Gearing Up for Big Fish, Part 3 of 5: Leaders and Tippets

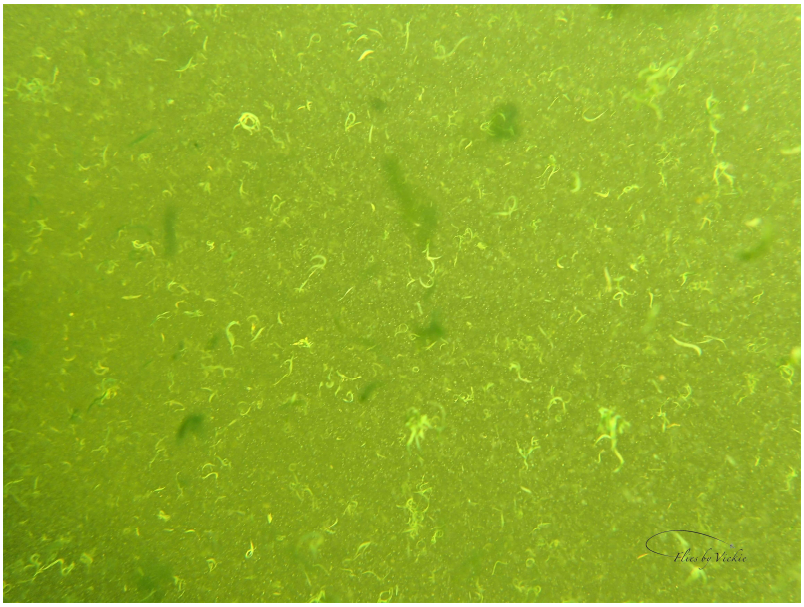
Leaders and tippets both are crucial components of your tackle system. Selection of the appropriate size and length is vital. The effectiveness of the entire presentation hinges on having a balanced line, leader and tippet system that delivers the fly with accuracy. Choose incorrectly and you risk losing a big fish. Either the cast crashes on the surface, or you lose the fish through a frustrating breakoff.



I learned this lesson well while fishing at Guild Ranch Reservoir in Wyoming. Fishing with an indicator during glassy, sunny spring conditions, I watched trout darting in and out of the weeds, attacking my dangling midge. When the trout hit the fly, any pressure placed on the line with my 4X tippet resulted in snapped tippets. I lost three large trout in a row.

Unwilling to surrender, I switched to a 0X leader and 1X tippet. I Immediately hooked and landed two 6-pound trout. Now my tackle system includes heavier leaders and tippets which can better withstand the aggressive runs and spectacular aerial leaps of large fighting trout.

Problems will occur when the leader and tippet system is unbalanced. For example, when the length of the leader and tippet is too long, you may lose precision in your cast and your fly may often land under a pile of line and leader. When the length of the leader and tippet is too short, it drops like a lead brick, slapping the surface of the water. Both situations reduce any chance of hooking up – especially on clear glassy water.



The total length of the leader and tippet is also relative to the fly and the existing conditions. For example, when the conditions are sunny and glassy, I extend the total length of the leader and tippet to 15 feet, allowing the fly land softly on the water. Any any surface disturbance will send the fish running for cover.

A shorter leader may be used in low light or off colored water (like this algae bloom at Wildhorse Reservoir in Nevada). Also, when fishing deep, or during windy conditions with choppy water, any surface disturbance caused by the cast will be inconsequential.

My preferred setup consists of a 9-foot 0X monofilament leader and three feet of 1X fluorocarbon tippet. I almost always use a leader and tippet with combined length of at least 12 feet. When the tippet section becomes shorter than 12 inches, I remove the short section and replace it with a longer piece.

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Caught using Vickie's Predator Minnow at Guild Ranch Reservoir



Vickie's Predator Minnow

I use monofilament leaders because they have memory, which allows the leader to be straightened by stretching. I use fluorocarbon tippets because fluorocarbon does not reflect light, does not leave a shadow, and is almost invisible in water.

Knots

Attaching the leader to the line: I tie the leader directly to the line using a nail knot. This approach creates a smooth transition and avoids a bulky connection. This is important because if an aggressive fish takes off with your line, a bulky connection can get hung up in your rod guides and the friction can cause a break off. Losing a big fish is a heartbreak easily avoided by having a smooth connection between the leader and the line.

Attaching the tippet to the leader: I use a blood knot, as this also creates a smooth transition which limits the buildup of moss and debris at the leader/tippet connection.

Attaching the fly to the tippet: I use a loop knot when using tippet size of 1X or 2X which allows the fly to move naturally due to the stiffness of the fluorocarbon.

Summary

The leader and tippet selection is a vital aspect of the presentation system, and I would suggest more critical than fly selection. This is because if the leader, tippet and fly are out of balance with each other, you risk splashy landings, breakoffs, tippet pile ups, and short casts, all of which reduce your catch rate.

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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