

# A BUMBLER FISHES THROUGH IT

I was no Brad Pitt, but I decided I had to learn how to catch a trout with a fly. By Ben Long. Illustrations by Mike Moran

I admit it. Fly-fishing was not my thing.

I'd lived in Montana for nearly 30 years, all within minutes of several rivers that made the state famous.

But fly-fishing—dry, wet, or just damp around the edges—never stirred my drink. It's kind of embarrassing.

I mean, being a Montana outdoor writer and not fly-fishing is like hailing from Texas and not barbecuing, or being a New Yorker who doesn't know how to hail a taxi.

Oh, I *knew* about fly-fishing all right. I grew up reading fishing writers like Norman Maclean, Ed Zern, and Roderick L. Haig-Brown, fly casters all. I took my future wife on our first date to see *A River Runs Through It* on opening night, back when the movie theater was downtown and had only one screen. You might think I was ripe for fly-fishing, but you would be wrong.

Frankly, I was intimidated by the whole business: the fly anglers with their polarized sunglasses that cost more than my first car, the array of waders for every temperament and temperature of water body found on Earth. (My idea of waders is last year's sneakers and cut-off jeans.)

Then there's the fly-fishing gear. When I step into a fly shop, I feel like I don't know the secret handshake. The shelves display enough imitation insects on hooks—in mysterious variations like pupae, larvae, dun, and spinner—to warrant returning to school for a PhD in entomology. And the rods! Fly rods must have the highest ratio of price-to-mass of any item ever traded in a human economy. They come matched with reels containing mechanisms so precise you'd think they were made by the Swiss to be worn on your wrist.

What intimidated me more than anything else were the knots. During my Eagle Scout training, earning my knot-tying merit badge was as great a challenge as passing calculus in college. I have two good knots from that experience: the square knot and the super-granny. I use them both equally.

But fly-fishing appears to require knowledge of dozens of different knots: the nail knot, the surgeon's knot, the blood knot, the clinch knot, the improved clinch knot, and the Palomar loop, for starters. To make matters worse, serious fly casters actually fish in the winter, too. In the frigid weather they have to take their gloves off to tie those knots. Or they wear fingerless gloves (like, what's the point?). If I did that, I'm pretty sure my fingers would freeze up so I couldn't type for a month and would go broke.

Yet fly anglers insist that their way of fishing has no equal. I remember my first float down the Smith River, several decades ago. My outdoor compatriot Sylvester was fly-fishing, while I used my trusty spinning gear. It was the Smith, so we both caught trout.

"You know what?" Sylvester said that evening at the campsite.

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"Not catching fish with fly gear is actually more fun than catching fish with spinning gear." I didn't believe him. Because isn't catching fish the whole point?

Later, he actually gave me one of his extra fly-fishing outfits. I tried it a few times and usually ended up tossing it in the back of the truck after a few minutes of frustration, the backing twirled around my ankles and flies stuck in the tops of an alder somewhere.

All that line! All those knots! All those blasted bugs I was supposed to know something about! Just give me a Rooster Tail spinner and let me be.

After a while, though, my failure as a fly angler started to get to me. At that point, I was raising a boy in Montana. What kind of Montana father didn't fly-fish? What kind of example was I?

Then, a few years ago, I had a revelation. The revelation came from Japan. Its name is tenkara.

Some say tenkara is Japanese for "fly-fishing for idiots." Others translate it as "latest fad to hook gullible Americans into buying yet another type of rod."

Not really. Tenkara actually translates to something like "floating down from above." It's an ancient form of fishing that evolved on Japan's mountain trout streams. Tenkara is fly-fishing made simple. It's minimalist fly-fishing.

There is no reel. The 12-foot rod is long and nimble and telescopes into the handle. The woven, tapered line ties to the rod tip and is short, only the length of the rod. To the end of the line you simply tie on the tippet—a hair-thin piece of clear monofilament line—and then the fly. That's all.



Finally, a fly rod I could wrap my simple brain around. What really delighted me was that my entire fishing kit weighed just a few ounces. Because I like hiking as much as fishing, this was a big selling point.

With this lithe little weapon in hand, I could see myself catching a fish. Not a lunker, but a fish. I rose to the tenkara bait and swallowed. *Ka-ching* sang the cash register.

I bought a selection of several flies: a Royal Coachman, because the famous *Field & Stream* humorist Ed Zern always wrote about them; an Elk Hair Caddis, because I like elk; and a Woolly Bugger, because what other sport can you turn to someone and, with a straight face, say "I'm going to tie on a Woolly Bugger"? I also bought some nymphs, because I had been told that when you can't see any flying bugs, it's time to fish with nymphs. Beyond that, I had no clear idea what a nymph actually was, especially since it was both a verb and noun. A person actually nymphs with a nymph.

I picked medium-sized flies because I wasn't after big fish, and because I couldn't see the little eye of the small flies well enough to tie on the tippet, even after I cleaned my glasses.

Things were starting to add up: simple angler, simple tackle. All I needed was simple prey. Happily, those were at hand in the

form of westslope cutthroat trout.

All trout have reputations. Brookies are known for their beauty and table fare. Rainbows are renowned for their acrobatics. Brown trout are famous for their finicky palates and, in spite of having a brain the size of a BB, superhuman critical thinking skills.

Then there are westslope cutthroat trout. Montana's state fish. The fish that Silas Goodrich, dedicated fish catcher of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, hauled in from the spray at the foot of the Great Falls of the Missouri back in 1805 and thus introduced to the world a new species of trout.

Westslope cutthroat are known for their spotted, orange-throated beauty and for requiring the coldest and cleanest water. They are also about the easiest trout in the world to catch.

This is not because they are stupid. It's just that they evolved in relatively sterile water where food is naturally scarce. Cutthroat learned to eat first and ask questions later. Their credo—"Never pass up a free meal"—has helped them survive since the ice age. Only nowadays sometimes that "meal" turns out to be a wad of thread and feathers with a hook in it.

Their eagerness to bite a fly also makes cutthroat, hands down, the favorite game fish of novice (read: bumbling) anglers like myself. Luckily, I live in northwestern Montana, the epicenter of the world for westslope cutthroat trout.

So I had plenty of places to try my luck. Sylvester suggested we backpack into one of his favorite lakes in the Whitefish Range. It doesn't have a trail to it, and a mile or so of bushwhacking through grizzly country tends to weed out the competition and leave more fish for us.

"Sounds perfect," I said, thinking the remoteness of the lake would also make it less likely anyone else would be there to witness my casting ineptitude.

The first weekend in July that we both had free, the two of us set out. We arrived at the lake a bit bedraggled from the hike, hung our food bag from a tree, and proceeded to fish.

Sylvester decided to fish the lake itself. I was drawn to the outlet stream, which tumbled as rapids for a few hundred feet out of the lake before meandering through a lush meadow. The stream was about the width of a city sidewalk, the water crystal clear and without any pesky bushes along the banks to snag my casts.

As I had read in trout fishing books, I approached the water with as much stealth as I could muster, as if stalking some shy beast. I squinted at the bugs on the surface and—lo!—saw fish in the shallows.

Prey in sight, I extended my long, slender tenkara rod from the handle, tied to the tippet my smallest fly with my best super-granny knot, and sort of flung the tiny piece of fluff onto the water. The little trout scattered like my fly was some kind of osprey zooming in for the kill.

But I kept at it. My casts got better, some perhaps even halfway respectable. Trout grew curious at my presentation. Some even rose to the fly, and a few made half-hearted strikes.

I found myself lost in that wonderful predatory zone when you are entirely enveloped in the pursuit. It's akin to following fresh elk tracks in perfect snow. You know you are in the right place at the

right time. Just...one...more...cast.

But, no. Nothing. The sun dipped behind the mountains and both the air and the fishing grew colder. I had evidently spooked every fish in the stream.



I trudged back to camp, disappointed I had not caught a fish. But then I thought about Sylvester's statement from the Smith River, 20 years before. I really did have more fun not catching fish on a fly than I might have had otherwise with my standard spinning gear. And since I brought enough food for dinner, I was content with the lesson.

Sylvester was still casting away, halfway across the lake. I rummaged through my pack, getting ready to pitch the tent and assemble the cookstove.

Then I saw them. Out on the lake. Telltale dimples from rising trout. Holy smokes. The bite was on!

I grabbed my rod and climbed onto a rock along the shore. The rises were beyond reach of the rod, even if I had been an expert caster. So I waited.

In one of those rare blessings of the outdoor world, the school of feeding trout gradually moved toward me, until the fish were just offshore. I could not tell what they were feeding on, but I flipped my fly into the middle of the dimples.

Immediately, unbelievably, the fly disappeared and the line went taut. I swear I could hear the "slurp" as the strike took.

"Fish on!" I said to myself. "Tip up! Tip up!"—remembering advice I'd read in a book somewhere for when you hook a trout.

I stood on the bank, rod tip up, as the lithe rod danced and the fish did what cutthroat trout do—rush toward the bottom of the lake with a strong run. It was a good fish, a living slab of electricity and silver.

Now what? I thought. The simplicity of tenkara fishing—no reel—turned out to be a challenge for the angler who actually catches a fish and needs to bring it in.

So I landed the fish exactly the same way I landed my first fish out of a farm pond, caught on a bobber and a worm, when I was a boy. I reefed back on the rod and flipped the fish out of the water and onto the bank. Then I pounced on it and hit it on the head with a rock.

A trout! A beautiful trout! And on a dry fly no less. It wasn't one of Roderick L. Haig-Brown's steelhead, and my style wasn't as pretty as Brad Pitt's Hollywood casting, but it was fish enough for me.



I tried to catch more, but the magic of the bite had evaporated as suddenly as it had begun. Still, I had my fish, and Sylvester returned to camp with a matching dandy of his own.

As the summer evening faded, we stripped a dead fir of limbs and got a little fire going. We cooked the fish in aluminum foil and boiled up some instant rice. We picked the bones clean and flung them into the deep of the lake so as not to attract bears.

I slept under the glowing Milky Way, belly full and soul happy, and dreamed the dreams of a fly fisherman. 🐟

