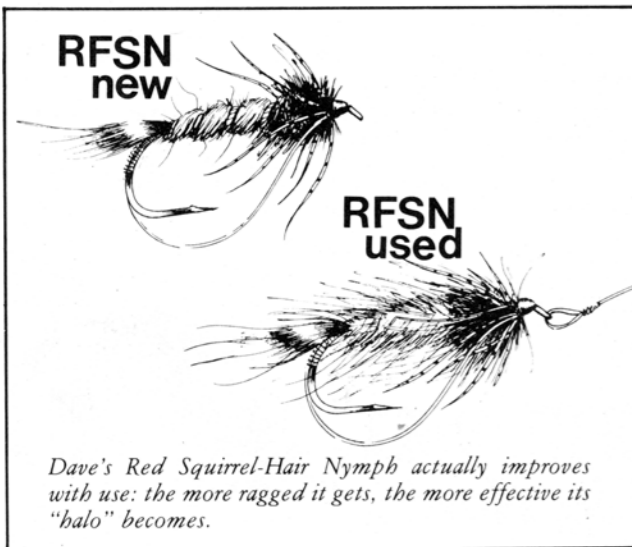
NYMPHING STILLWATERS with the floating nymphhead is as effective as stream nymphing but most practical when the nymph is to be fished from the surface down to 10 feet.

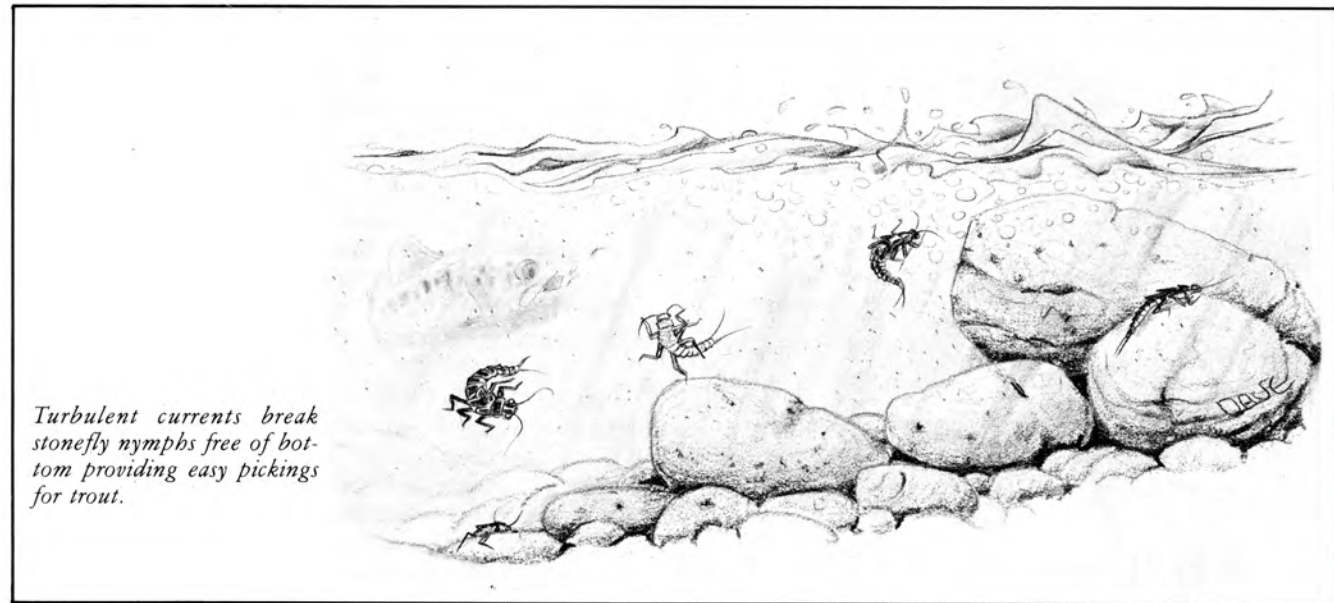
Most stillwater trout and bass cruise to hunt nymphs. But when they're not cruising they stay suspended in deeper, comfortable areas such as creek beds, drop-offs, moss beds and spring holes. Even during such inactive periods, they will still take a well-presented nymph.

When I see a rise or a cruising fish I cast the nymph well ahead of the fish so that the fly mimicks the naturals when the fish spots it. If the natural nymphs are emerging to the surface or hatching in the surface film I work my fly to imitate the naturals.

For floating nymphs I merely present the fly on my side of the approaching fish. I often twitch the fly to get the fish's attention, and then I wait and watch for the take.

To mimick emerging nymphs I present the nymph well in advance on a stacked or tucked leader tippet, let it sink and begin to swim it up as the trout comes into close range of it. The nymph, tippet and mid-section of the leader must be wet to sink through on film on still, smooth-water surfaces. I want the line tip, eight to 12 inches of butt and the indicator to float, so I grease them generously with mucilin or Dave's Bug Flote. I lower my rod tip to the water's surface and take up all the slack as the nymph and leader sink. I want a direct no-slack contact between the nymph, line, rod tip and my hands to feel a take and strike immediately. A high rod tip—fine for streams—negates my line and nymph control on stillwaters. I usually see emergers taken at the surface but if the nymph is too deep or the surface is choppy, I rely on the indicator and feel to help detect the take.





*Turbulent currents break stonefly nymphs free of bottom providing easy pickings for trout.*

DAVE WHITLOCK ILLUSTRATION

I retrieve the nymph with my left hand, sliding the line through the fingers of my right hand. I try not to use the rod tip to impart action because it hinders line control and strike sensitivity. I watch the water and the fish's behavior as it approaches. Takes in stillwater usually are slower than you would expect, so you must delay striking until you are sure that the fish has taken the fly. For some reason, trout usually take the nymph twice before they give it up, so if I miss the first take I keep the nymph swimming.

To fish nymphs deep, I cast my heavily-weighted nymph on a long, slack tippet so it will sink vertically and fast. I watch the leader pull beneath the surface, and when it stops I know the nymph is on bottom. Since the fly line, leader and tippet are in a more-or-less straight line, both the indicator and my sense of feel signal the take nearly at the same time. The indicator is usually first to warn me with a dip under the surface! **I STRIKE THEN!** If a fish takes and comes toward me, the line feels as though the nymph is no longer there. **I STRIKE IMMEDIATELY.**

I strike by making a quick, short line pull with my left hand, keeping the line under my right hand on the grip. I follow the strip with a slow, smooth lift of the rod's butt—not the *tip*. If I miss I keep the nymph coming as before, holding the line between my left thumb and index finger and loosely under the right index finger on the rod handle so that if the fish strikes, it will not break off against the tight line.

Stillwater nymphs are slower-moving than nymphs in streams, so I am careful not to overswim them. Slow, short, erratic or smooth animation is best. Inch-long moves are natural. Nymphers new to stillwater fishing usually are too impatient to let the nymph sink and retrieve it slowly.

The nylon snag guard is especially useful for swimming nymphs through weeds, moss and brush. When a large, resting trout or bass is under rock ledges, sunken trees, stumps, lilies or mossbeds, the snag guard allows you to force feed them by putting the fly right in front of the fish.

Fishing nymphs from a boat or in the wind can be difficult unless you stabilize your floating platform and pick the

right casting angle. Tubes or boats should be held in place by anchor, pole or paddle. If you drift, you will lose 50 percent or more of your control.

When it is windy I try to cast down-wind, not across or up-wind, to prevent excessive slack. A nymphhead made with an intermediate fly line and a greased leader butt, indicator and tip section performs well in the wind.

### Nymphing Seasons With the System

I FISH NYMPHS ALL YEAR LONG with good results because natural nymphs are always available and make easy prey. Even during major hatches or spinner falls, trout will take nymphs, especially in very cold-weather waters or when exceptionally warm or cold water forces trout or bass into spring seeps or deep water in search of more comfortable temperatures.

In very cold streams I fish my nymphs slow, deep and with very little action. Very large, weighted nymphs (#1/0–#6) to seem to work best when the streams are large, fast, and have deep runs and pools. For smaller, slower streams, one medium-size nymph or a cast of two small nymphs work better. In either case, fish usually take very slowly and easily. I make a lot more casts to a winter holding spot than I would in warmer water. Trout and bass in very cold water seem to feed in slow motion.

For early spring or winter nymphing in fast water, I use a split shot or lead twist-on to slow the nymph's drift. I also tuck-cast almost straight up-stream or slack-line cast directly downstream getting the nymph down faster and drifting it without any vertical or horizontal drag to bring the nymph straight to the fish's mouth. The take is slower and the fish holds onto the fly much longer in cold water.

Nymphing has taken giant strides in a few decades, and I like to think that my system has helped move it forward.

Just remember it is not limited to one time of the year, one type of water or one species of fish. It is truly universal, all year for trout, bass, panfish, landlocked salmon, catfish, whitefish, char, alewife, steelhead, suckers, crumb, alewife, walleye and carp!

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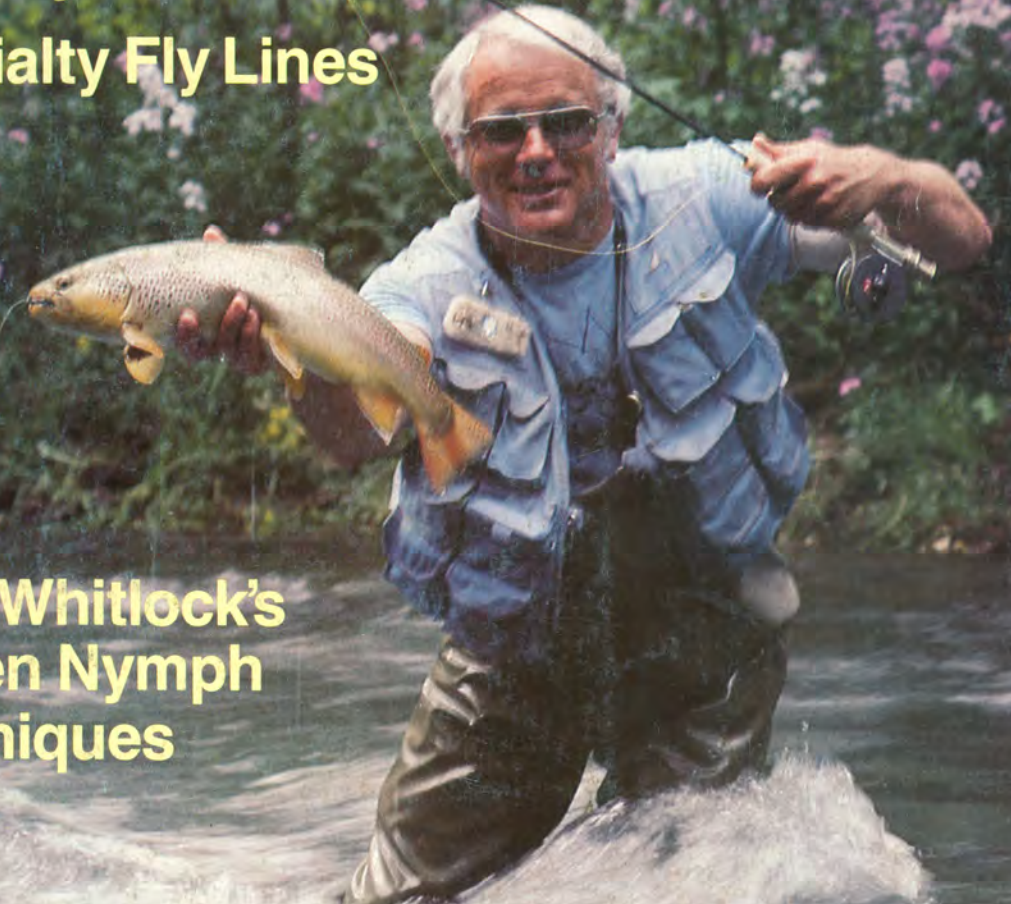
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