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Subject: : Beginner Forum

Topic: : Tippet size selection

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I have been thinking about what I believe to be common misconceptions among beginning FFers.

I thought back to when I was a 14 year old beginner, that only really knew what I was told by fly shops, magazines, and the odd TV show.

Without a doubt, the one biggest misconception that I had was about tippet size.

Beginning fly fishermen, for whatever reason, seem to feel that fly fishing is about light, delicate tippets. There is a culture of overestimating trout's sensitivity to tippets, IMO, and it results in a lot of beginners with twisted tippets and break offs.

I have found the following points to ring true:

1. Tippet size is primarily a function of fly size.

If you're fishing a size 12 or 14 dry fly on 7 or 8x, you probably will experience line twist. The tippet is too supple to prevent twist while casting or retrieving flies. 4 or 5x is much better suited for flies of that size.

2. Trout can see 4x. Trout can see 8x. Trout can see 12x. Using smaller tippet DOES help you to achieve a better presentation. This is because it's more limber, and allows you to get a better drift. Often, I have found that the same effect can be achieved by using a longer piece of heavier tippet, and working on my presentation. There is no magic formula for presentation. It takes practice and hours on the water. Using lighter tippet is a crutch, IMO, and can be substituted with better presentation skills.

In situations where presentation isn't much of a concern, such as a brookie stream, there is no reason to use any less than 3x. I prefer 1x. It saves flies from trees and brush, requires less re-ties, and in the off chance that I hook a nice fish, allows me to keep it out of structure.

I do concede that there are cases where the larger diameter tippet could cause a fish to reject a fly in VERY occasional circumstances. It is certainly not the case often. This is just a guess, but your average fly angler would be (un)lucky to encounter such a situation MAYBE once per year.

Consider the following:

If the trout can detect the minute differences between 5 and 7x tippet, why does it ignore the colossal metal spear coming out of the "bug"'s rectum? Food for thought.

Regarding pressured fish:

I used 0x to 2x for the bighorn river. It's possibly one of the hardest fished rivers in the world.

3. Break offs should be rare in typical PA fishing situations (excluding steelhead, salmon, and other "big game" situations).

Breaking a trout off should NOT be a common thing. I usually only have break offs in the following situations:

- My tippet is frayed or nicked.
- I tied a bad knot
- I horsed a large fish
- A fish ran into structure
- The fish made a last ditch run as I was attempting to land it, and I didn't give it line.

I cannot remember the last time I broke a trout off. I typically nymph with 2x-4x and fish dries with 4 or 5x.

When I made the decision to stop using light tippets, I DID notice my catch rate drop, due to my bad presentation. The tippet had been hiding my flaws. In the year or two since then, my presentation has improved to the extent that I do not see it as a handicap in any way.

I anticipate people to chime in with what they think to be exceptions to this, because their pet streams are tougher in their eyes. If so, I welcome them to try heavier tippet and work on their presentation. It'll allow them to safely land fish with less stress, save flies, and become a better angler.

Thoughts, disagreements, comments welcomed. This is an opinion post, but I'm pretty close to positive that it's correct. Plenty of respectable anglers that I have met disagree. I think they're incorrect here, but would like to hear any arguments to the contrary.