

Midging

Successful midge fishing begins with a well-designed tackle system.

DAVE WHITLOCK

TROUT EAT THE MOST dramatic range of food sizes and forms of any freshwater fish I have ever encountered. Food organisms eaten by trout range from as large as one foot (300 mm) long to as tiny as 1 mm. Fly fishing is the only angling method yet conceived that can successfully cope with the wide variety of food types and sizes in a trout's diet.

It is the smallest food extreme that requires the ultimate in refined tackle, tiny flies and precise technique. This highest plateau is called midging.

Little Importance.

SOME FLYFISHERS REFER to all tiny aquatic and terrestrial insects as midges, but, strictly speaking, midges are aquatic insects. In many areas midges constitute a major percentage of the trout's annual diet. Anglers often miss out on significant midging opportunities because they quickly become frustrated by the problems of limited tackle, flies or techniques. Their frustration leads some of these fishermen to completely ignore midges.

Many anglers fail to appreciate how much most trout depend on midges. From the first time they feed on insects as tiny fry, through the remainder of their lives, trout in both streams and lakes learn to rely on midges as a food source. Just as humans nibble away on peanuts, raisins and popcorn, trout steadily nibble away at insects of proportionally similar size and weight. Midges often are the most abundant and most accessible of the annual aquatic trout foods, especially in stillwaters and slow- to medium- speed flowing streams.

The Hatches

MIDGING CAN BE LOOSELY classified as fly-fishing with imitations of smaller aquatic and terrestrial insects, usu-

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ally in #16 to #28, or even #32. Mayflies, caddis, diptera, ants and beetles are most common. But midging in its purest form is the purposeful matching of true aquatic diptera insects. Diptera simply implies two-winged insects. Aquatic dipterans that trout most often feed on are midges, blackflies, deerflies, craneflies and mosquitos.

Midges (particularly of the order of Chironomidae) provide the most classic type of midging. They have a four-stage aquatic life cycle of egg, larva, pupa and adult. Hardly a day passes on open water when some significant

subsurface and surface midge activity is not present. Trout normally feed willingly on the ever-present midges. When most other significant insect hatches have passed due to seasonal warming or cooling, the midges remain, particularly in the colder months.

Midge larva, pupa, and adult stages vary in size from 2mm to 30mm (25mm = 1 inch), but average about 4mm to 7mm (from #18 to #26 hook sizes). If you live near waters inhabited by the giant Chironomidae (10 to 20mm, #8 to #14), you may find imitation a much easier job. Standard dry and nymph techniques and tackle

in the five- to seven- weight range works well for these oversize members of the Chironomidae family. Classic midging, where flies in #18 to #32 range must be used, is another story.

Midge activity has always frustrated trout fishermen. The sight of trout selectively gobbling almost invisible midges while almost totally ignoring or fleeing perfectly respectable ties of larger flies has sent some anglers home in frustration. Perhaps as a result midges have often been called the "fisherman's curse." Ignoring a fine midge hatch by whipping the water with a big streamer is a



DAVE WHITLOCK PHOTO

cop-out if you really enjoy the sport of flyfishing. I know because for almost 15 years I let the tiny bugs bug me.

Midge Tackle

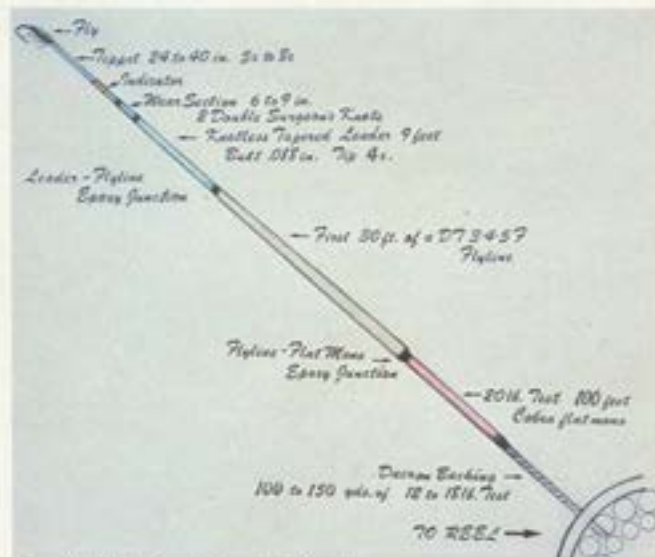
REFINED TACKLE AIDS in casting, fishing, hooking and consistently landing trout that selectively feed on midges.

The key to midge tackle is elimination of excess friction between the trout and your rod, line and reel. A six- or seven- weight trout rig will not consistently cope successfully with long 6X, 7X and 8X leaders, tiny hooks and strong, wild fish.

An ideal midging system must be calibrated to cast these tiny flies precisely, delicately and to fish them correctly. The components in the system must not cause problems when hooking, fighting and landing trout on such small hooks and light tippets. Finely tuned tackle also helps you develop a sensitive feel for midging. That special feeling or touch allows you to take trout on midges, and it allows you more enjoyment from each hook up.

Midge Fly Lines

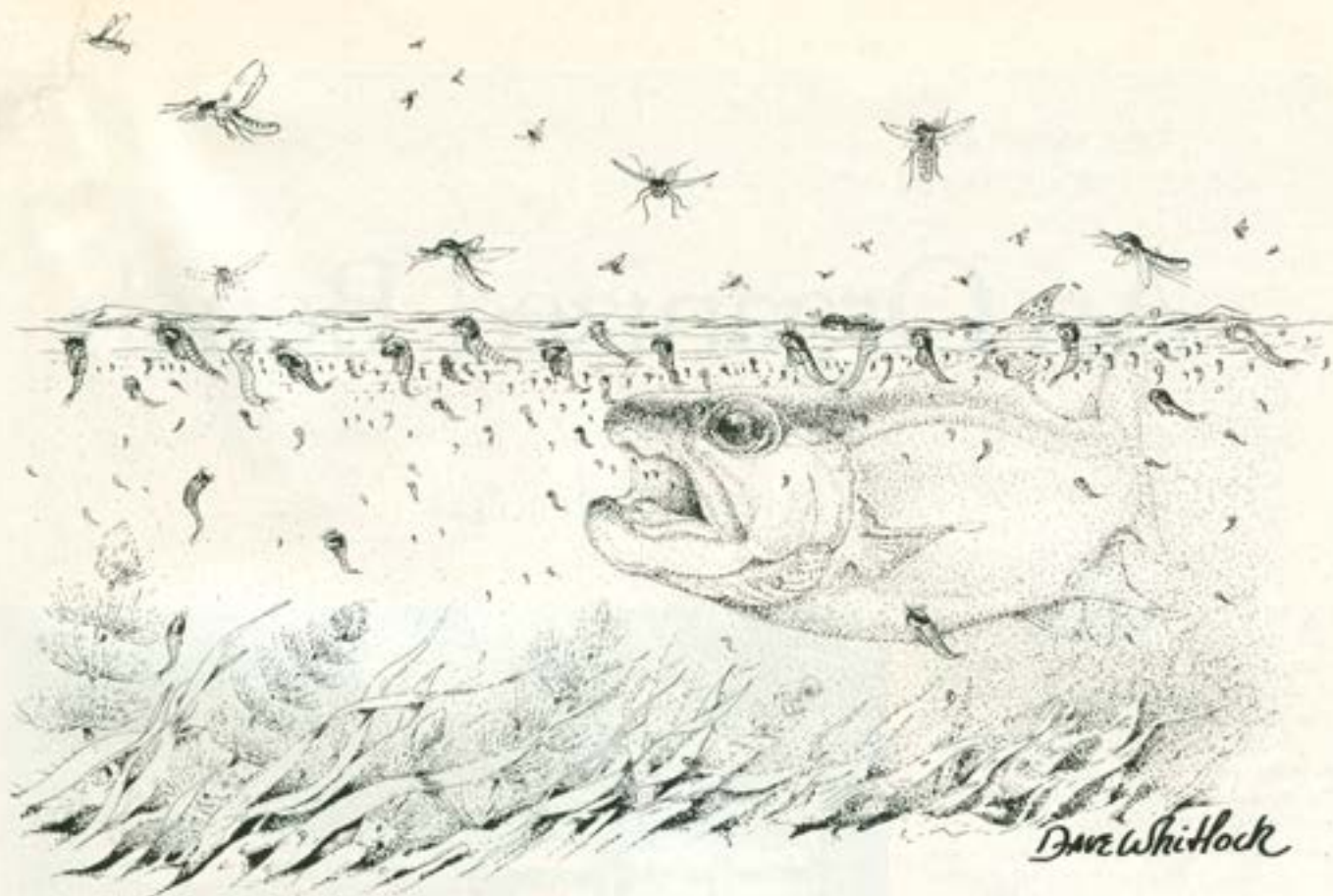
THE FLY LINE IS THE KEY component in a balanced fly tackle system. It provides the controlled casting weight which delivers the fly to the target area. For midging with #18 and smaller flies, I recommend a line weight no heavier than five-, and preferably four-, three- or two-weight, as circumstances allow. The smallest sizes delicately deliver and fish midges effectively in the mid to close casting ranges (20 to 50 feet), over very clear, calm, shallow waters. Sizes four and five do a better job in wind or if longer casts are necessary.



Dave Whitlock's midging tackle system.

DAVE WHITLOCK ILLUSTRATION

For most of my midging, I prefer a floating midge shooting-taper line design. My second choice for midge fishing is a weight-forward line. I prefer these line systems over double-taper lines because they cast and present a midge fly just as well as the double-taper, yet they reduce time consuming and fish-scaring false casting when extra distance is required. They also drastically reduce critical guide and water drag when a trout over a pound begins to run and pull line out. A good run or jump by a spunky native trout can easily snap a tender tippet or tear a tiny hook from its lip with the water friction of 60 or 70 feet of fly line.



The midge-head fly line casts well to any practical distance with minimum false casting, while presenting and fishing the midge correctly and allowing more room on the reel for backing. It also drastically reduces drag and knot problems while fighting and landing a trout.

Pastel line colors are most practical, but I also carry an extra midge-head or weight-forward line in a low-visibility, dark brown or green color when casting in bright light and over clear, shallow, calm surfaces. A flashing, airborne line puts surface film midge feeders down fast. Neither light or dark lines seem to disturb trout once the line is on the water.

Leaders

THE LEADER AND TIPPET are critical tackle components in presenting and fishing the fly properly. They should not stress or tangle during the fighting or landing.

The midge leader should be knotless and seldom needs to be longer than 12 feet. For best performance, it should have a small, limp butt section that matches the flexibility of the fly-line tip. The best midge leaders have a long tippet section to allow the fly to be fished as drag-free and naturally as possible and to absorb the shocks of hooking, fast runs, hard head-shakes or encounters with underwater obstructions.

I prefer a 7-1/2- or 9-foot knotless leader with a long level tippet section one size smaller than the leader's tip. A 7-1/2 foot, 6X knotless tapered leader with 30 to 40 inches of 7X tippet material is typical of this leader construction. Most leader tippets are weaker than the same tippet material, so step down in size to compensate. Make the leader-to-tippet connection using a double sur-

geon's knot. Don't become obsessed with the "perfect leader turnover." Most larva, pupa and adult midge flies look more natural and fish better if the tippet and fly are relaxed on the water.

On the leader/tippet junction, install either a 1/2-inch section of very small fluorescent-colored fly line or a tiny tuft of nylon tow yarn. These function as critically important locator/strike-indicator aids, which help you to see the nearly invisible midge or to detect subsurface strikes.

Backing

BACKING IS CRITICAL for two reasons. In open water almost any wild trout over two pounds can easily take more than 90 feet of fly line on its first run, and backing also serves to make the reel give line out and retrieve it more efficiently. I prefer at least 100 yards of braided 12-pound micro backing made from dacron.

Reel

THE IDEAL SINGLE-ACTION midge fly reel must have the capacity to carry the line and backing, in addition to having a very light, velvet-smooth drag. I prefer large-circumference, narrow-width reel designs (most common in the Hardy and Orvis product lines) over less practical, small-circumference, wide-width fly reels. They simply give and take line more efficiently with less tangling. An audible click-drag helps to tell when and how fast the trout is moving or how tired it is becoming. A palming rim is seldom necessary as small flies and super-fine tippets cannot handle the extra drag pressure they provide.

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I certify the statements made by me above are correct and complete.

JOHN RANDOLPH, Editor

Midging...
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DAVE WHITLOCK ILLUSTRATION

Rod

THE MIDGE FLY ROD should cast and deliver line, leader and fly softly and precisely from 20 to 60 feet. It must mend and handle line on the water as well. On the strike it should set the hook without shearing the leader tippet or tearing the hook out. As the trout lunges against the line and the rod's pull, the rod must dampen this shock while maintaining a constant but delicate tension. For these reasons, I prefer a rod with a much softer or more supple action than I use for regular trout fishing. The rod's length should seldom be less than 7-1/2 feet and not over 9 feet. The midge rod can be made from bamboo, glass, graphite or boron, as long as its overall action is soft and it casts a relatively tight loop at slower line speeds. The tight loop is necessary for precise presentation and the slow-moving, small line size allows delicate presentations.

The sensitive midge rod, like the fly line's matching tapered leader, should have a gradual taper from tip to handle to control, but eventually check and tire, any trout without tearing the hook out or breaking the leader tippet.

Small But Tough

THE PROPER MIDGE TACKLE set-up in me instills a unique respect and pleasure seldom felt with heavier tackle. Although it may be light and small, it is not an impractical toy. A properly assembled midge outfit is an efficient tool for coping with fly-fishing's ultimate matching-the-hatch game.

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Midging...

A properly matched system will surprise you with its effectiveness in fishing small flies correctly, and hooking and controlling large, hard-fighting fish. For me, there is no pleasure or satisfaction greater than taking a 20-inch trout on a #20 midge, but even trout half that size are twice the fun on such sensitive tackle.

Midging is playing the trout's best game where the odds are usually in his favor.

Whitlock's Midgehead Fly Line

1. Head: First 30 feet of a floating or intermediate 2-, 3-, 4- or 5-weight double-taper or weight-forward line.
2. Leader: 7-1/2 or 9 feet, 5X, 6X or 7X knotless, tapered leader with a butt diameter of .018 inches or less.
3. Tippet: 30 or 40 inches of 5X, 6X, 7X or 8X material.
4. Locator/Strike Indicator: 1/2 inch of fluorescent orange, 3- or 4-weight fly line.
5. Shooting Mono: 100 feet of 20-pound (flat) Cortland Cobra monofilament or Amnesia mono.
6. Backing: 100 yards of 12-pound braided-dacron "Micron" backing.

Construction Steps

1. Tie backing to fly reel with Duncan loop knot.
 2. Attach shooting mono to backing with thread and Super Glue splice.
 3. Tie head end to shooting mono with a Needle Knot, epoxy or Super Glue splice.
 4. Tie leader butt to head tip with a Needle Knot, epoxy or Super Glue splice.
 5. Tippet to leader tip with a Double Surgeon's knot.
- Make all midge-head component connections neat, small and smooth. Overcoat each junction with Dave's Flexament or Pliobond to further enhance a smooth, strong, trouble-free connection.

You may vary components lengths to accommodate better your personal needs. The sizes and length specs shown are just a general guide.

(In part 2 of his article on midge fishing, Dave Whitlock will discuss the midge life cycle, appropriate fly patterns, strike indicators and locators, and hooking, fighting and landing trout on midges. THE EDITORS)