Gearing Up for Big Fish, Part 2 of 5: Line Selection

Line selection is the most critical component of your tackle. While there is no one type of line appropriate for all conditions, I find that the following three types of lines satisfy most of my stillwater requirements:

- Floating line
- Intermediate slow sinking line
- Intermediate sink tip

The value of having multiple lines is that you will have the flexibility to respond to changing conditions.

The critical factor in line selection is to choose a line that will maintain the fly within the top six feet (the primary feeding zone for trout). Using the right line allows the fly to be presented and maintained at the depth where trout are feeding. This makes the difference between occasional strikes and more consistent success. These are my recommendations:

1. Floating Line

The floating line has two applications. The first is when trout are feeding on the surface. Surface feeding is usually quite brief, and during this time, all other stages of aquatic insects under the surface are ignored.

The second application is when indicator fishing, suspending small nymphs or chironomids below the surface. This form of presentation is used in depths greater than two feet. The indicator is an effective way of presenting pupae or emerger patterns when faced with clear, glassy conditions or during cold water temperatures when trout are not likely to chase a fly.





This trout was caught at Pronghorn lake during cold glassy conditions using a floating line and an indicator with Vickie's UV black/silver midge.

One limitation of floating lines becomes apparent during windy conditions. They are ill-suited for casting and retrieving during a wind because of line drag. That drag will cause the fly to move unnaturally. Also, the belly created by the wind makes it impossible to maintain line tension needed to feel a strike.

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There are additional limitations with floating lines when casting and retrieving. When a floating line lands in the water, it creates a surface disturbance. Additionally, miniature ripples on the surface result when the fly is retrieved. Further, flash and shadow will occur when the line is back lit by the sun. All of these factors spook trout

2. Intermediate Slow Full Sinking Line

When there are no visual clues that trout are feeding on the surface, my go-to line is a clear camo intermediate sinking line. This line cuts through windy conditions and sinks below the surface, minimizing surface disturbance.

Intermediate lines sink at a rate of 1.25-1.75 inches per second, or about one foot in ten seconds. These lines are well suited to fishing lakes. When trout feed, they will either feed close to the surface or along shallow shoreline edges. With a slow sink rate, the fly can be pulled horizontally through the water while maintaining the proper depth in the feeding zone. At the back end of the retrieve, or during shorter casts, you may let the fly sink then pull it up vertically, which mimics pupae emerging up through the water column.

This line is also effective for probing the top six feet to determine at what depth feeding fish are cruising. By counting 10, 20, or 30 seconds before the line is retrieved, the angler can test the fly at difference depths. Simply count, and then retrieve. For example, using this line, if the strike occurs after a count of 30 seconds, you know that the trout are feeding three feet below the surface. You can then repeat this count prior to retrieve in future casts.

Click for video: Trophy trout caught while trolling Pronghorn Lake

This line is also productive when trolling. An effective approach is to stop moving every 40-60 feet, then retrieve the line. If you do not get hit, recast in a different direction and start trolling again. I have found this effective in generating a reactive response.



This fish was caught using the 7-foot intermediate sink tip and Vickie's UV Emerger pattern. Landed Martin Landholm at Pronghorn Lake



Vickie's UV Emerger

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Tip: When evaluating sinking lines, determine the sink rate. Each manufacturer has adopted their own rating system. For example, a slow intermediate sink rate is defined by one manufacturer as 1.5 ips (inches per second) while another may define a slow intermediate sink rate as .5 ips. Knowing the sink rate is the only way to correctly estimate the actual depth where the fly is being presented.

Tip: If the fly, is hit immediately after casting or within the first few retrieves, you know that the trout are feeding in the top few feet.

3. Slow Intermediate Sink Tip line

A sink tip line is a floating line that is married to a sinking tip. It works well when sight casting to trout that are feeding close to the surface. A 7-foot intermediate sink tip is my go-to line when there are visual clues (e.g. dorsal fin rises indicate trout are feeding on pupae in the top 10-15 inches). It is well-designed to fish the pupae form of mayflies, midges, and caddis just below the surface.



The intermediate sink tip line is especially valuable when probing shallow areas or shorelines where trout feed.

Fishing in between the weed beds will entice trout to leave the protection of cover for the promise of a meal. This line helps reduce getting hung up in the underwater structure as it maintains the fly in the top few feet of the feeding zone.

An added advantage of a 7-foot intermediate sink tip line is that it is easy to pick up and recast anytime during the retrieve.

Select the correct weight of the line:
Regardless of what type of line you use, the weight of the line needs to be balanced to the weight of the rod. For example, it the line is too light, it will cast poorly because it cannot load the rod sufficiently. When using a six-weight rod, I recommend a 6- or 7-weight line.

Summary

The single most important component of your tackle is your line. Having a floating line, an intermediate slow full sinking line, and a slow intermediate sink tip line at the ready will place you on the path toward success when fly fishing lakes. Good hunting!

Be sure to read the other parts of this 5-part series on Gearing Up for Big Fish!
Part 1 of 5: Rods
Part 2 of 5: Line Selection
Part 3 of 5: Leaders and Tippets
Part 4 of 5: Landing Nets
Part 5 of 5: Putting It All Together

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