Hook ups and Landings…may the odds be ever in your favor!

Posted on June, 2016 by Vickie Loftus



I remember my first experience catching large fish years ago at Monster Lake in Wyoming. It was a day filled with broken tippets, unbuttoned fish, and fish weeding me and breaking off my fly. The fish schooled me that day!

More recently, my education was furthered while fishing Piedmont Lake in Wyoming. It was first light in the morning, when a brown trout hit my fly like a freight train and turned my knuckles white with tension as I held fast to the rod. Flashing above the water surface, the span of the brown trout's tail exceeded six inches. He started to run directly away from me, shooting though the water like a torpedo. He disappeared into the dark depths while my reel screamed, spitting out line and backing. Reacting with laser focus, I kept letting out line while attempting to maintain only a light tension on this runaway monster.

Suddenly, everything just stopped, and the line that an instant before was electric with tension and speed now dropped lifeless and motionless from the tip of my rod: the running trout had completely straightened the hook and secured its escape. Was his victory inevitable, or could it have been averted?

Fish break off during the hook set and when you try to land them. This article describes what tactics I have learned work, and why (including what I should have done in the example above). These tactics have increased my success hooking and landing behemoths and can help you too! Read on to find out what tactics to add to your angling skill set to increase the odds ever in your favor of hooking and landing trophy trout.

Part 1 Hook up tactics…

Set the hook by lifting the rod tip or by using a quick strip set: Setting the hook either too lightly or too hard will reduce your chances of a successful hook up. When setting the hook, if the hook set is too lightly, the fish can easily shake off the hook. If the hook set is too hard, either the fly is pulled out of the fish's mouth, or you may pull smaller hooked fish clean out of the water and launch them flying over your head into the next county – I have seen this happen. Setting the hook is a matter of reflex. The stronger the take, the harder we instinctively react. Learning to fine-tune our hook set is important in order to increase the number of successful hook ups.

© 2020 Stillwater Adventures. All rights reserved
email: vickie@stillwateradventure.com





When a fish takes a fly, it will be either a reactive bite or a feeding bite. When you feel the fish aggressively take the fly, it is a reactive bite because the fish saw the fly in profile. Also the location of the fly will be in the side of the trout's mouth.

If it is a soft take, you may not even feel the trout take the fly. This is because the trout approached the fly from behind or from the front, and sucked the fly in as food during the pause between your retrieves. You might feel only a slight movement of the line as if the fly is moving though weeds. Set the hook immediately! Trout hooked in this way will have the fly in the front of the mouth:

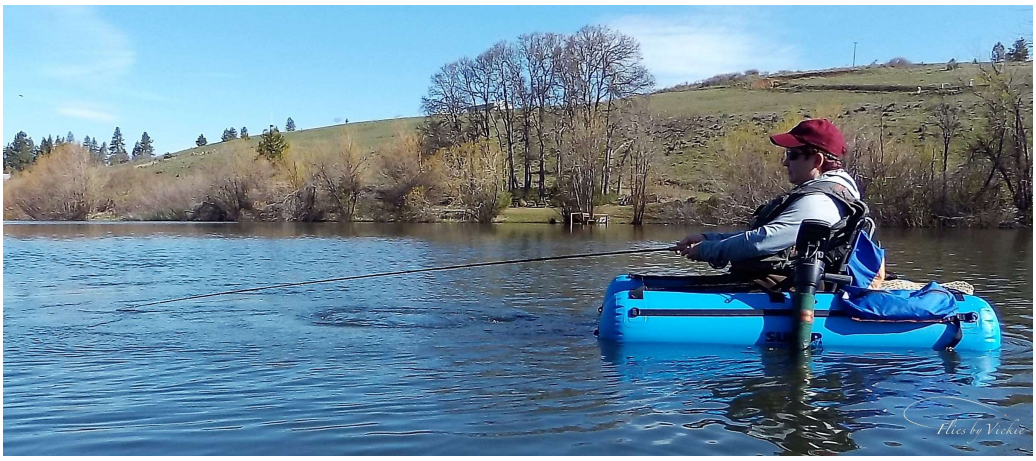


Keep your rod hand in the hook set position: Get in the habit of holding the line in-between the index and middle finger of the hand holding your rod ("rod hand"). This is important because if you happen to get an immediate hit once your fly touches the water, your hand will already be in position to set the hook by either lifting the rod tip or by a quick strip.



© 2020 Stillwater Adventures. All rights reserved
email: vickie@stillwateradventure.com

Keep the rod tip in the water to avoid slack: Avoid break offs by keeping the tip of the rod underwater. When the rod tip is above the water, the dangling line creates slack which may cause missed hook ups. I've observed anglers repeatedly miss hook ups because they kept their rod tip a foot or more above the water surface. Hookups were missed because they first had to strip in the slack line before they could set the hook. The slack line hurts you in two ways: you won't immediately feel the fish is on, and you won't be able to quickly initiate a hook set. Both place you behind the 8-ball in your response time and lower your chances of a successful hook up.



Use the free hand to strip the slack out of the line after a hook up: Strip the line from behind the index and middle fingers of the rod hand into a stripping basket. For those anglers who rely on the reel to remove slack, it is virtually impossible to respond fast enough to a fish quickly changing directions. The reel's drag setting has to be perfect, since too tight or too loose of a drag can cause a break off. For example, if a fish doubles back and creates slack in the line, it is extremely difficult to reel in the slack quickly enough. In my opinion, relying solely on the reel to maintain line tension is like taking a shower with your waders on…neither is productive or effective.



This rainbow trout found cover under a row of willow trees completely submerged in the water. Casting near these trees was a risky undertaking because, once hooked, these behemoth trout would immediately go deep, bury themselves in weeds, wrap the line and tippet around the willow branches, and escape capture. Being outwitted by these wily fish previously had forced me to replace many hooks, tippets, and leaders. I was determined not to donate more gear to the depths and come out empty-handed.

I cast only 20 feet from my pontoon boat, and within seconds, the trout took my grey A.P. emerger, pulling the line with her as she fought to dive into the abyss amidst the willows – her favorite refuge where she would gain her advantage.

© 2020 Stillwater Adventures. All rights reserved
email: vickie@stillwateradventure.com

Immediately I began stripping line with my free hand to maintain tension and prevent the trout from going deep. I was determined to win this epic battle. However, the fish had other plans. She turned and aimed straight towards me, and as fast as a runaway freight train, headed directly under my boat while aggressively pulling my rod tip downward. I had to quickly adjust and give her a slack line to prevent her from breaking the rod tip. I finally was able to lead her into the net.

Learning how to quickly use the rod hand index finder as the brake and the free hand to feed or strip line as needed is critically important in order to quickly adjust, react and respond to the unpredictable movements of a large, frisky, hooked trout who displays attitude.

Run your leader through your thumb and index finger to check for any abrasions or knots: Wind knots or abrasions from rocks weaken the tippet. A large, energetic fish can break off usually at the location of a wind knot or a section weakened by an abrasion. Inspect the tippet and leader before you're on the water. Don't chance it; replace any knotted leader or tippet section as soon as you see the knot because you want to keep the odds in your favor if you chance to get "Walter" on the line.

Increase the size of your tippet and leader if you repeatedly experience break offs: Break offs can happen when using tippets that are too light and leaders of too small a diameter. This is because small diameter leaders have less overall strength as well as less elasticity and stretch – the latter of which are necessary to absorb the shock from a fish strike or large fish making sudden changes in movement. Even though the angler may be skilled enough to land a fish with lighter weight tippets and leaders, they may have to play the fish longer in order to do so successfully. When a fish is played longer, it places greater stress on the fish and decreases their survival rate once released.

Keep your hooks sharp and replace bent hooks: Hooks that have been bent and then bent back into shape after fighting an energetic fish are weakened. They lose their strength and may fail when "Walter" gets on the line. Hooks that are dull or may have a scale attached to the point may also prevent a successful hook up. Check your hooks often – especially after you land a fish.

Part 2 Landing tactics…

Maintain a tight line by stripping in the slack: Big fish run faster and the bigger ones go deep. Over challenging a fish at hook set can cause breakoffs. If the fish runs either to the right or the left of you, keep slight pressure on the fish using the left hand to control the slack and the right index finger (of the rod hand) as the brake.

Keep the line taut by putting only slight pressure on the fish if the fish runs directly away from you: Too much tension placed on the line when the fish is moving directly away from you increases the chances that the fish will become unbuttoned or straighten the hook (as that fish at Piedmont Lake did to me).

Reduce pressure when you feel the head shake: Back off the line pressure and let the trout finish its head shakes during these intense moments. After the fish finishes shaking its head, strip in the slack.

Reduce pressure when fish go airborne: Reduce line tension on the fish when the fish jump. This avoids pulling the fly out of its mouth during the aerial acrobatics. Strip in the slack when the fish lands. Putting pressure on the fish is what causes the fish to go airborne.

© 2020 Stillwater Adventures. All rights reserved
email: vickie@stillwateradventure.com



Keep the rod tip up and use side pressure on the rod: If fish goes left, move the rod tip to the right. If the fish goes right, move the rod tip to the left. The rod should bend in the mid-section. The rod is the shock absorber, compensating for the sudden jerky movements of the fish. Let the rod bend; they are made to bend and absorb the pressure and shock.



Avoid horsing the fish: Horsing the fish (trying to bring the fish in too quickly) can cause the fly to pull free or the tippet to break. On the other hand, I have seen anglers overplay fish, which stress the fish and increases the mortality rate – especially when the water is warm or cold.

Keep your back to the wind: When landing a fish in windy conditions, remember to keep your back to the wind. This provides greater agility and control when guiding fish into the net.

© 2020 Stillwater Adventures. All rights reserved
email: vickie@stillwateradventure.com

First place the net into the water, then guide the fish in head first: Be prepared for the fish to make a run, freak out, flip you the fin (and give you a shower), and then run away under full steam when they come near the boat, see the net, or come into shallow water. When landing the fish, lower the net into the water first, then guide the fish headfirst into it. If the net is already into the water, the fish's own motion will propel them head first into the net. Don't try to scoop up the fish into your net from behind or from the side as the fish will likely be able to escape the net.





Reduce pressure when using smaller hooks, leaders and tippets: Hooking large trout with a small hook is not the problem, landing them is. While catching large trout on a small #18 dry fly can be the emotional high point of your day, being able to land these oversize monsters can be challenging. The size of the gap in the smaller hook often lightly hooks the trout, giving the trout a greater chance to break free.

The most important tactic of all to hook and land big fish is to spend time on the water: More time on the water exposes you to more diverse experiences and opportunities to experiment with and master the techniques that work for you. There are a lot of different ways to hook trophy size fish in stillwater, but you must also be able to successfully land them. The big fish that have escaped me are the ones that I think about in the middle of the night. The ghostly images of their sleek forms gliding away from me is what compels me to keep coming back.

I'd like to hear from you!

I am interested in your questions and your feedback! Send me comments on this or other articles as well as your questions and your comments using the Contact Me link. I will incorporate your feedback and questions in future blog entries.

© 2020 Stillwater Adventures. All rights reserved
email: vickie@stillwateradventure.com