Gearing Up for Big Fish

Successful stillwater fly fishing requires specialized gear, particularly when angling for trophy trout. This five-part blog series will provide tackle guidelines on rods, lines, leader/tippets, and nets when fishing lakes that support trophy size trout.

Check out this 23-pounder caught by Toby Loftus along the shallow shoreline edges at Pronghorn Lake.



Trout caught at Pronghorn Lake using Vickie's Predator Bugger



Vickie's Predator Bugger

Being prepared with the appropriate tackle to withstand the rigors of catching and landing large trout in a lake like Pronghorn, requires tackle able to withstand the rigors of aggressive trout doing everything possible to avoid capture.

We'll begin the five-part blog series with how to choose the right rod.

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Gearing Up for Big Fish, Part 1 of 5: Rods

Factors to consider in rod selection include: rod weight, comfortable rod grip, rod tip bend, large guides, and rod length.



Trout caught on Vickie's Predator Leech at Pronghorn Lake



Vickie's Predator Leech

Rod Weight

Choose a 6-7 weight rod and leave your 5-weight at home. Lighter weight rods do not have enough strength in the butt section of the rod to overcome resistance from a large fighting trout. A 6-7 weight rod is also sturdy enough to slice through windy conditions as well as make long, delicate casts.

Another reason to use a heavier weighted rod is that it requires less time to land a trophy size trout. When lighter rods are used, fish must often be played to the point of exhaustion before landing them. This results in an increased level of lactic acid and cortisol generated by the long fight. This stress upon the fish can significantly contribute to increased mortality rates as reported by Dan Dauwalter in his article, "Fish Stress from Catch-and-Release Fishing" (in *Trout Unlimited*, September 1, 2014).

According to his study, when a trout is played to exhaustion, the mortality rate can increase up to 89% either immediately upon release or during their recovery period afterwards. Help keep these wonderful creatures alive! Avoid playing them to exhaustion so that they may survive and be even bigger the next time you hook them!

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Comfortable Rod Grip

Select a rod with a comfortable grip. You must keep a firm hold of your rod when fishing for trophy trout, and a comfortable grip makes this easier. After personally experiencing the tug that these fighting fish can place on a rod, it is easy to imagine how a rod might be ripped out of the hand of an unsuspecting angler. This has happened to several angers at Pronghorn, including one fellow last fall, whose story had an unexpected happy ending.



Mark triumphantly holding the recovered rod

A week after this gentleman lost his rod, Mark, a local Pronghorn angler was able to the retrieve the lost Winston 5-weight rod.

Mark hooked a fish and began stripping his line, and the struggling fish amazingly wrapped the line around the previous angler's lost rod. Astonishingly, Mark had hooked not only a large fighting trout with an attitude, but also the rod! Mark successfully retrieved the lost rod, but unfortunately, the trout ultimately evaded capture.

Rod Tip Bend



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Select a rod tip that has a progressive bend in the tip section. A softer bend in the upper section of the rod allows the tip section to absorb the impact of a trout attacking a fly or a strong hook set. The softer flex acts as a cushion, helping to prevent breakoffs. Rods that have a stiff tip will recover too abruptly, placing increased pressure which can generate a break off at the hook or tippet.

Large Guides

The ideal stillwater rod has larger guides. These reduce friction that results when line and leader rub against the guides during the retrieve or when your trout is running. As the line whizzes through the guides, any knots connecting the line, leader and tippet can get caught in smaller guides. A slight amount of resistance can be enough to cause a break off.

Rod Length

Select a rod that is 9 feet long as it provides sufficient leverage to make longer casts. I save my 10-foot rod on those very rare occasions that I am sight fishing from the shoreline using a floating line when I need to generate long casts or slice through wind. Be aware, however, that a longer rod will magnify any casting mistakes. On the other hand, a rod shorter than 9 feet cannot launch the line sufficient distance because it cannot generate the necessary line speed.

Summary

Evaluate these rod options while considering your own personal preferences. Since there are no industry standards manufacturers use to define rod performance, it is important to test various rods to determine which is best suited to your individual needs and preferences. The following qualities are what I look for when evaluating rods:

- 6-7 weight
- Medium-fast action rod with a stiffer butt section
- Comfortable rod grip
- A softer progressive tip
- Large guides
- 9-foot length

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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