Line Selection for Stillwater

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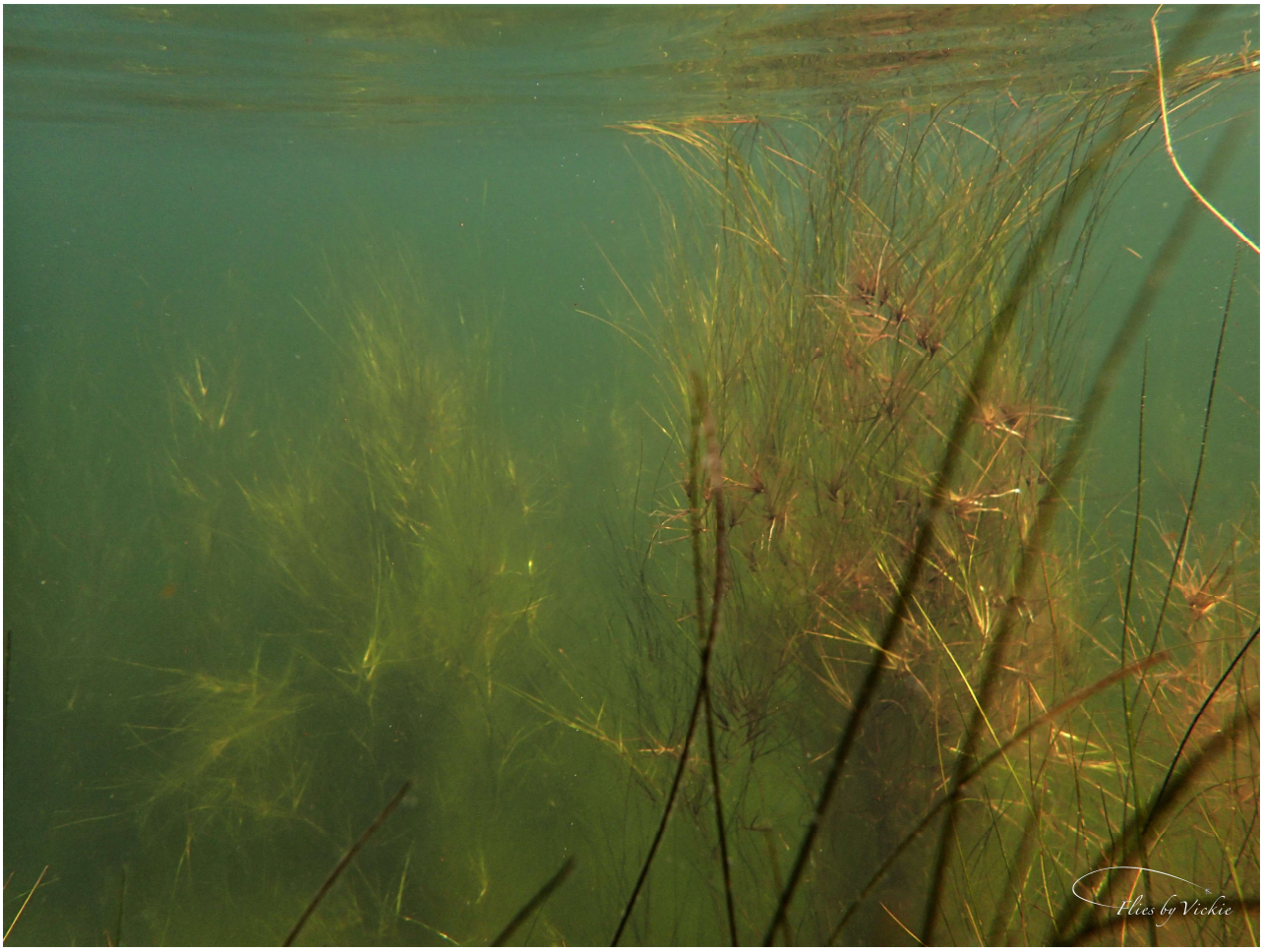
I believe proper line selection is vital when fishing stillwater because line determines at what depth the fly will be presented. If the fly is presented at a depth where no fish are feeding, it will be a frustrating day on the water. A shortcut to unraveling the mystery to line selection is to first understand where trout feed. This article will cover the four basic lines that I use with a brief explanation of when I use which.

When trout are feeding, they primarily do so in the top five feet because that's where the food is. This is because the top section of the water column is where photosynthesis occurs which supports the growth of aquatic vegetation. Plants provides protection and emit oxygen, creating an ideal habitat for aquatic insects.

As predators, trout developed feeding strategies which provided them the best return on their investment of energy. As a result, trout target these shallow zones because it has the greatest amount of available food. Populations of minnows also thrive at this depth, feeding on decaying plants, plankton, and algae.



The top five feet is the primary feeding zone of trout due to the availability of aquatic food sources

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Line selection is determined by the depth of the water column that I am targeting. These are the four lines that work best for me:

1. 3- 10 feet: Cortland Camo Intermediate Full Sinking Line
2. Top two feet: Cortland 7-Foot Intermediate Sink Tip
3. Surface: Cortland Long Belly Distance Floating Line
4. 11 feet and deeper: Cortland Type 3 Level Sink Line

When trout do hold deeper it is when they are not actively feeding. The exception to this is during the hot summer months when high water temperatures and a lack of oxygen force the trout deeper. During these warmer months, zooplankton or scuds also migrate deeper to cooler depths drawing fish deeper in order to feed.

The following explains when I use which line:

1. Cortland Camo Intermediate Full Sinking line: When fish are not showing on the surface, my line of choice is the Cortland Camo Intermediate Full Sink Line. This line has a slow sink rate of 1 to 1½ inches per second (approximately 1 foot every 10 seconds). A slow sink rate is important as it maintains the fly in the feeding zone longer. This line performs well in warm water and does not coil in cold water.

To determine depth where trout are feeding, I use a 10, 20, or 30-second count before starting the retrieve. Note the count when the strikes begin occurring. This indicates at what depth the trout are feeding.



For example: With a line that sinks 1 foot every 10 seconds, if strikes occur at a 30 second count, you know the fly is at three feet. If so, continue to use this same count before beginning the retrieve.

To drop the fly deeper you can use a long countdown and combine it with a slower rate of retrieve.

Toby Loftus using the Clear Camo Intermediate Full Sink Line

2. Cortland 7'Camo Intermediate Sink Tip: This is my go-to line fishing over weed beds, fishing shallow shoreline areas, or when fish are feeding in the top two feet. This line can be picked up with minimal surface disturbance any time in the retrieve and recast to cruising fish while maintaining the fly in the top two feet.

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Tiger Trout Caught on Vickie's UV Midge using Cortland 7' sink tip line



Vickie's UV Midge

3. Cortland Long Belly Distance Floating Line: I use a floating line when conditions favor floating small pupa patterns under an indicator or for casting dry flies. I prefer a weight forward line in olive, like the Cortland Long Belly Distance Floating Line, or other muted, or darker colored floating lines to eliminate line flash.

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Sun flash caused by the line



Caught with floating line and indicator with Vickie's UV Midge

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4. Cortland Type 3 Level Sink Line: If I want to fish deeper and desire a faster sinking line, I use the Cortland Type 3 Level Sink Line. This line has been useful for me during the warmer months when the fish are feeding at cooler depths. This line casts like a dream and hang markers at 14 feet and 24 feet to allow you to gauge at what depth your fly is located.



Caught with the Cortland Type 3 Sink Line using an Olive and Burnt Orange Predator Leech



Vickie's Predator Leech

I appreciate the questions from the readers of this blog. Keep them coming! Until I see you on the water….Good fishin'!

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