What's more important: fly or presentation?

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Most anglers believe selecting the appropriate fly pattern is the key to catching fish. Is this true? Or is the presentation more important? This story compares the importance of presentation versus pattern selection in successfully catching trout.



My husband and I kicked our SuperCat pontoon boats out on a lake close to Portland one midmorning, savoring a break from the long, cold, and rainy Northwest winter. The sky was cloudy, and the air temperature warmed up to 50 degrees F. Water temperature was 48 degrees F and the surface was glassy with a few midge pupae floating in the surface film. A few surface rings were visible indicating fish feeding in the top two feet of water.



Vickie's All-Purpose Nymph

We both used intermediate 7' sink tip lines to keep our flies high in the water column where the fish were feeding. Both of us used the same fly, my grey AP Nymph. This fly is a productive pupa pattern when fish are feeding in the top few feet.

Trout were dispersed, which commonly occurs when water temperatures are cold. It did not make a difference if we fished either along shoreline or in deeper water if we maintained our flies in the top two feet of the water column.

As I trolled the lake, I would stop kicking approximately every 50 feet, make 10-12 slow, 4-6 inch strips, wiggle my rod tip to release line back into the water, then start moving again. This allowed the fly to sink, simulating the natural movement of the insect.

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When trolling, it is important to stop moving before beginning the strip. If you kick the same time you strip, the increased speed of the fly will reduce hookups since fish are reluctant to chase the fly. Therefore, it is important to stop trolling before you start stripping, especially in cold water conditions.

Using this kick, stop-and-strip method, I immediately hooked fish. This told me I was presenting my fly at the correct depth where the trout could see it and were feeding. The slow retrieve imitated the movement of their natural food source.

I wanted to test whether adjusting the way the fly moved would make a difference in my catch rate. We both continued trolling with identical lines and flies, but I changed the speed of the retrieve. Here is what happened:

As I sped up the retrieve, I continued to receive a lot more bumps, nibbles, and pecks, but overall, the fish would not take the fly. By this time, my husband had out fished me 3-to-1, landing six fish to my two. This is a striking indication how important the retrieve is in simulating the natural movement of the insect. Since I knew that the rate of the retrieve and the importance of the pause was critical in my catch rate, what would happen if I changed the fly?

I changed the fly to my UV Emerger and tried the fast retrieve. The fish continued to refuse taking my fly. I then modified my retrieve back to the original slow, short retrieve with a pause between strips. The fish started taking the fly again.



Vickie's UV Emerger

This experiment illustrated that the retrieve, not the fly, significantly influenced the behavior of the fish. Both flies were effective in catching fish, but what made the difference in the hook up was the speed of the retrieve and the pause between retrieves.

The slower retrieve with the pause made the fly's movement more closely mimic the natural movement of an insect. My husband continued to catch fish during my experimentation which made for a lot of shared laughter over cocktail hour.

The next time you find yourself on the water, be willing to adapt to conditions as this may allow you to turn potential failure into success. If the bite slows, change the retrieve before you change the fly. When trout refuse a fly, it is more likely due to the method you are presenting the fly verses the actual fly pattern.

Have fun experimenting and focus on finding the depth where fish are feeding and keeping your fly at that depth. This can mean all the difference turning a slow day into one filled with great fish stories.

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