Adjusting to Changing Conditions

My first day was epic as I landed thirty-one 18 to 20-inch trout in the afternoon. On the second day, I was so eager to get back on the water, I forgot the most important factor an angler must consider in any stillwater situation. Can you guess what it was?

If you answered that you must first consider conditions to determine the best presentation approach, you are on your way to fish whisperer status. Taking a few moments to observe water conditions before you get on the water is an essential habit that will save you time and increase your hookups. A recent fishing experience of mine reinforced this lesson.

I was fishing a couple days last week at an OFC lake property near Mt. Adams in Washington State. It was a sunny and windy spring afternoon, and after landing 31 trout, I camped overnight fully expecting similar success the next morning.



Day 1: Sunny and windy

The following morning, I shivered as the air temperature held at 27 degrees - but I was not deterred. Anticipating a bounty similar to the one enjoyed the previous day, I grabbed the same rod and fly line that worked so well the day before and headed onto the water. The water temperature had dropped to 47 degrees overnight and the was sun still low on the horizon. The surface of the flat, glassy water reflected a completely different picture compared to the previous day's wind rippled water and bright warm sun. After 15 minutes my enthusiasm waned and I began to wonder why the trout were ignoring my fly.

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Day 2: Cold and glassy

Assuming what had worked yesterday would again work today, I wasted a lot of time. If I had taken a few more moments before getting into the water to notice how the conditions had changed, I would not have had to paddle back to get the appropriate rod and line…as well as try to find humor, and remember the value of humility and importance of patience. There were now visual signs of feeding fish on the surface - feeding behavior different from the previous day. In order to be successful, my presentation had to be adjusted instead of blaming my failure on the mysterious and unpredictable behavior of trout.

The reason that the fish were feeding just below the surface was due to the availability of food sources, as well as the darker light conditions offering the trout protective cover from predators. Trout were now feeding on emerging pupae in the top few feet of water. One could observe the surfacing dorsal fins of the feeding trout. Due to the flat, glassy water conditions, I replaced a cast and retrieve approach with a trolling presentation to minimize surface disturbance. Instead of positioning the fly in the top four feet (as I had the previous day), I used the 7-foot intermediate sink tip to position the fly in the top two feet of water. As a result, I immediately hooked into fish and landed thirteen, 18-inch trout within the next hour.

Since fish feed in the top 5 feet of the water column, staying in the 7-foot water depth range targets trout in the feeding zone. When fish hold deeper than 10 feet, you may be able to trigger a reactive bite, but they will not be feeding. If you have no fish finder to determine depth, use your rod to probe how far you are above the bottom. Focusing on the zones where fish are feeding will increase your number of hook ups. Feeding trout also may cruise in the shallow water. I have caught my largest fish early morning in 1-2 feet of water near shoreline edges.

Conditions and Presentation Approach

How productive we are as anglers depends on the ability to adapt to changing conditions by modifying our presentation accordingly. For example, the bright afternoon sun pushed the feeding trout deeper in the water column. An

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intermediate full sink line presented the fly in the top three to four feet at the same level the feeding fish were cruising. This presentation approach was successful as I landed 31 trout.



Anglers that rely on a floating line in windy or sunny flat water conditions are met with a variety of challenges. A floating line reflects sunlight during the false cast and creates a shadow under flat water which can spook trout causing them to run for cover. Floating lines are not meant to be retrieved as the movement of the line across the water creates surface disturbance. Windy conditions cause floating lines to drag and develop a belly which causes unnatural movement in the fly. Simply put, skittish trout refuse the fly as it does not mimic the natural movement of their food source.

Floating lines are most useful when fishing a chironomid under an indicator and/or fishing dry flies during a hatch. A stillwater angler using only a floating line fishes with a tremendous handicap - it significantly limits the angler's ability to effectively adjust to a variety of conditions. Having the right tools and knowing when to use them is vital to being able to catch fish consistently regardless of the conditions.

Windy conditions

While windy conditions can be a nuisance to anglers using floating lines, I use the wind to my advantage when casting an intermediate sink line. Instead of casting downwind as many anglers do, I make casts across the direction of the wind. Keeping my back to the wind, I cast to the left and right of my pontoon boat. This is because trout face into the wind, waiting for tasty morsels to float to them thus conserving energy chasing after food. Casting perpendicular to the wind increases the number of hook ups as more fish will see the fly in full profile. Also, the intermediate full sink line in windy conditions does not cause surface disturbance which can spook trout.

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Cold water conditions

In cold water conditions target shallow or shoreline areas because water temperatures warm up faster than deeper areas of the lake. Reduce the speed of your retrieve as trout are more reluctant to chase after the fly in cold water.

In Summary: To be successful, the itinerant angler who braves the wildest weather in search for trophy trout must accept that fish feeding behavior is determined by the conditions. Choosing the most productive presentation is always the immediate challenge and absolutely critical to success. When you start outfishing everyone else by applying this knowledge, you will move closer to earning the legendary title of fish whisperer…especially during cocktail hour.

- ✓ Always take a few moments to observe water conditions and select your presentation approach accordingly.
- ✓ After determining your initial presentation approach, be prepared to make constant adjustments as conditions change.
- ✓ Include an intermediate full sink and 7' sink tip line to your arsenal. Bring more than one rod and line with you so you don't have to go ashore if conditions warrant.
- ✓ Cast across the wind, not with the wind when using a full sink intermediate line.
- ✓ Be constantly aware of the water depth to target feeding fish. Stay in 7 feet depths where feeding trout are cruising.
- ✓ Early spring conditions require slowing down the trolling speed and the speed of retrieve due to cold water conditions. Target shorelines and shallow water areas as they warm up quicker.

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