

Dry Fly

Tips and Tricks

by Carl Haensel

As the sun dips behind the hillside on a warm May evening, trout rise to the surface. The best flyfishing action of the day is about to begin.

A few caddisflies escape the surface film and flit about the water's surface. You carefully observe the caddisflies and tie on a size 14 Elk Hair Caddis. A well-placed cast sends your fly drifting toward the nearest rising trout. Slowly the plump brown trout rises toward the fly. It follows for a few feet and then sinks back to the bottom of the stream—a refusal. Twenty casts later, no trout has taken your fly. What is wrong?

We all wish every day on the stream were a storybook day. Trout would rise left and right to our carefully hand-tied flies and gulp them with abandon. Sadly, it isn't always so. Have you ever wondered how to make those finicky trout hit your pattern? Or have you looked in vain for your tiny dry fly on a swift trout stream? Here are a few ideas to help revitalize your dry fly techniques and get those fish to grab your offerings.

1. Make short drifts to avoid drag. In many cases, the main enemy of a flyfisher is drag. Drag is a fly's traveling at a speed other than that of the water current on which it rests. If this problem occurs when fishing a dry fly, there are two options. Fix it, or cast again. To fix a cast that has begun to drag, one may "mend" or move the fly line so that drag no longer occurs. This option presents many problems, so we will take the easier route. If your drift starts to drag, pick it up and cast again.

Short casts can be the key to success. If the fly is on the water for only a short time, it will not even have time to drag before reaching the fish. In fast, broken water, successful casts may be no longer than 5 feet. The key to this strategy is to pick either the fish or the structure that you are casting to. Start your drift a bit above the feeding zone or "window" that the fish sees, and pick up your cast once it has cleared this zone, and will no longer spook any fish. When casting to a trout that has just risen, remember that it had to drift downstream to rise to the surface. This means you must cast a few feet ahead of the rise to let the fish see your fly.

2. Use a trailer fly rig to fish your tiny dry flies. Can you see a size 22 or 24 Blue-Wing Olive 25 feet away on the water? You might be able to see it on a clear, still day, but at times it can be downright impossible. A better way to fish your tiny dry flies is to fish them as a trailer behind a fly that you can see. Large, fluffy flies that you can see and that do not twist your leader work well. These include Elk Hair Caddis patterns, Stimulators, Grasshoppers, Parachute Adams, and other similar high-floating, easily visible flies. Make sure you pick a pattern that YOU can see well.

Your trailer should be tied to the bend of the hook of the first fly, and should be one tippet size down from what is tied onto your first fly. This way, if your trailer snags, you will lose only one fly (hopefully). A normal trailer rig will have 5x tippet to a lead fly such as a size 12 Elk Hair Caddis, and 16 inches of 6x tippet tied to the hook bend of the Caddis. An improved clinch knot is a good knot to use to tie on this trailing tippet. Your tiny dry fly is then tied to the end of that tippet. Dry flies to fish on the end of your trailer include Trico Spinners, the previously mentioned Blue-Wing Olives and Midges. Remember that your dry fly is acting as both a fly to catch fish and as a strike indicator. Set the hook when you see a rise anywhere near your large fly.

3. Fish an emerger trailer behind your dry fly. This isn't exactly a true dry fly technique, but it is a good way to catch a bunch of fish. Once you are comfortable fishing a two-fly rig as outlined in #2, the concept is simple. First, your lead fly must be large enough to avoid being dragged underwater. Large mayfly, caddisfly, and other "fluffy" patterns work well. Next, tie an emerger pattern of the insect that your dry fly is imitating to the trailer tippet on the lead fly. An emerger is an "in between" pattern that



Mayfly and Midge Emergers



Goddard Caddis,
Elk Hair Caddis, Stimulator,
Elk Hair



Caddis Pupae & Emergers

mimics an insect changing from nymph or pupa to an adult. It will sit right in the surface film or slightly below. Your trailer should again be tied to the bend of the hook, and should be one tippet size down from what is tied onto your dry fly. This way, if your trailer snags, you will lose only one fly. Remember that your dry fly is acting as both a fly to catch fish and as a strike indicator. This technique often tempts a few larger fish from the stream. Big fish rarely rise to an insect floating on the surface, but they are often more than willing to take a pattern slightly under the surface.

4. Overcast your target. At first this sounds like a bad thing to do. And sometimes it is. When you are fishing toward the bank, you would not want to toss your fly into the bushes intentionally. Still, this is one way to put your fly exactly where you want it. Simply cast farther across the stream and ahead of where you want to fish. Next, pull your fly back into the drift line you would like to fish. Make sure that your motion stops before you enter the feeding zone of the fish that you are targeting. This allows you to let your fly drift directly over a fish's nose, and also takes all your slack line up so that you are ready to strike. For this technique, make sure that you are using a well-hackled fly that can be skated or skittered across the surface.

5. Skitter your Caddisfly patterns. As much as I hate to admit it, caddisflies are just a bunch of glorified aquatic moths. Have you ever seen a moth sit still? It almost never does. Caddisflies are the same way. Almost every moment they are flitting and bouncing around the trout stream. Some of them even run!

Even though dead-drifting a caddisfly pattern can work sometimes, activating your caddis can work wonders. Here's how it works. First, cast either straight across or slightly downstream of your position on the water. This helps take slack out of your line and keep it taut. Next, quickly drop your rod tip to the water and strip in your slack line. Now raise your rod tip and skitter, or skate, your caddis pattern back toward you across the surface of the water. Your caddis should bounce just slightly off the surface of the water occasionally. A great way to use this technique to catch fish is to skitter your caddis into the drift lane of the fish you are targeting and then allow your fly to dead-drift with the current. If you are fortunate to have fish very near you, you can also bounce the caddisfly on and off the surface of the water. These techniques work very well with an Elk Hair Caddis/emergent trailer combination. As a last note, you may want to use this technique only for part of your drift (see #4.)

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