

BARBED / BARBLESS HOOKS

Laurence Davies



I posed the question in the FFA newsletter, asking who was fishing flies with barbed hooks, or fishing barbless, and why. I asked this after a comment from Steve Brooks, when he was telling me that he had reverted back to fishing with barbed hooks on his recent Eastern Cape trip with Ian Cox and Martin Davies, where he was fishing trophy trout waters. He had made this decision after having lost a number of good saltwater fish, and didn't want the same to happen on his trip.

Most of those that I talked to, fish barbless for trout and spoke of fishing barbless out of self preservation. I was one of them, having fished barbless for many years. I told the story before, of standing on the bank of the Mooi River, putting a newly tied nymph into my mouth and wetting it whilst at the same time looking at the water for any signs of trout. Suddenly my foot slipped and I pulled the fly into my lip. Fortunately I had crimped the barb on that fly, so it was easily withdrawn, not like the one in the picture below which I filched from the internet.



I also like to release fish easily and with little harm to them, which I can with a barbless hook. I don't remember any fish that I have lost because I was fishing barbless. Of course, I have lost them by being stupid, like leaving too much slack whilst trying to get in loose line so that I could fight the fish from the reel.

Mark Bowen responded and I also went to two flyfishers, authors, and two of the nicest anglers in the country who have never let me down with their responses, for their comments.

Response from Mark Bowen

I fish barbless for two reasons. Firstly, if a fish swallows my hook I have a plastic thing (*Ketchum Release Tool – see below - Laurence*) which I run down the line and jiggle the fly and it releases easily from the trout's mouth. It is released



without touching the fish. The second reason is in case I catch myself. I don't mind removing flies with barbed hooks from Ian Roberts, Graeme Kerr and Co, but I prefer any hooks which penetrate my finger, cheek or any other parts of my anatomy to be barbless.

Laurence - I remember Ian's hook up, at Mount West. The barbed fly was well embedded in his hand. Mark wrapped some monofilament around the bend of the hook, pressed down on the eye of the fly, and said to Ian, "I will count to 10 and then I will pull". Mark got to 3 and then yanked the fly out of Ian's hand, clean as a whistle.

Response from Peter Brigg:-

I posed the question to Peter one of our doyens of fly fishing, an expert in small mountain streams.

At a guess I gave up using barbed hooks completely, probably 15 to 20 years ago. I did it at the time because I began to feel that they were somewhat barbaric. Now that I return 99% of my catch I'm more comfortable knowing that the risk of injury or damage to the fish is reduced considerably. As a case in point, it is far easier to remove a barbless hook when a fish is deeply hooked and if carefully done with forceps there is a good chance of survival after release – the same cannot be said of barbed hooks where death is a real possibility. Also if you are broken off by a fish the barbless hook will easily fall out where the opposite will apply with barbed hooks. The fish will be left with a hook in its jaws and a length or tippet trailing behind it possibly for some time, it may even cause infection and maybe death later.

I have no basis other than my experience having used both types of hook to say that I have not noticed anything significant in terms of losing more fish with barbless hooks.

Personally I feel that barbed hooks have no place in modern sport fishing.

The danger to you and the fish with barbless hooks is far less, the tradeoff being that you may lose a few more fish, a minor sacrifice in my opinion."

Dr Tom Sutcliffe

I posed the same question to Tom who needs little introduction as this country's top angler and author :-

I know of nobody fishing barbed hooks in freshwater situations today, and I can appreciate that you may well lose more fish on them. To me that isn't a major issue in most situations, but it may be a critical issue in some circumstances, like trophy fishing for a scarce species, or fishing where you get one strike per 1000 casts (steelhead fishing comes to mind), when a barbed hook is almost a must. One thing to dispel is that I don't take an ethical or moral stance on this at all. It's a legitimate personal choice.

Having said that, we do fish a number of streams pretty hard where there is high angling pressure and mandatory CAR protocols are in place. Here I'd suggest barbless hooks are essential. Last season fishing with a good friend we hooked and landed the same fish four times. I would not like to do that with barbed hooks.

Stiff, quick-actioned rods are a problem with barbed hooked flies because when the angler strikes sharply there is a rebound effect after the strike and that often dislodges the hook. Both Leonard Flemming and I have experienced this on many small streams and it's one of the reasons I so like using bamboo.

If you keep even pressure throughout the fight you shouldn't lose a painful number of fish on barbless hooks, but you will lose some.

Finally, releasing the fish is so much easier and more often less harmful, to say nothing of getting flies out of your shirt or flesh! I fished yesterday with my son Robert and kept forgetting he is a left-handed caster. So I was too often on the wrong side behind him and must have freed at least six flies from my cap or shirt. All came free in a second.

I have taken to heart a new dictum with its own website. The dictum is 'Keepemwet' meaning to never remove your fish from the water. The movement is gaining ground in the USA. See <https://www.keepemwet.org>. I imagine they would prefer barbless, but I may be wrong, because with forceps you can remove barbed hooks quickly – if you know how to use forceps properly.

It is hard to follow the above observations but I would like to add further comments. Firstly I would like to point out, as Tom did, much depends on where you are fishing and the size of the fish and size of the fly. Hooking a one metre long GT with a 5/0 fly does not compare to catching small stream trout where the trophy might be 14", but where many will only make 8". A barbed hook on a small mountain stream trout can do great damage, and as Tom and Peter said, you need to fish barbless to avoid major damage.

For many years you could not get decent barbless hooks so you had to flatten the barb, which often led to snapping the point off the fly. I then started to flatten the barbs **before** I tied the fly. But for those who do not tie their own flies, most of the flies that one buys from the shops are barbed, and many will have broken the points when flattening the barbs, eventually leaving them barbed.

Some anglers prefer to flatten barbs rather than fish barbless because a flattened barb tends to have a bit more holding power than a barbless hook because the flattened barb still leaves a little bump at the position of the barb.

In the early days the popular hooks had brute barbs until they introduced whisker barbs. Many converted to the whisker barbs and still use them despite the excellent barbless hooks now available.



Barbless hooks nowadays are excellent, having not only sharp points which are easy to extract, but penetrate more easily than barbed hooks. Likewise they are easy to extract from a fishes mouth, by grasping the fly and jiggling it or using a Ketchum tool, without touching the fish or removing it from the water. However a word of warning which Roger Baert wrote about many years ago, and that is, that any fish which has been fought for a long period, must be revived **properly** before it is released. Without reviving it properly, the quick release is likely to end up with a dead fish.

For those converting to barbless, don't attribute "long line" releases to the barbless hooks, because I am sure that many of you had "long line" releases when you fished with barbed hooks as well.
