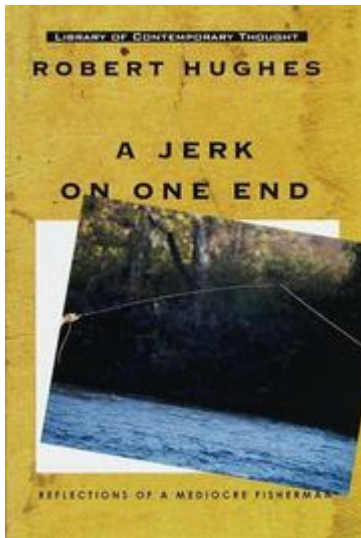


A jerk at one end

By Laurence Davies

I was reading an autobiography by Robert Hughes recently, titled “A Jerk at One End”. It reminded me about a presentation given at a FFA meeting on fly fishing retrieves, short jerks and long jerks. The guest gave us all the options and finished up with the comment that your success in flyfishing depends on the “jerk” at one end. I could not for the life of me remember who the guest was, but his closing quip was re-awakened in me when I saw Robert Hughes book.



Of course the comment about successfully hooking a trout, being dependant on the “retrieve” and the “retriever” is a valid one, so I thought that I would present some of my thoughts on retrieves when fishing for trout in still waters.

Firstly, I must confess that I am as guilty as most flyfishers that I see, fishing way too fast, especially considering the insect that their fly was meant to represent. On each outing I find that it takes me about half an hour to unwind and relax when on the water, being all tense from the stresses of my busy life, and the excitement of getting onto the water. Too often I am in what my wife calls robot mode, fishing a fly that has been tied on without a hell of a lot of thought. Ok, I have gone through the process of looking at the water to see if there is any surface movement, or any fly hatch, which would help me make a decision on whether to fish the surface or sub-surface. Very rarely has there been any surface movement on the water so invariably I am fishing sub surface, with either a floating line or an intermediate. Rarely do I fish

a sinking line nowadays, preferring to rig up two rods, one with a floating line and the other with an intermediate line. This then covers my options for fishing both shallow and deeper water, using either weighted or unweighted flies on either rod.

The rate, or method of retrieve should realistically depend on the prey that you are trying to mimic, be-it mayfly, dragon or damsel nymphs, midges, snails, tadpoles or minnows to name the most popular targets. That is, if you know the insect that your fly is meant to represent. I say this because, at a flytying course given by Gordon Van Der Spuy last year, he started by asking each of the attendees to draw a mayfly nymph, then a caddis and then a dragon fly nymph. It was obvious from the results that very few knew the general shape or size of the insects that they thought their flies represented, and some had been fishing for trout for many years. OK, so maybe you don't need to know what insect your fly represents, especially if you have had some success with that fly, fishing at a rate or depth which would certainly not be mimicking the insect that it is supposed to represent.

So why did the trout eat the fly if it did not mimic the insect it should have represented? And here is the big question- what makes a trout tick? Why does it in one minute turn its nose up at a fly which is an almost replica of the insect you are trying to mimic, even at the right speed and depth, and yet, in the next instant it will swallow a fly which looks nothing like any which are found in the water? And I can assure you that there are many flies in this category.

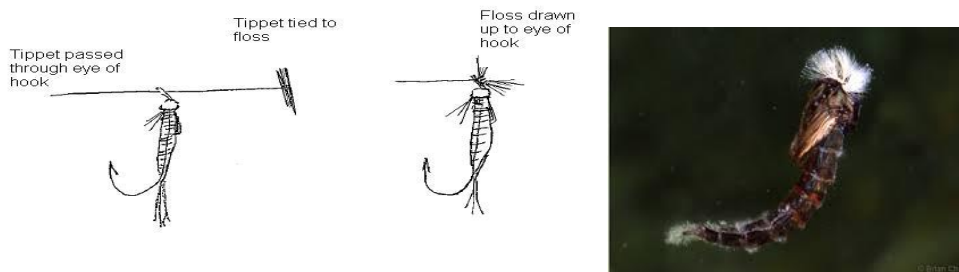
Malcolm Meintjies, in his book, “Trout Through the Looking Glass” discussed why a trout will take a fly, especially as, no matter how close to being an exact copy of an insect, your fly still has a great hook sticking out of it, and you also have a great big knot at the eye. He reckons that, in many cases the fly is attacked because it brings out aggression in the trout.

But at the same time, trout **will** take a well presented fly, either closely resembling the insect, or being a suggestive, generic pattern of a range of insects, and being fished at a speed representative of those insect. So how do we determine at what rate and depth we should be retrieving our flies?

Firstly, you should have a basic knowledge of what insect, or range of insects your fly represents, where the insect usually resides in the dam and how fast they move.

Now our mayfly nymphs live mainly on the rocks or in the muds, some are free swimming, and all migrate to the surface from where they metamorphose into Mayfly adults, a very simplified description of their lifestyle I know. They are tiny and they move very slowly, less than an inch a second. They are best represented by flies in the size 16 to 12 range (GRHE, Zak, PTN, etc.), fished with a very slow retrieve, if retrieving at all, ie just left to drift around. I remember Hugh Huntley telling me that often he would cast out his red-eye damsel and light up a cigarette. While keeping his eye on the end of his line, he would smoke his cigarette and when finished, he would retrieve slowly and re-cast. He said that he got most of his takes on the drift.

Remember, that even if you are not retrieving line, the drift and ripple on the water will impart some movement to your fly. John Mill's favourite fly when we fished together many years ago was the Bow-tie Buzzer, not so much a fly pattern, but a system of fishing, developed by Frank Sawyer, if I am not mistaken. This was a midge imitation using something like a Pheasant Tail Nymph, where the tippet is passed through the eye and tied to some floss which keeps the fly afloat, with the body just under the surface. It is a useful technique when wanting to fish buzzers in the surface film, and you don't have buzzer patterns in the fly box.



Whenever there was a chop on the water, John would tie on the nymph, bow-tie buzzer style, cast out and let the fly drift, with the chop bobbing the fly up and down. He swore by this method.

Even if there is no visible surface or sub surface activity, a dry fly or hopper pattern will bring fish up from the depth. A DDD is particularly effective in this way. They can be left to drift around with the occasional twitch to simulate a live terrestrial. DDDs work a treat when fishing for bass, they love them. Once, when fishing a trout dam in the Kamberg area, I became desperate. The water was crystal clear, with a clear sky, and I had circled the dam, fishing from the side, with not a sight of any fish. I sat down on the dam wall, tied on a DDD and cast out diagonally from the wall, and let the fly drift towards some weeds on my right. Once the fly had finished the drift I carefully lifted the line and recast. After I had done this a number of times, without success, I started a slow jerky retrieve, like I would have for bass, and bang, a nice sized trout took the fly. I would love to say that I had hit on the right technique for the day, and that I caught a few more trout in this way, but alas, it was the only one.

Another way to fish static, without retrieving the fly, until the end of the drift that is, is using a washing line technique, where you fish with a floating line and a bushy dry fly on the point of the leader, and have a nymph or buzzer (or two) on a dropper. The nymph is fishing subsurface and the dry fly acts like an indicator/float, and is also sometimes taken by the trout (many of us have had trout go for the strike indicator, then why not use a dry fly for an indicator). Conversely, by using a slightly weighted fly on the point, and a bushy dry fly on the top dropper, you can fish at greater depth with the small nymph, and the dry fly acts as your indicator.

Midge larva are found on the bottom of the dam and can barely swim, only wriggling, so that is where you need to fish your imitation (San Juan worm). No good stripping it at pace.



Now the one trout food item which is available all year round, and is a good mouthful, **and** it moves at a pace which many of us fish, is the dragon fly nymph.



There are various families of dragonfly nymph of all shapes, colours and sizes (from 1cm to 75 mm), ranging from burrowers, crawlers and free swimming nymphs. They swim by squirting water out of their tail end, and they do this in short sharp bursts. They will also rest in between spurts, hovering or slowly sinking in the water. It is the short fast bursts which most of us imitate, with our large woolly buggie type flies, or more the recently popular. The flies can be weighted or unweighted (Roger Baert and Tom Sutcliffe both tied neutral density dragons). Ideally you should retrieve in short sharp jerks, with an occasional longer draw, and then leave the fly stationary for a few seconds before starting the retrieve again. I must admit that I have the most confidence when fishing such a good sized fly. After all, you think, how could the fish resist such a good mouthful when it has been filling up with tiny daphnia. No contest surely? When hatching they swim to weeds or plants in the water from where they crawl up the stem out of the water and hatch.

Damsel nymph imitations account for many trout, particularly the red-eye damsel, when tied correctly. It is a slender insect with two prominent eyes, and it moves slowly through the water with an enticing wiggle of the abdomen and tail (or more correctly, gills). They range in colour from almost transparent to bright green and brown, dependant on the substrate in which they reside (Hugh told me that he fished the olive red-eye damsel near the surface and the brown one when fishing deeper). They are usually between 15 and 25mm in size.



When hatching it swims to the weeds, climbs up out of the water and then changes into the adult damselfly. The imitation is best fished static or very slowly. No material, or fly design can imitate the wiggle of the nymph, although use of a disk or sequin at the head has been claimed to work well. Marabou or rabbit fur tails provide tremendous movement in the water. Gary Borger recommended casting out your floating line and allowing the fly to sink, drawing in some line, wagging the tip of the rod from side to side which will create a little s curve in your line on the surface, take up the line to straighten it and wiggle the rod tip again. Repeat until you have fished out the fly.

Minnows are also a good mouthful for the trout and they can move pretty quickly, in all depths of water, again, at the speed which many of us retrieve. I believe that the quick retrieve, when fishing a minnow pattern, brings out the aggression in the trout. Jan Korrubel was saying that you can strip as fast as you like. It is always advisable however to apply variation ie strip, strip, pause, strip, strip, long strip, pause, etc.

I have covered the main food items and the retrieves that mimic the common insects, but, as I stated at the beginning, trout are funny creatures, and the “wrong” technique sometimes works. Let me give you an example. I was fishing a small lake near London and saw an angler catch a few trout. I noticed that he was stripping quite fast and could not believe it when he showed me his fly which was about a size 16 mayfly nymph. Now a mayfly nymph can never swim anything like the speed of his retrieve, but it worked for him on that day. Another example was when I was fishing a water in the Kamberg area, fishing a marabou damsel on an intermediate line. I saw a good rise about 25m to my right. I started stripping as fast as I could in order to recast and cover the rise when, bang, the fish had travelled some 25m and taken my fly, which was travelling way too fast to mimic the insect. Obviously the retrieve had triggered aggression in the fish. It happened to be the largest trout that I have ever seen before, let alone hooked. Unfortunately it headed for the weeds and I was broken off. The only satisfaction that I had was that it cleared the water between me and my son, and his eyes almost popped out of their sockets, so at least I had a witness.

Jan Korrubel was saying that he was told of the “13 minute rule” adopted by a fellow flyfisher. If nothing happens within 13 minutes, change something. That change could be the rate of retrieve, change the pattern of retrieve, fish deeper, change the fly or fly colour. Retrieve in a series of jerks - short jerks, long jerks, pause, or longer smoother strips.

Don't fish in robot mode.
