

They're Under Your Feet

It's time to put your 7-wt away and go for a lighter approach as GAIA instructor Andy Smith targets the fish right under your feet.

Stillwater fisheries have been around for as long as I can remember and their popularity continues to grow. However, interestingly, whereas I began my fly fishing activities around 50 years ago with my dad on fantastic reservoirs such as Eyebrook and then Rutland Water, the availability of reclaimed gravel workings has delivered dozens of wonderful small trout fishing venues across the country for what I see as now being the go-to venues of today's stillwater flyfisher. These waters, many of which may be around 14 acres or far less, provide a perfect venue for all. For beginners just getting into fly fishing, or the flyfisherman who has just an hour or so to fish within life's busy schedule, or as I have found, these small waters regularly provide serious tactical fly fishing situations that can beat even the most experienced anglers among us.



Stand well back and target the margins first.

Time For Change

To get the best from these small waters does require a method change for most, in that it's time to think outside the box and put to one side the trusty 7-wt outfit we were all originally sold when we started and move to something altogether lighter. There is nothing wrong with the 7-wt outfit because it really is a great all-round package that suits most people for most situations, most of the time, but it's a bit like how these days we are sold a digital camera and the shop assistant says leave it on the auto green setting! That's okay straight out of the shop and it does have you taking good pictures from day one. However, take it off the green setting and there's a whole new world of far better imagery out there that few ever realise. The same can be said of fishing methods, and especially rods.

We buy our fly rods for stillwaters, and let me emphasise again that there's really nothing wrong with the 7-wt because it remains an all-rounder setup that's still perfect for throwing big lines and big flies over big expanses of water, but for these small stillwaters, especially during the spring and summer months, it really is overgunned. After all, in the USA and Scandinavia our modern 10ft 7-wt trout rod has become their go-to outfit for salmon fishing, so if you haven't already done so, it's time to move off that green setting, as it were, and discover a whole new world of fly fishing by going significantly lighter.

You'll enjoy the scrap on a lighter outfit.

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GAIA

Game Angling Instructors' Association

The Light Touch

When I say go lighter I mean something like a 5-wt, although there are many times when I'm fishing a 4-wt or even a 3-wt rod as I drop down to fish a single size 18, 20 or 22 buzzer, nymph or CDC pattern on light leaders. So in this instance we don't need the power of the big rod to throw out a team of large flies and as things get sunnier and warmer I will fish really light with nothing more than 3lb leader, and often quite a bit less, which if used with your powerful 7-wt is going to snap every time you have a fish on. If you use a 3lb leader you are not even going to lose a 6lb trout if you are using a light outfit. Having sampled the delights of using light tackle for a day, going back to your 7-wt rod will seem like you're casting a ton weight!

When the season begins and the fish are freshly stocked, they're hungry and will basically take flies of almost any pattern with relative ease, even if the leader is as thick and heavy as, say, 10lb. However, as the season moves on, the fish become altogether pickier, especially if you fish a catch-and-release water and/or it's one with great natural fly life, where the fish soon learn to reject the mandatory Cat's Whisker, Fritz patterns and the like. It's at this time that you have to change your approach, not only with your choice of fly, rod, line and leader setup but, importantly, you have to think more about where those fish are in the water as the season moves on, and that's quite often right under your feet.



Finesse is the name of the game, Andy uses a 10ft 4-wt.

Spot The Fish

Obviously venue is crucial and because I love to fish the margins I choose fisheries and lakes where there is good clear water, lots of overhangs, reed growth and shade, so I consider myself blessed to have such a water right on my doorstep. Trinity Lakes Fly Fishing, situated on the east side of Nottingham, offers everything I look for in a place to fish and because it has exceptionally clear water throughout the season, seeing fish is a piece of cake. This is a bit tactical perhaps for some and requires a relatively calm day, or at least areas protected from the wind to create a calm on the water, but fish spotting/stalking, or should I say at least casting to fish seen close in, is a world apart from just casting out as far as I can into the middle of the lake and waiting for a tug to a slow figure-of-eight retrieve.

For me, seeing fish is vitally important, so when I drop a fly, either dry or nymph, over them, I'm able to watch their reaction. This brings stunning excitement if the fish takes the

fly before your eyes and it's a real feeling of satisfaction because you visually witness the entire event.

However, the reaction of the fish tells you so much more, especially if it ignores your fly completely or comes straight to it, only to turn away as it approaches. As frustrating as these rejections can be on occasion, at least I know what the fish are not taking. I've seen anglers fishing the same fly for hours without success, yet I've already witnessed the reaction of trout and established that they have no interest in that fly.



No need to go big. Try tiny morsels first.



Small flies, light leaders.

They're Under Your Feet

Fishing close in can be a real education about the feeding habits of fish at different times of the year as you try to pitch your skills and the contents of your fly box to those trout. We've all either experienced, or at least heard other anglers describe, how having been fishing 25 yards out they had taken a fish close in, sort of out of the blue, as they were about to make a new cast, saying the fish must have followed the fly all the way in? No, it's the fact that the fish was already there close in and your fly proved irresistible as it was raised up to the surface prior to the cast.

Even first thing in the season I find that fish can be really close in and getting a visual on them can be the difference between catching or blanking.

A case in point during the March opening week, I was stood on the bank above an angler who, after an average of six false casts, repeatedly managed to land a team of flies 25 to 30 yards out. Amazingly, from my high vantage point

I could see trout swimming past no more than six yards in front of him and throughout his session he never caught anything, other than regularly hooking into the bank with his back cast as he strived for completely unnecessary distance. The angler looked at me in total disbelief when I pointed out that fish were right in front of him. Over the period I had been watching, no less than 30 trout had passed by close enough for him to spear them with his rod tip.

Let's fast-forward the first few weeks of the trout season and get to the part of the year where the weather is warmer, the fish aren't as easy to catch and maybe you have already blanked once or twice. If this

sounds all too familiar then it's definitely time to switch away from that auto green setting, hang up the 7-wt outfit, fish closer in, fish light and try fishing flies that are really small.

Going Light

I use a 5-wt setup or less and that's going to give an altogether more pleasurable fishing experience. Even a 2lb stockie will seem like the fish of a lifetime played on a 4 or 5-wt outfit against the rigidity of your trusty 7-wt. The lighter line will have you casting more delicately, the line will land on the water with very little disturbance and you are less likely to spook any fish close in. My go-to

small-stillwater outfit is a 10ft 4-wt, which works perfectly for all delicate presentations with either nymph or dry fly. If you are fishing in close, there's no need for long leaders and therefore nine feet is plenty unless you know the fish are deep down, at which point you can always tie on an additional four feet or so of your favourite leader material. Long leaders will not cast well for short distances, so work with a length you find easy to handle. Use a good tapered leader of no more than 3lb or a tip diameter of 0.14mm and less and use small flies. Even when buzzer fishing I tend to use size 18 the most and with a fine leader the smaller, lighter buzzers fish far more naturally and hang better than the larger hook. Heavier patterns fall through the water all too quickly and thus bypass fish that are feeding on or near the top. Over the years I have had my biggest fish on the smallest of flies and if you ever take the trouble to put a dipping net through the water where you fish regularly, it's not hard to see why because so much of the trout's diet you will see is made up of creatures no bigger than a

match head.

A good pair of polarised sunglasses is essential for fly fishing because without them you'll see nothing. I can't tell you how many times I've found anglers who have never invested in them and fished blindly for years without the slightest realisation that fish were swimming around less than a rod's length in front of them. The angler I referred to from my March session wasn't wearing any polarising eyewear either and never saw a thing. I appreciate the best quality eyewear can be expensive but, honestly, they are worth every penny.

Carpet-Slipper Approach

Whether you know your water or not, you need to approach every likely fishing spot in stealth mode and have the fly ready for an immediate cast. Creeping up to the water's edge as if you were wearing carpet slippers is a must and try to keep off the skyline. Use the least movement possible and it's amazing how close in fish are. When you start fishing, it's really worthwhile to remain inconspicuous. Also spend some time looking at the

One of several blue trout caught in the margins.



Use all available cover to avoid spooking the fish close in.

Flies for the light touch



TACTICS

water before you start fishing and that will give you a more informed choice of what fly to use. All too often I see anglers at my local water tackling up in the car park and tying flies onto their leader before they have even assessed whether the fish are down deep or not.

Once I'm ready to start fishing, I'll often drop my first fly in the water from several yards back if I know it's a deepish spot that's likely to hold a fish right in close. I move up to the water's edge or on to a fishing stage platform and begin to cast further out once I've covered the water tight in. Watch carefully at all times for fish and peer into the depths in front and cast along the margins and alongside overhangs. These are the areas where the food is and therefore where the fish are, pretty much under your feet.

Having said all that, don't ignore the water 15 yards out in front of you but, honestly, on these small stillwaters, having to cast huge distances of anything like 30 yards simply isn't needed.

Keep It Natural

If you are able to see fish swimming around, but not coming to the surface, don't use your usual big flies. Cast a small nymph or buzzer to them and let it slowly drop through the water as near to it as possible without spooking it. If the fish ignores or refuses the fly try a different pattern, but all the time keep it natural to what's around. I generally find

that a couple of fly changes will do the trick, unless it's a fish that's already been fished over many times earlier that day, then maybe nothing will work.

Remember, what I'm describing is my methodology for small, clear, stillwaters and not something that will roll out as an answer to fishing big reservoirs or open waters with only Wellington-boot-depth shorelines. Stalking fish on the small stillwaters can be as exciting as fishing some of our best rivers and perhaps that's why it can be so rewarding. If you find that your fishery greens up in summer with no visibility, don't give up. Still fish close in around overhangs and reed beds because the fish will still be occupying this area looking for food.

One last thing, on breezy days, and this works for any size of stillwater, fish the shoreline where the wind is blowing on to it, especially if that wind direction has been the same for several days. Here you are going to find fish stacked up no more than a rod length out as they take advantage of the food drifting to them by the wind and/or the waves stirring up the bottom exposing food. I know casting into the wind just doesn't work for beginners, but it's so worth having a lesson from an instructor to become competent at this because fishing along a breezy shoreline can be fantastic, and again it's fish that are under your feet. **TFE**

Casting Into The Wind



A high, up back cast...



... followed by a low, forward cast to cut the line under the wind.

Fooled at close range. Try a light approach close in before casting to the horizon.

