

# Streamer Strategies:

## Put Streamers to Work and Start Tagging the Big Ones

*By Ralph Cutter*

Over the years of guiding and teaching I've browsed through hundreds of fly boxes and virtually all contained at least one streamer with its telltale slip of leader dangling from the eye. When asked, the owner of the box would usually admit that he or she used the streamer once or twice then put it into retirement because it "didn't work."

In truth, that streamer was never really put to work. Nothing in a fly box comes close to offering the diversity and deadliness of a well presented streamer. Whether on a Montana spring creek, an Amazon black water lagoon, or the chalky flats of a Caribbean reef, a streamer can be put to work deceiving the wariest (and largest) of fish.

Many people don't use streamers because of the mistaken belief that streamers will target only the largest fish and preclude the possibility of catching a lot of "regular" fish. While it is true that streamers consistently account for the truly huge fish, small fish will take incredibly large streamers. It never ceases to amaze me as I watch three-inch trout in my aquarium routinely attack, kill, and eat one inch guppies. Translated into angling terms this means a four inch streamer can (and will) be taken by twelve inch fish.

What is a streamer? I'm not sure. Several years ago while tossing a number 12 birds nest to fish feasting on Siphonurus nymphs (Gray Drake Mayfly) , I observed a nice trout surging through the weedy shallows in obvious pursuit of baitfish. I cast the nymph its way, and after a few strips was fast to a 17 inch brown. During release, the trout coughed up two speckled dace fry... the birds nest was a perfect imitation and in the course of a single cast had been transformed from a nymph to a streamer.

By anyone's definition a wooly bugger is a streamer, however, I've used them to imitate dragonfly nymphs at Crane Prairie Reservoir, crayfish on the Walker River, and lamprey eels on Pacific Coastal streams. If it looks like a streamer, acts like a streamer, and catches lots of fish... it's a streamer.

### **Streamer Design**

Open any fly-fishing catalog and prepare to be overwhelmed by the sheer numbers and types of streamers; there's one for every conceivable purpose and even a few I can't figure a purpose for. From the intricately detailed Widowmaker to the satisfying mess called a marabou leech, streamers run the gamut of extreme realism to ultimate impressionism.

In the desire to express one's artistic ability, or perhaps on the oft chance that it will be purchased by a wide eyed angler, many streamer designs have been

developed that are detrimental to the effective pursuit of fish; deer head sculpins are a good example.

I've spent many dozens of hours in SCUBA gear observing the antics of sculpins in their natural environment. I've had pet sculpins that would eat earthworms from my fingers and would nearly leap out of the aquarium for a tadpole. Through this long term relationship, I've come to the inescapable conclusion that sculpins are not open water fish and that after the first few weeks of drift, they spend their entire lives within a several inches of the streambed. Deer hair floats like a cork and thus is counterproductive on a streamer meant to imitate a bottom dweller.

Wool head sculpins were developed to provide the bulky silhouette of a sculpin's head and pectoral fins without the liability of being buoyant. The problem with wool-heads is that they soak a lot of water and become heavy to cast. The best sculpin heads are made by simply turning a few winds of soft saddle hackle around the head of the fly; the illusion of bulk is provided without the attendant problems of deer hair or wool.

Are bulky heads even necessary? Absolutely not. Sagehen Creek in the Truckee River drainage has a population of sculpins reaching densities as great as six adults per square meter. The trout in Sagehen are highly keyed to sculpins but time and again refuse realistic sculpin patterns in favor of impressionistic wooly buggers and zonkers. I've pressured some of these trout severely, fishing streamers past them several times a day for days on end. These fish became acutely selective to presentation but never did they shift pattern selectivity to that of a realistic tie.

Fly color has long been open to debate; the old adage, "Bright flies for bright days, dull flies for dull days," contains a lot of merit. When dredging deep, dark water or when fishing during low light periods, nothing can compare with a black streamer for visibility. A small amount of flash created by a few strands of Crystal Hair or Flashabou will often work wonders perking the attention of an indifferent trout. Gobs of brightly reflective material will catch fish, sometimes in impressive fashion, however, more times than not Silver Sparklers and the like tend to put trout down. In discolored water, patterns with highly contrasting materials are often significantly more productive than mono hued imitations; for instance, a goblin (basically a dark olive wooly bugger with a bright orange hair strip pulled over the back, zonker style) is consistently a top producer during periods of run off, but it fails miserably when the water clears.



It is normal to find streamers weighted. Heavily weighted streamers look dead underwater... they clunk amidst the rocks, drop like a stone between strips, and snag incessantly. Heavily weighted streamers are invariably hard and I'm positive that many fish are lost (or never detected) when they mouth and immediately reject a hard fly. Though streamers are usually best fished right on the bottom, there are situations when the streamer is most effectively worked just under the surface, through shallow riffles, and in and around weed beds and snags. A weighted streamer is a liability in these situations. The most versatile streamers are tied without weight so split shot can be added or taken away as the situation dictates.

Where snagging is a real problem, a long tag end can be left on a Duncan knot and the shot squished onto that... the lead will strip off in the event of a snag and save the fly. When two streamers are used in tandem, I'll weight the point streamer and make sure it's tippet is considerably lighter than the dropper's. If the point streamer snags, it'll break off thus saving the dropper (a sacrifice fly). Snagging can be reduced by using weed less streamers. Keeled flies (imitations where the hook rides upside down) offer snag protection but are to be condemned be-cause of their propensity to hook fish through the eye or brain. Monofilament loops work well only if the mono extends directly over the point of the hook. The best weed guards can be easily made by folding a piece of .009 guitar string in half then tying the ends of the wire near the eye of the hook so the folded segment of guitar string just envelopes the hook point. Ninety cents will buy a lifetime supply of guitar string (to make it black simply dip the wire in a bottle of instant gun bluing).

In a nutshell, I feel a general use streamer should be dark, very lightly weighted if at all, and impressionistic... the less it resembles a specific food form and the more it counterfeits "life" in general the better. Wooly buggers, marabou leeches, and bunnies run far ahead of the pack followed by zonkers and matukas; nothing else comes close.



*Wooly bugger*



*Marabou leech*



*Bunny*

## **Streamer Presentation**

While working in Alaska I watched my guide partner Brad Estelle tie a soggy Skoal Bandit to his leader and proceed to entice a large rainbow to chase down his "streamer". In the hands of a skilled angler even a marginal pattern can be turned into a living thing that trout want to eat.

A good streamer with lots of built-in life will take even the novice angler a giant step towards hooking fish. The following techniques are described in a pure form, how-ever, it is rare that these techniques aren't used in combination.

1. **Drag Free Drift (DFD).** As the name implies this is a presentation where the angler not only avoids adding action to the fly but does everything in his power to prevent drag from disrupting a dead drift. Except for exceptionally fast and deep water, a floating line with an eight to ten foot leader will work well. Floating line is easy to control and the monofilament leader isn't nearly as vulnerable to drag as weighted lines.

DFD is best accomplished by positioning yourself directly across stream from the target. Cast well upstream to allow the streamer to sink to the desired level. Keep as much line off the water as possible by raising the rod tip and stripping in line as the streamer drifts towards you. If needed, mend the line

that remains on the water to avoid drag. As the fly passes and drifts downstream, lower the rod tip and feed line to the drift. Make several passes through the lie with an unweighted streamer then add enough shot so that the fly starts scraping bottom.

This technique is particularly effective where a riffle drops into a pool or at the discharge of a spillway or penstock. At the real risk of being anthropomorphic, my guess is that fish associate the drifting streamer with a life form that was stunned or killed by the turbulent waters.

2. **Klamath Swing.** This technique is the easiest to perfect but has never produced like the DFD or the downstream retrieve. The Klamath Swing can be accomplished with either a floating or sinking line. Because the strikes are on a taught line, heavy tippet is a must!

Cast quartering down and across stream; the more you cast directly across the stream (rather than down), the deeper the streamer will drift. A reach cast is great in this situation, however, a quick mend towards the far shore should give the streamer a chance to sink a bit before it begins to swing.

As the current picks up your fly line the streamer will ferry across river and end up directly down current of the rod tip. Strikes usually occur at the start of the swing or just at the end as the fly begins to slow. Allow the fly to hang in the current for a few seconds and strike on even the most subtle bump (Repeatedly, I've witnessed trout completely inhale then reject even fast moving streamers without telegraphing their presence to the angler.) At this point you may wish to sling the fly into another drift by using a water haul or you might want to swim the streamer for a while; I usually elect to play mind games with any suspected fish before beginning a new drift.

As you play with the streamer keep in mind that any fly will always attempt to rest directly below the rod tip. By simply switching an extended rod from one hand to the other, you can easily swim the streamer back and across twenty feet of river. By mending towards stronger current the streamer will speed up, a mend into the slower water will cause the fly to slow and sink deeper in the water column. Make your streamer come alive by altering the speed of its "swim", twitching the streamer a few feet upstream then letting it drift back down, or by pulsing the fly by bobbing the rod tip. Think the fish to your fly (if you don't know what I mean, keep fishing).

3. **Downstream Retrieve.** This is a killer technique that effectively mimics the true behavior of a wounded or fleeing baitfish. Just about every animal I can think of will take the path of least resistance when being pursued (chukar defy logic). Deer will run downhill, doves will fly downwind, and fish will swim downstream. Almost all streamer anglers violate this behavior by stripping their imitations upstream.

Where possible, simply cast upstream and strip the streamer back to you. If

you own an old worthless rod try setting it up with a sinking shooting head then take it and a handful of streamers to a place where the water is deep, dark, slow and cold... lunker country. Wade into the river as deep as you dare, launch the fly upstream then bury the rod in the water so that the rod tip is supported just off the river bottom by the top of your wading shoe. Strip the fly toward you; the only place it can swim is directly along the river bottom. Simply deadly. Have fun trying to lift the rod out of the water with a large trout tugging your line!

Another way to achieve a downstream retrieve is to use what I call the big bend technique... it is the finest method I know of for fishing an undercut bank. Position yourself so that you're facing the undercut bank, beaver lodge, overhanging alders, etc. then:

- a) Cast the streamer far upstream so that it lands as close to the bank as possible.
- b) Mend the line so that it lays parallel with and as close to the bank as possible.
- c) Point the rod tip back upstream towards the fly (feed slack line through the guides so that the pointing motion doesn't ruin your nice mend).
- d) With rod tip at water level, strip like hell. The fly will dart downstream, right along the undercut, just begging to be slammed by any trout lurking in the cover.

By putting streamers to work you will start tagging much larger trout than ever before and it will be tempting to make wall hangers from these guys. Please don't.