Three Perspectives on Fly Selection

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Fly selection is driven by tradition, long held beliefs, personal preference, and experience. My fly box overflows with patterns that hold the promise of catching that 10-pound behemoth. Universally accepted guidelines for fly selection are repeated by anglers as gospel truth. Do these theories hold true in stillwater? In this article I will discuss three popular opinions and provide my own experience.



“Big flies for big fish”

Trophy size fish have grown large because they have honed their survival skills and remain wary in their underwater habitat. Even the slightest casting mistake can send them diving for cover. If they take our fly, that is the exception. Although you might think a large trout might prefer a single, big, juicy gulp of protein rather than chasing many smaller insects to eat the equivalent amount, I have found trout sometimes demonstrate their preference for smaller sized pupa patterns and refuse larger fly presentations like bugger or leech patterns. Perhaps it is because they are opportunistic feeders and react to the movement of the fly or they are keying on the image of emergers that are just below the surface.

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I experienced this when fishing Piedmont Reservoir in Wyoming. Trout were taking small flies and refusing larger patterns. Casting my UV Midge into the shoreline where feeding trout were cruising rewarded me with several 24-inch rainbows and a large brown trout. These large trout were selectively keying in on the profile, size, and silhouette of the UV Midge and refused any of my leech or bugger offerings.



This big brown trout inhaled my Black UV Midge



In another example, when fishing at East Lake in Oregon, I was casting in between shallow weed beds. A very large brown inhaled my blood red UV Midge, surfaced, and disappeared into the depths to hide in protective vegetation. Burrowing deep, he held me at bay, unyielding to any of my attempts to bring him up to the surface. After a tense standoff, the brown finally broke free, snapping my 13 lb. fluorocarbon tippet and taking the fly with him to disappear again into the recesses of the shallow bottom.

When not getting hit, try changing to a smaller aquatic fly pattern.

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“Fishing two flies is better than one”

Using multiple flies as a presentation approach is a matter of personal preference, and many anglers find this method very successful. However, this technique can present a unique challenge when using two different fly patterns (e.g. a seal bugger and a small chironomid). How do you determine the best retrieve to simulate the natural movement of both flies?



For example, with a bugger/chironomid combo, the larger fly will require a longer, fast pull and the smaller fly a short, slow pull. Since you can only do one retrieve, you will only be able to match the movement of one fly while sabotaging the movement of the other.

The solution to this dilemma is to use two flies that that require the same speed of retrieve. This can be an effective method to increase your chances for hook ups.

I have seen anglers use multiple small chironomids suspended under an indicator and landing beautiful 18 to 24-inch trout. Which fly was more successful? It depended on which fly matched the depth where feeding fish were cruising.

Another effective two-fly presentation approach for sight fishing is to cast a floating line with a dry pattern as the indicator and suspending a nymph pattern below it. The challenge with this approach is the you cannot avoid creating surface disturbance upon the retrieve. Applying this technique at Monster Lake in Wyoming during late spring was tremendously fun as huge trout I hooked often took me down to my backing.

“Bead head or no bead head,” …the discussion continues

Traditional brass bead heads are a popular and an effective way to get the fly down fast. However, I no longer use flies with bead heads. I prefer to distribute the weight along the hook shank. This is because when retrieving a fly with a bead head, the fly moves unnaturally. To see what I mean watch the following video.

Compare these two flies, identical except one has a bead head and the other does not. Watch how head of the bead head fly rises and drops unnaturally up and down during the retrieve in this underwater water video: https://youtu.be/zxBzpkcWNY4

Both flies were weighted equally and tied with the same materials. The difference was that the fly without the bead head was wrapped with twenty wraps of .020 lead distributed along the shank. When the weight is distributed, the fly will rise and fall in a more natural motion as it is retrieved.

Any adage, no matter how often it is repeated or widely accepted deserves to be tested. I’ve spent a lot of time fishing all over, and these are the conclusions I’ve reached. How does your experience compare?

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