

Ten Mistakes Anglers Make

Improving Skills Are Part of the Challenge to Fly Anglers

By Scott Branyan
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An angler fumbles a rainbow trout while trying to pose for a photo. The angler should have kept low to the water with a net under the fish. The photo illustrates one of many common mistakes anglers sometimes make.

No one is immune to the need for improvement. This is true of fly anglers no matter how long they have fished. Here are some common mistakes I see anglers often make. Correct a few of your worst errors and you will be on your way to becoming a better angler and catching more fish.¹

1. Reaction is too late. Anglers are often surprised fish are interested in their offering as soon as it hits the water. They present the fly and then relax—often to the point of becoming distracted. The line or indicator moves, and, as the fish ejects the fly, they come around to realizing they just missed a fish. It is hard to stay focused 100 percent of

¹ The two—angling and catching—are not necessarily the same. Does merely catching fish make one a good angler? It is certainly the primary aspect, but an argument could be made that one angler executes his angling better or worse than another aside from how many fish are caught. Fly-angling to many is about the merger of form (or art) as well as function. Creative problem solving is the heart of the art of angling with a fly.

the time, but successful fly anglers learn to concentrate and anticipate a good presentation receiving an immediate reaction from fish.

2. Allowing the belly of the line to swing into a rock or log rather than tightening the line sooner. This is primarily an error in judging the distance to the end of the fly or not watching for obstacles in the stream.

If you let the fly swing out on the far side of a log, as the belly of the line catches the log, it draws the fly right into it. To avoid the problem, tighten the line sooner so the fly swings just ahead of the structure drawing out any fish from the prime holding lie in front of or to the near side of the log. It is also helpful to try to guesstimate the correct distance to the fly allowing for the length of the leader. This is harder to do in the case of sink tip lines where the dark tip sinks out of sight.

It takes practice and observation to watch for snags not only near the surface but potential snags in deeper water as well. The goal is to allow the fly to come near the structure but not close enough to hang up. Hang ups waste time and effort and sometimes cost flies.

3. Leaving the fly in the water while traveling through skip-over water. This is an annoyance to the guide but also allows the fly to pick up trash or snag objects. Whenever moving to another spot pull the line, leader and fly inside the boat or coil it in hand as you wade. If the guide tells you to bring your line and fly inside the boat there is usually a good reason, so listen to him or her. Use the downtime to relax momentarily and/or check your fly and leader.

4. Failing to check your fly often. Moss or other trash on the fly will keep fish away. It's important to check your fly anytime it touches bottom, especially when nymphing in fast water with weight. Also check the hook point to make sure a rock has not dulled it. Carry a sharpener with you. A diamond hone works well.

5. Failure to check leader and tippet often for tangles and casting knots. Get in the habit of quickly checking the leader when you inspect your fly. Run the tippet just above the fly through your fingers to feel any nicks or abrasions. If there are any, cut the tippet and retie the fly. This may save you from losing a trophy fish. Check your connecting knots and keep them clean.

Before every fishing outing, check your fly line to leader connection. If it is hinging or cracking or even looks "iffy," re-do the connection.

6. Oversetting the hook. The amount of hookset required to hook a fish varies depending on the tightness of the line, the current and aggressiveness or passiveness of the fish.

The goal is to do whatever it takes to move the hook inside the fish's mouth. If the line is tight, when swinging a streamer for example, and the current fast, an aggressive fish will virtually hook itself. In slacker water, however, you may have to move quite a bit of line in order to set the hook in a more passive fish. Overly hard hooksets, though, tear fishes' mouths and break off flies—a hard lesson when losing a big fish.

7. Not waiting and presenting the fly at the optimum time when drifting into prime water. This applies mostly to drift boat anglers and is especially true when coming up to drop-offs. Cast so your fly hits just above the drop-off—just where depends on current speed. Then allow the fly to swing or drift naturally into the upstream end of the pocket. Too early and you snag the shallows, or the current swings the fly out just as it gets to the drop-off. By the time you recast you may have missed the zone. Fish are often holding very tight to the drop-off zone, so you want to be sure to have your fly set up and drifting into the zone at the proper moment.

8. Trying to cast too much line or too much slack in the line. Take the time to pull in and pick up all that slack line especially if it's out there 40-50 feet. Shorter, controlled casts catch more fish as opposed to long, sloppy casts.

9. Casting without knowing where your partner is fishing. Fishing partners fishing the same side from a boat often cast over each other's line and fail to see it until the fly lands. Get in the habit of checking on where your partner's line is before you cast. It's the considerate thing to do.

On a related matter, sometimes a guide will have two anglers fish on the same side of the boat and purposefully overlap while swinging lines with streamers. The downstream angler must be careful to wait until the upstream angler's line begins to swing out well below the boat before throwing over the upstream angler's line. One should never line a fellow angler's fly. It's OK to throw over a line, but not over the actual fly as the disturbance on the water may ward off a fish about to take.

10. Casting for no reason. The fly is in position; line position is fine; the drift is good; the fly is about to drift into the hot spot; and the angler recasts. Stop! Leave the fly in the water in good spots. Fish it out.

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