

WISDOM OF THE CAST AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVE HUGHES

By Bill Forward



Over the years, Dave Hughes has vividly shared his familiarity with where trout are found, what they eat, and how they are caught in over 20 books he has written on the subject of fly fishing. Titles include: *Trout Flies*, *Handbook of Hatches*, *Trout Rigs and Methods* and *Reading the Water*. His latest work, *Nymphs for Streams & Stillwaters*, is information packed for both fly tier and aspiring fly fishing nymphers alike. It is safe to say, if you don't have a few of his books in your library now, you eventually will. As I spoke with Dave in Denver, at the Fly Fishing Retailer's Show, it immediately became clear that an interview with him on the subject of nymphing would be extremely fitting for *Sierra Fisherman*. Here are a few excerpts from that interview.

Q. Dave, what three skills do you consider essential for beginning nymph fly anglers to master?

I give a seminar that I call the Elements of Fly Fishing For Trout. It consists of a slide show aimed at each of what I consider the essential elements: Reading Water to find the trout, and to avoid wasting time fishing empty water; Selecting Trout Flies, so you're fishing something suited to the situation in which you find yourself; and Tactics For Trout, in which I

emphasize the few basic rigs and tactics that fish the flies you've selected in the correct ways. Those three skills... reading water, selecting flies, and a core of tactics are the most important skills to master.

Q. Fly anglers tend to accumulate boxes of nymphs. You have suggested organizing those nymphs into three distinct go-to-boxes, based on two broad categories, 1) Searching and 2) Imitative. Briefly explain this model, and how following it might help an angler.

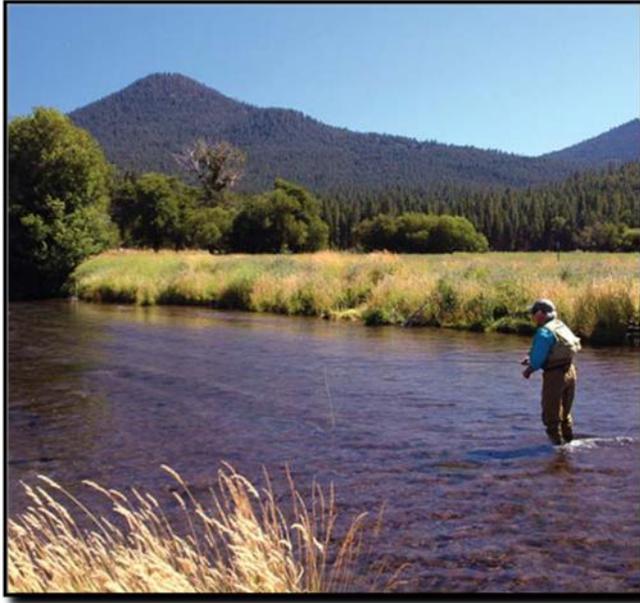
I own a few boxes of nymphs. I got tired of carrying all of them in order to have the core of nymphs that I actually fish. One day I condensed all of my nymphs into one monstrous box, and carried that for awhile, but found it unwieldy. At the beginning of one recent winter, I bought a new modestly-sized fly box, started tying my core dozen or so searching nymphs into it, and found, when finished, that I was carrying a lot less weight, but was catching a lot more trout. Then I got another box, and began tying specific imitations into it, for those situations when I needed something that couldn't be found in the more general box. As that one filled up, I found that I could solve more and more situations. Finally, I bought another box and dedicated it specifically to stillwater nymphs, because lake and pond food forms overlap only slightly with stream and river forms. With that last box, I had all the nymphs that I needed, and not a lot of extra.

Don't get the idea, however, that I don't try new nymphs. I'd say about half the trout I catch each season are on nymphs that I've encountered, and added to my arsenal, within the last two or three years. Get your core organized, then experiment around it.

Q. Dave, based on tying materials rather than specific patterns, what groups of flies round out an angler's arsenal?

I like to think in terms of a few core fur nymphs— Dave Whitlock's Fox Squirrel comes to mind—and a few essential wire and tinsel-bodied nymphs—John Barr's Copper John and the late Larry Graham's Lightning Bug—and herl nymphs such as the Flashback Pheasant Tail and

Herl Nymph. Most of these are bead heads, or can be tied with beads; I'd feel naked going fishing without a good number of brass and tungsten beaded nymphs.



In terms of rounding out, if you fish stillwaters, you need to look closely at lake and pond insects and crustaceans, because trout in those waters get selective, even under water, and you need nymphs to resemble each of the things to which they might, on any given day, become selective. The flip side of that is this: lots of stillwater food forms are small to medium sized, say size 12 to 14, olive because they live on vegetation, for camouflage, and they move slowly, to keep from being noticed. So a size 12 to 14 olive nymph, say a damselfly or scud dressing or sparse Woolly Bugger, will usually do some devastation in a lake or pond.

Q. What is your line of choice for nymphing in streams? And how do you determine the length of leader to use with it?

I use a floating line, usually weight-forward but on some rods a double-taper, for about 95% of my nymph fishing. The only other line I use is what I call a depth-charge; the heaviest and fastest sinking line a rod will carry, for bombing deep nymphs and streamers...I've used that more often in Chile and Argentina than I have in the States and Provinces.

The leader length varies with the depth of the water I'm fishing. Assuming I'm trying to reach

the bottom, which I usually am, and assuming that I put my nymph on one end of the leader and my indicator toward the other end, which I also usually do, then I want my leader about 1-1/2 to 2 times the depth of the water. To simplify that, and my life as well, I have a 1-foot butt tied to my line tip, and I buy 7-1/2 foot tapered leaders in 3X. Then I build my tippets based on the situation. I used to tie my own leaders, but I ran out of room in my brain for the complexities of doing so.

Q. It is my understanding, that unless a specific hatch is occurring, you prefer searching with a two fly rig. Including fly size, how might you typically set that up?

I always want to give trout a clear choice: a large fly and small one, a bright fly and dark one, a beadhead and non-beaded one. Whatever flies you choose, make them have some rationale in terms of what lives in the water where you're fishing. For example, a salmon fly on the Deschutes River is rarely a mistake, because the river is full of them. They have a 3- or 4-year life cycle, so the earlier instars are always out there, the reason I downsize my imitations to 10's and 12's rather than the standard 4's and 6's. They always work.

The typical setup is a small fly at the point, usually size 16 to 20 and not weighted, a larger fly, anywhere from size 14 up to 8, about 10-12 inches above the small one; then two or three small split shot about 8-10 inches above the upper fly, if weight is needed. I often use putty weight; it's adjustable, and doesn't snag as much as shot. Then the indicator starts 1-1/2 to 2-1/2 times the depth of the water, depending on current speed.

It's critical to remember that conditions change as you move from one bit of water to another, and you need to constantly change the amount of weight on your leader, and the separation between the flies and the indicator.

Q. Current is faster on the surface than it is near the bottom in streams and rivers, and because of this, indicators tend to impart an unnatural speed on flies near the bed. How do you compensate for different current speeds

in the water column of a stream or river when using an indicator?

In his very fine book *Slack Line Strategies*, John Judy wrote about the hinged indicator method and the necessity to toss a roll mend right after the cast has landed. The object is to roll the indicator upstream from the nymphs, so it follows them rather than leading them. I try to use this method in all of my nymphing, and follow with constant mends that are attempts to keep the indicator from leading the nymphs. It doesn't always work, but the attempt is important.

Q. Acknowledging that fishing is regional as well as seasonal, suggest a couple of dry fly and dropper combinations our reader might consider.

My favorite is Jim Schollmeyer's Deer Hair Caddis, usually in size 12 or 14, above a size 16 or 18 Fox Squirrel Beadhead. I explore water a lot with that combination. If I can't see the Deer Hair, then I use a brighter Elk Hair Caddis. Randall Kaufmann's Stimulator makes an excellent support system for any nymph. I use it most often in spring, when golden stones are out, and usually drop an A. P. Black under it. Combinations are almost endless. They almost always consist of a high-floating hair-wing fly up top and a bead-head nymph beneath.

When using a dry and dropper rig, always remember to use a dry a size or two larger than the nymph, or it will simply sink. And use a tippet to the nymph a size lighter than that to the dry, or when you lose one, you lose all.

Q. When nymphing on moving water, how can inexperienced fly anglers determine the amount of weight to use, and where to place it in their rig?

That's an interesting question. I wrote an article on nymphing for *Field & Stream* once, and got a letter of criticism from a fellow in Massachusetts. He said he rigged as I advised in the article, and cast out, and all his rig did was sink at once to the bottom and sit there as if it were the anchor on a yacht. I'd fished the stream he mentioned; it was deep, but very slow. He

needed to lighten up, on both his weight and his criticism.

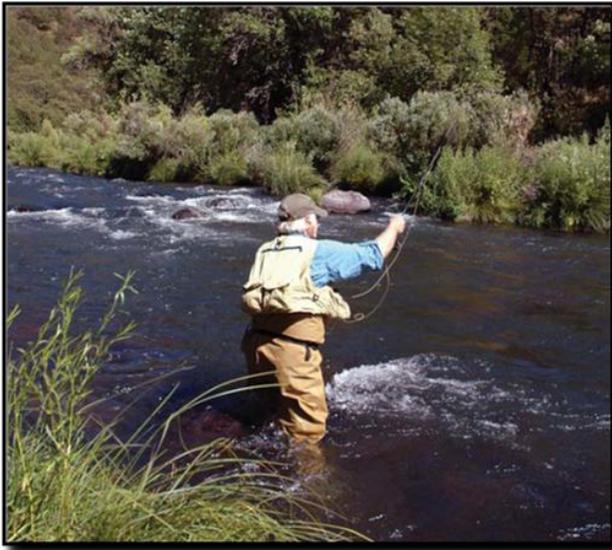
The key is adjusting to the water depth as well as the speed. A second key is to use two or three small shot rather than one large one. If you use a single big one, you can't adjust it. If you use small ones, you can add or subtract them. Putty weight is even more adjustable, the main reason I use it often. If your rig gets hung up on every cast, take off a shot, or pinch off some putty. If your indicator tells you you're never touching bottom, add a shot or some putty.

I'll have to say that the single thing you can do to change your nymphing is to add a split shot. I have no idea how many times I was sure I was fishing empty water, added a shot, and was suddenly into trout.

The shot should go 8-12 inches above the upper fly. I fish with the weight between the flies sometimes, but it seems to increase the number of times I'm forced to deal with the Gordian Knot. If your shot slips, by the way, rig with your tippet knot a few inches above the top nymph, and place your shot above the knot.

Q. Would you list a few factors fly anglers should consider when sizing up an unfamiliar body of moving water?

What I call 'winds and weathers' first: Is it winter, and cold, so you know you'll need to go down, and look for soft spots in currents, or is it summer, and somewhat warm, so you know you'll have a chance on dries? You'll have this first sense developing on your way to the stream; let's hope it's not a sense of foreboding. Then observe water conditions themselves: is it high and off color, or at the opposite end of the spectrum, low and clear? You'll rig to fish one way in one set of conditions, an entirely different way in a different set. Next look for active insects, or those at rest in streamside vegetation. They'll give you an idea what's going on, or has been. If something is hatching, you react to that...and probably don't fish nymphs. If nothing is happening, no insects are around, then you know you need to go down, at least until something starts to happen on the surface. Look for rising or cruising or holding trout. If you spot trout, then you know where they are, what they are doing, and it's much easier to respond.



Of course when you encounter a creek, stream, or river for the first time, you also want to get a sense for how to read its water, find its trout, and beyond that a sense for whether this is the kind of water you like or dislike...yuck; you might take a glance and head elsewhere; you might as likely fall in love. Go with these hunches; hunches are based on experience, and your experience, ultimately, becomes the best guide to how you should react to any situation—that advice slips into the rest of life beyond fishing. Read Malcolm Gladwell's book *Blink*. It's an assignment.

Q. Do you prefer to fish upstream or down, and why?

I'm a graduate of Infantry Officer Candidate School, during the VN dustup, and we had only one answer to any question: "It depends on the situation, sir." We were required to bellow it. But now that things have quieted down, at least for me, I'll answer the same way. If I'm on a small stream, which I often am, I'll be fishing upstream because they're too small to fish cross-stream, and wading them downstream warns everything in them that you're coming. You wade right into the trout's sight. It's better to sneak up on their tails. If I'm on a medium-sized stream, I'll still usually be fishing upstream, or at least my general direction will be upstream. But I'll be on the watch for situations that can be better solved with downstream casts. If I get into that kind of situation, I turn around and fish down.

On big water, especially flats, I'll often fish downstream presentations, because that shows trout your fly ahead of the line and leader. It's critical, though more often when dry fly fishing than when nymphing. I also like to fish big rivers downstream, whenever I'm boating, because the current makes it easier to go that way...but I suspect that is out of the overall view of your question.

Q. As a final question, what are three of the more common mistakes beginning nymph anglers tend to make?

First, they rig so complicated that it's difficult to avoid tangles... Keep it simple.

Second, they get rooted and fish the same water over and over... Get moving.

Third, they get discouraged because they don't catch trout... Add a shot, to get down deeper, and then keep your nymphs in the water, fish each bit of water thoroughly, and then move to the next.

I don't like to point out peoples' mistakes, especially here at the end...you've all been so patient. The biggest mistake beginners make is being beginners; they've just got to get beyond that. The only way to get beyond being a beginner is to go fishing. That's an assignment to go fishing more, go out and get experience, get over being a beginner. That's not a bad assignment; you can use it on your spouse: tell him or her that Dave said you have to go fishing more often, it's required.

Given an opportunity to see Dave Hughes at one of his speaking engagements or participate in one of his workshops, do so! At the minimum visit Dave's website at <http://dave-hughes-fly-fishing.com>, you won't be disappointed.