The Turnover Point

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As a guide in northern California, I have learned to love and master a wide variety of nymphing techniques. It goes with the territory. Here in California, we don't have mentally impaired 16" cutthroats that will rush to the surface to inhale size 10 royal wulffs. And for the most part, our fish don't look up on midsummer afternoons for wind-blown grasshoppers. Anyone who has fished the most productive California rivers knows that there are times of year and times of day when our native California rainbows are very happy eating bugs near the bottom of the river and wouldn't think twice about rising.

Accordingly, many of California's fly anglers are proficient at fishing nymphs. I guide many of them every season. Occasionally, after a client has worked over a piece of water for a while without success, I've been challenged to catch a fish in the same water. Without adding weight, adjusting the drop, or changing the fly, I can frequently catch a fish out of the same water on my first cast. All it takes is a slightly different presentation which includes something called a "turnover point." This technique is not only very effective in its own right; it's a 'gateway' technique – one that introduces a very important concept that will hopefully lead to a breakthrough in the way you understand nymphing.

When indicator nymphing, there are three ways to get your fly down deep. The first is to add more split shot. The second is to increase your drop, which is the distance between the indicator and the split shot. The third way, which I will detail here, is to set up a drift that a "turnover point" in it. Whether it's the high water of spring snowmelt or just a fast, deep chute you fish during the summer, the turnover point technique will help you get your nymph down faster, with less weight, and slow it down when it's near the bottom, creating a more natural presentation.

The major concept here is that the water near the surface of the stream is the fastest and the water near the bottom is the slowest. In a typical nymphing presentation, you cast upstream and let the indicator come back towards you or across the river from you. In this type of upstream cast, the nymph usually lands upstream from the indicator. As we make our drift, we do whatever we can to make sure the indicator is not "dragging." There lies the problem: if your indicator is moving at the same speed as the water on the surface, then so is your nymph. And if you used enough lead to get your nymph near the bottom, then it is being dragged at 'surface speed' through water that is moving at 'bottom speed'. To a trout feeding near the bottom, your nymph would be moving much faster than natural food items being carried by the current.

The bottom line: when you land your nymph upstream from your indicator, even if you use enough lead to get your nymph down, the indicator will drag your nymph at surface speed, which creates an unnatural presentation. I'm not trying to say that this presentation doesn't catch fish! Most trout that have ever been caught on nymphs under indicators have fallen for this presentation. But not all of them will. If you know how to set up a drift that includes a turnover point, you will be able to fool a whole other segment of the trout population.

So what is this "turnover point?" Well, the way you get one is by somehow landing your indicator upstream from your nymph. I'll discuss three methods for setting up such a drift later. For now, let's just understand the concept. When you position your indicator upstream from your fly, your nymph will begin to sink into parts of the water column that are moving more slowly than the surface water. Since your indicator is moving downstream faster than your nymph, it will eventually be directly over your nymph. This is the deepest point of the drift, and the fly is moving the slowest. This is the turnover point. Once the indicator overtakes the fly, it will pull them up and away from the bottom, mimicking an insect emergence. Many grabs occur right at the turnover point and as the flies are starting to rise.

Do you have to get your indicator way upstream from the nymph to make it work? No. Any little bit helps. The problem with the typical indicator splash-down (where the nymph lands upstream from the indicator) is that as soon as the nymph sinks a little, the indicator is *pulling on* the nymphs, making it harder for them to sink. If you land your indicator upstream from the nymph, the nymph is free to sink without the indicator pulling on it, and therefore it sinks more quickly.

The first way to insert a turnover point into your drift is to use a stack mend to move your indicator upstream from your nymph. Start with a normal upstream cast. Your nymph will land upstream from your indicator. Then throw a stack mend to move the indicator upstream from your fly. A stack mend is just a roll cast that doesn't have enough power to pull the nymph out of the water. Just bring your rod tip back into your roll-casting position, and fire a mini-roll cast upstream from your nymph. If you do it right, the indicator will hop upstream from your nymph. Another nice thing about the stack mend is that it gives you an opportunity to position your indicator in the same "lane" as your nymph. When casting across the current, your nymph will frequently land in a different current lane than your indicator. When you throw in your stack mend, you not only create a turnover point but you get the nymph in the same current lane as the indicator.

The second way to make your indicator land upstream from your nymph is to use a tuck cast. A tuck cast is a short-range cast commonly used when nymphing pocket water. It won't work well on longer casts. To perform a tuck cast, aim your roll cast or overhead cast high in the air above the point where you want the nymph to land. When the indicator and nymph reach their apogee, pull back on the rod a little bit. This will cause the nymph and split shot to swing around your indicator (which is more or less at the center of a pivot). If you do it right, the nymph will swing directly under the indicator, and the indicator will land right on top of your nymph. On a day with a nice upstream wind, the wind will help blow the indicator upstream from your nymph. On a day with a nice downstream wind, just forget about your tuck cast and try something else. With a tuck cast, the best you can frequently do without an upstream wind is to get the indicator to land right on top of the flies. Even that is a big help in getting your flies down.

The last, and perhaps easiest, way to get your indicator upstream from your nymph at the beginning of the drift is to do a straight downstream drift. Stand on a rock at the head of a nice long run, or try it from an anchored boat. Let your line drift downstream. To start the drift, lift up your rod tip until the nymph skates on the surface, trailing the indicator. Drop the rod tip and start to feed line. This is a deadly technique, and a great way to insert a turnover point into your drift. In this type of drift, it is easy to try and pinpoint different parts of the run. Just start your drift in different lanes and at different distances to place your turnover point in different parts of the run. You'll be surprised how many times the fish grabs your fly right at the turnover point and as the fly begins to rise up off the bottom.

When you start to insert turnover points into your drifts, you will need to make some adjustments to your technique. First, please realize that you won't be able to detect strikes in the first few seconds of the drift. As the nymph is sinking, there is little tension on the tippet since the indicator is not pulling on the nymph. Once the fly approaches the bottom the tippet will straighten and you will be able to detect strikes. To make up for this lack of strike detection in the first part of the drift, you would be wise to do a few traditional drifts through a run first, then try the turnover point technique if you don't get a grab.

It may also be necessary to adjust your drop. Since your flies will get deeper, you may need to make your drop a little bit shorter. The rule of thumb for most indicator fishing techniques is to set your drop 1.5 times the depth of the water. This rule is based on the assumption (usually correct) that your tippet never completely straightens and/or your nymph is never directly below your indicator. When you start using turnover points, it will be easier to fully extend your tippet directly below the indicator, at least at the turnover point of the drift. You may have to reduce your drop to equal the depth of the water to avoid hanging up.

A final note on using the turnover point: don't use it on every drift! I've seen anglers get so excited about the turnover point technique that they throw in an upstream stack mend on every cast, even though they just landed their fly in water that's only a foot deep! What we've learned so far is that we can control the depth of our presentation by controlling the relative positioning of our indicator and nymph at the beginning of the drift. By positioning the indicator *upstream from the fly*, we can get the fly deeper. Likewise, by positioning the indicator*downstream from the fly*, we can achieve a shallower presentation. This is an important concept when fishing from a moving boat, since you rapidly cover water of different depths and can't change your drop for each situation. For the deeper runs, throw in a turnover point to get the fly down. When you encounter shallower water and don't have time to change your drop, you might throw in a downstream stack mend to help your indicator pull the flies and keep them off the bottom.

I encourage you to play around with this technique. A good way to do it is to find a long run with relatively uniform current and good visibility. Tie on a brightly colored nymph, like an orange egg pattern. Do a few conventional drifts and see how long it takes for the nymph to get down and how long it stays near the bottom. Then do a drift with a turnover point and see how much faster the nymph sinks, and how it lingers near the bottom. Be forewarned – it may take less split shot than you're accustomed to using!