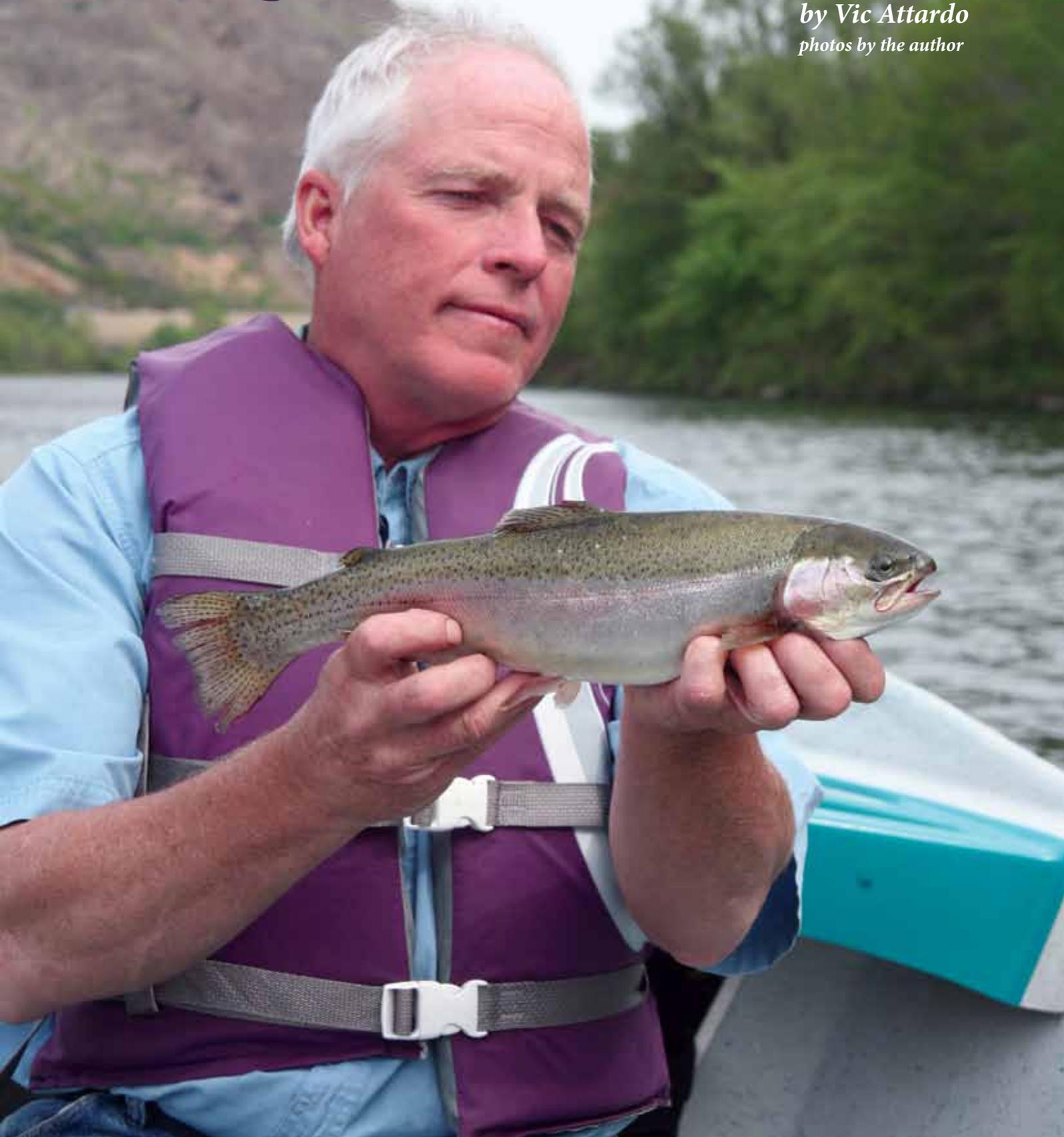


Drifting for Lehigh River Rainbows

*by Vic Attardo
photos by the author*





Drifting for Lehigh River rainbows can sometimes take a deep presentation to raise trout from their rocky haunts.

After a week of rain and strong flows, the Lehigh River had cleared. Paul Davidson eased his drift boat off the shoal in Bowmantown and rowed us into the strong current above the bridge. At this spot, it took a deep presentation to raise trout from their rocky haunts.

I had two fly rods rigged and ready to go. A 5-weight had a five-foot, fast sinking-tip splice on the end of a floating line followed by a short three-foot, 5X fluorocarbon tippet. The tippet carried a dual-fly rig of a heavy size 12 (Mustad 9672) beadhead Beaverkrat and a dropper of a size 16 (3906-B) Flashback Sulphur Nymph. The second rod was my cannon, a 6-weight with a 12-foot, 4x leader and fluorocarbon tippet ending in a size 6 streamer, Tar's Heavy Metal Minnow.

As Davidson dropped the anchor from his high-peaked drifter, we settled into a fast slot on the morning-shade side of the river. Being close to cover, I chose the 5-weight.

Making a short tuck cast to my left, I let the dual flies plummet towards the bottom, then continued to flip out line with rolling mends designed to keep the weighted nymphs gliding tight along the boulder floor. As the line was downstream about 30-feet, I felt a tap—but no connection. I gathered up line and performed the same cast and drift a second time.

The tug was solid. I lifted the rod tip into a hungry rainbow. It wasn't a big fish, but it leaped out of the water several times.



I worked the fish through the heavy current and brought it to the weaker side, where Davidson scooped the fish out of the water. It was a gleaming little rainbow of about 12-inches, so Davidson popped the dropper sulphur out of its mouth and lowered the net. The trout swam off.

“You’ve done that before here,” Davidson prided me. “Sometimes I think you own this spot.”

“It’s where you anchor,” I said.

Indeed, where the drift boat guide drops his anchor above a heavy run, how he maneuvers through a current cut, what rods the angler is prepared to use and how the presentation is made are all as important to catching the Lehigh River’s vigorous rainbows and browns as any fly selection.

During the early-season, the best producers are nymphs and streamers. The 5-weight Fenwick I used for the first ‘bow does double duty as my evening dry fly rod or to present an attractor dry in the afternoon. The 6-weight can be rigged with either a dual nymph or an oversize nymph or streamer.

I use my 5-weight for the dual smaller nymphs, because I like a thinner fly line when working heavy currents. While there’s only a few tenths difference between the diameters of a 5- and 6-weight line, there’s a huge difference in the way the current grabs and holds the slightly larger diameter. I add a sink-tip splice on my 5-weight. I don’t grease the first few feet of the floating line— I may even rub it with mud.



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Another critical element to the 5-weight set-up in strong currents is the use of a yarn strike indicator. When anchored, I let the dual flies swing downstream on a long straight line. I think an indicator just gets in the way, holding the flies off the bottom. When Davidson is gliding along with the current and he wants me to punch the sink tip along the shore, I attach the yarn indicator to the leader in a spot about one and a half times the depth of the water. Hopefully, the driftboat and the flies are moving at the same speed and the indicator is nearly parallel to the boat. When it stalls or stops, I raise the rod tip.

A sink tip of some kind is a necessity when working the brawny currents and though I'll carry a fly reel with a full-sink line, I don't use it much. It is too much prep casting.

A line and rod capable of working a large weighted streamer is another plus on a drift boat trip. Often as Davidson heads into the top of a riffle, I'll lay out the streamer on the 6-weight just to get a big fly over the first lip of the run following the shallow riffle. I hang the fly straight downstream of the boat, bouncing the rod tip with slight jiggles to give the presentation some life.

When Davidson shoals out in water only 3- or 4-feet deep, I take off the sink-tip addition to the 5-weight and

work a floating line with a 10- to 12-foot leader and fluoro tippet.

The cast to use in most of these situations is a reach cast. As the forward cast is sailing out, lift your rod arm upstream creating a large aerial mend. This will slow a streamer's arcing swing. With tandem flies and a strike indicator, a reach cast adds drift time to the presentation and slows the dead-drifting nymphs.

Another good practice when using a streamer or a classic-winged wet fly is to tie the fly with a Riffle Hitch. This is particularly true in the shallow, slower areas. The lasso-head knot of a Riffle Hitch gives the fly a lot of action in smoother water; however, it tends to bring a fly to the surface. I take advantage of this by using Tar's Heavy Metal Minnow—a metallic, chenille Woolly Bugger—making it appear like a fleeing minnow.

In the evening, I'll use the Riffle Hitch on Tar's Sleepless Night—a classic wet fly design made with a crow, goose or starling wing and a peacock body. Without a Riffle Hitch, I'll often use a large black leech made with a rabbit strip wing. With this pattern, I'll employ the 6-weight line, because the rabbit gets so waterlogged. The 6-weight line isn't a negative in slower water. ☐



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