

LEARNING MADE EASY



2nd Edition

Fly Fishing

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand



Raise your
fly fishing game

Cast like a pro, catch
like a champion

All-new guide to the very
best places to fish

Peter Kaminsky

Longtime "Outdoors" columnist for the
New York Times, Contributing Editor to
Field & Stream

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Published by: **John Wiley & Sons, Inc.**, 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030-5774, www.wiley.com

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Published simultaneously in Canada

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2020945546

ISBN 978-1-119-68590-6 (pbk); ISBN 978-1-119-68593-7 (ebk); ISBN 978-1-119-68594-4 (ebk)

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents at a Glance

Introduction	1
Part 1: The Basics	5
CHAPTER 1: What Every Fly Rodder Needs to Know	7
CHAPTER 2: Choosing a Rod	19
CHAPTER 3: Reels	35
CHAPTER 4: Between the Rod and the Fish: Hooks, Lines, Leaders	45
Part 2: The Fish and the Flies	61
CHAPTER 5: Trout and the Bugs They Love (Plus Some Non-Bugs Too)	63
CHAPTER 6: Mayflies (And Why Trout Love Them)	81
CHAPTER 7: Fly Tying	97
CHAPTER 8: Freshwater Fish	129
CHAPTER 9: The Beautiful Black Bass	155
CHAPTER 10: Saltwater Fish	173
CHAPTER 11: Saltwater Baits and Flies	193
Part 3: Fly Fishing Essentials	207
CHAPTER 12: Casting and Presentation: The Heart of the Game	209
CHAPTER 13: Time and Place	237
CHAPTER 14: Catching and (Often) Releasing	257
CHAPTER 15: The Fly Fishing Wardrobe	271
CHAPTER 16: Knots: A Few Will Do	283
CHAPTER 17: Cooking Your Catch	297
Part 4: The Part of Tens	311
CHAPTER 18: Great Trout Streams	313
CHAPTER 19: Ten Trout and Salmon Bucket-List Destinations	325
CHAPTER 20: Ten Saltwater Bucket-List Destinations	329
CHAPTER 21: Eleven Good Reads	335
CHAPTER 22: Ten Great Online Resources	341
Index	345

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
About This Book	2
Foolish Assumptions	2
Icons Used in This Book	3
Beyond the Book	3
Where to Go from Here	3
PART 1: THE BASICS	5
CHAPTER 1: What Every Fly Rodder Needs to Know	7
What Is a Fish?	7
How do I know it's a fish?	8
What does a fish want out of life?	9
Fishing versus Angling	10
How Do I Learn? Who Do I Ask?	13
Parents	13
Friends	13
Fly shops	13
Guides	14
Schools	15
Online: My inbox runneth over	15
Four Things I Wish Somebody Had Told Me about When I Started	17
Bad vibrations	17
Trying to do more than you really can	17
Shadows of evil	17
Your Budweiser hat	17
The Dog Ate My Homework (Or Why You Need a License)	18
CHAPTER 2: Choosing a Rod	19
Anatomy of a Fly Rod	20
No, butt seriously	22
You have to cast your way	23
The Four Jobs of a Rod	24
When bigger is better (and when it isn't)	24
Line weight and rod weight: The bottom line	25
The long and short of it	25
Realistically speaking	26
Where the action is	26
A Rod for All Seasons	27
Trout	27
Bass, pike, and light saltwater	28

Heavy saltwater: Tarpon, sharks, and other monsters	28
Matching the rod to the fish	29
Have rod, will travel.	29
Rod Care	30
Be finicky about ferrules.	30
Use a rod case	30
Not getting stuck	32
Getting unstuck	32
The last word	33
CHAPTER 3: Reels	35
MFP (Maximum Fishing Pleasure) and the Balanced Outfit	36
Fly Reels	36
What does a fly reel do?	36
The ABCs of arbors	38
Kind of a drag.	38
Using your tools to stop the fish (Hint: Your hand is a piece of tackle, too).	39
Why Is a Reel Like a New Business?	40
Be seated	40
The full-figured reel.	41
Maintaining Your Reels.	42
Like the dentist says, rinse often.	42
Don't forget to oil.	43
CHAPTER 4: Between the Rod and the Fish: Hooks, Lines, Leaders	45
Checking Out Fly Lines	45
Is weight good or bad?	46
Does color count?	47
Taper tips	47
Sink or swim	47
Threading your fly line	48
Looking at Leaders	50
Matching your leader to your fly.	51
What tippet should I tie?	51
How strong does the leader need to be?	53
Everything You Need to Know about Hooks	53
When bigger is smaller	55
Get to the point!.	55
Unhooking yourself.	56
Get rid of your barbs.	57
That Sinking Feeling	59
What Comes After the Tippet?	59

	Tie one on.....	59
	Hopper dropper: A true life saver.....	59
PART 2: THE FISH AND THE FLIES		61
CHAPTER 5:	Trout and the Bugs They Love (Plus Some Non-Bugs Too)	63
	The Short, Happy Life of the Mayfly: Swim, Eat, Fly, Mate, Die.....	64
	In the beginning.....	64
	Dry-fly time: The big show	64
	Spinners: The happy ending and then kaput!.....	66
	Get wet!	67
	Get net!	68
	Some Nymph Basics	68
	Crawlers	68
	Clingers	69
	Burrowers.....	69
	Swimmers.....	70
	Reading the Rings	70
	Headhunting	71
	Emergers: Trout candy	72
	Spinners: After the fun is done	72
	Don't ignore the small stuff	72
	Caddis Flies: Not Sexy, but They Work.....	73
	Stone Flies: The Biggest Bugs	76
	Salmon flies: The greatest hatch	76
	Grasshoppers: Trout Candy.....	78
	Beetles, ants, and other terrestrials	80
	Big fish eat little fish	80
CHAPTER 6:	Mayflies (And Why Trout Love Them).....	81
	How Big (Or Small) Is a Mayfly?	81
	The Quill Gordon: As Unpredictable as the Weather.....	83
	The Hendrickson: When the Fishing Gets Serious	84
	March Brown: Big Enough to Care About	86
	Green Drake: The B52 of Mayflies	86
	Pale Morning Dun: All Summer Long.....	88
	Trico: Major Snack Food	90
	Callibaetis: Banker's Hours.....	91
	Giant Michigan Caddis: The Champ	92
	Blue Winged Olive: Always There	93
	Isnychia: Fast and Furious	94

CHAPTER 7: Fly Tying	97
How Many Flies Do I Need?	97
Why dry?	98
Wets came first	99
Nymphs: Unseen but invaluable	100
Streamers: More than a mouthful	100
An Even Dozen	102
The Gold Ribbed Hare's Ear	102
The Prince Nymph	102
The Comparadun	104
The Elk Hair Caddis	105
The Parachute Adams	105
The Ausable Wulff	106
The Griffith's Gnat	107
Rusty Spinner	107
Zebra Midge	107
The Chernobyl Ant: All in the nuclear family	108
The Clouser Minnow	109
The Woolly Bugger	110
The Muddler Minnow	111
So Which Fly Should I Use?	111
Roll Your Own?	112
Tools of the trade	112
Tying your first fly, a wooly bugger	115
Tying a dry fly	121
Tying a Comparadun	122
Tying a Nymph	125
Finding Help Online	128
CHAPTER 8: Freshwater Fish	129
Trout	129
The champ: Brown trout	130
High jumpers: Rainbow trout	131
Sentimental favorite: Brookies	134
The cutthroat	135
Lakers: Big Macks	136
Pacific Salmon	137
Atlantic Salmon	139
Basses	140
Largemouth	140
Smallmouth: The gamest fish	141
Pike ("And the Winner of the Mean and Ugly Contest Is . . .")	144
Northern pike	144
Muskellunge	145
Pickerel	147

Fun with Panfish	148
Catfish	150
Shad: The Poor Man's Salmon.....	151
Carp	153
Golden Dorado	154
CHAPTER 9: The Beautiful Black Bass	155
Smallmouth and Largemouth	155
Do I need a special rod for bassing?.....	156
Don't be shy	156
Mainstays of the Bass Diet.....	157
Mayflies: Not just for trout anymore	157
Damselflies: Big and crunchy.....	157
Dragonflies: Bassing's B-1 bomber	158
Crickets and grasshoppers: Always good, by Jiminy.....	159
Hellgrammites: Helluva meal.....	160
Leeches: Finally, something good about these slimers!	160
Crayfish: If you don't eat them yourself	161
Frogs: The bass cookies	161
Sculpins: Little big head	162
Shiners: A classic bait	162
Mice: A bonus.....	163
Great Bass Destinations	163
The Everglades: Often overlooked, but nearly perfect	163
The St. Johns: Fishing with eagles	163
The Ozarks: U-pik-it.....	165
Lake Superior, Lake Michigan: Some very Great Lakes	165
The St. Lawrence River: A lotta water	166
The Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers: A good connection	166
The Susquehanna River: Birthplace of the Clouser Minnow.....	166
The New River: Not so new	167
Alabama's statewide bassin'	167
The Snake River and the Columbia River: The great Northwest.....	167
Quetico Provincial Park: The boundary waters.....	168
Down east: Ayupppp, pretty fayah fishin'.....	168
Any farm pond.....	168
Golf courses: No clubs required	168
Great Bass Flies	169
Popping bugs: My favorite	169
The Clouser Minnow.....	170
Wooly Bugger.....	170

Big-headed deer-hair flies	170
The Deceiver: I'm a believer	170
The Gamechanger: It ain't the meat; it's the motion	171
CHAPTER 10: Saltwater Fish	173
Some Saltwater Fishing Tips	174
Fishing in 360 degrees	174
Deciding what rod to use	174
The trout strike: A big mistake	175
Striped Bass: A Silver Treasure	175
Bluefish: Tough Guys	176
False Albacore: The Fall Classic	177
Weakfish and Speckled Trout: Brothers in Angling	178
Redfish: A Cook's Tale	181
Fluke: Flat and Fun	182
Marlin: Fly Fishing's Mt. Everest.	183
Bluefin Tuna: Big, Fast, and Gorgeous	184
Inshore Grand Slam	185
Bonefish: Gray lightning	185
Permit: As if	187
Snook: No schnook	188
Tarpon: The silver king	189
Giant trevally: Gangsta of the flats	190
CHAPTER 11: Saltwater Baits and Flies	193
Seafood: Major Saltwater Bait	193
Sand eels: Not reely eels	194
Silversides: Ocean-going French fries.	195
Anchovy: Not just for pizza.	195
Bunker: All in the baitfish family	196
Cinder worms: On the moon tides	197
Paolo worm: Small bait, monster fish.	199
Mud crab: A white sand standout.	199
Shrimp: A great go-to bait	201
Mullet: Good in the gullet.	201
Great Saltwater Fly Types.	202
Crazy Charlie: A very sane choice	202
The Surf Candy: The name says it all	203
Snake fly: Eels and then some	203
A crab fly: It fairly screams "eat me"	204
Lefty's Deceiver: A true friend	205
The Clouser: Still the champ	205
The Crease fly.	205

PART 3: FLY FISHING ESSENTIALS.....207

CHAPTER 12: Casting and Presentation: The Heart

of the Game.....	209
The Keys to Success	210
Timing: Not just for comedians	210
Keeping your loop tight	210
Holding the rod correctly	210
Mastering the Forward Cast.....	212
Okay — I tried what you said; what did I do wrong?	214
What am I looking for?	215
Don't be in a hurry.....	215
Now what? Preparing to catch an actual fish!.....	217
The reach cast	217
Mastering Other Useful Casts	219
The roll cast	219
The backcast.....	221
The steeple cast.....	222
Dealing with a headwind	222
Aiming for distance	223
The double haul.....	223
The Spey cast: Where have you been my whole life?.....	226
Drag: It's a major drag.....	227
Adding to Your Casting Arsenal.....	228
The backhand: A great tool	228
The pile cast: Lotsa loops	229
Bouncing under a limb	230
Mending: A must-learn technique.....	231
Keeping a dry fly dry (or at least floating)	231
False casting: The awful truth	232
Quarter casting: A great old-timer	232
Using a stripping basket and the two-hand retrieve	233
Fish Near, Then Far	234
Fishing the clock	234
Understanding the boat clock	234

CHAPTER 13: Time and Place.....237

Getting in the Zone	237
Going with the flow	238
Lakes and reservoirs.....	241
Salt water	247
The Time Is Now	251
Good times.....	252
When the barometer's moving, rent a movie or clean your closet	253
"Real guys fish at night"	253

No Matter When or Where You Fish, Remember This	254
Keep a cool head	254
Go slow	254
Be quiet, please	254
Stay out of sight	254
Be chill	255
Wading	255
Thy rod and thy staff	255
Thy friend, too	255
Don't do what fish do	256
Back(ass)wards, please	256
If you fall	256
CHAPTER 14: Catching and (Often) Releasing	257
When Should I Strike?	257
Lifters and Strippers	258
Trout: Be firm but gentle	258
Salmon: A different tune	258
Bass, pike, muskies: Gangsta style	258
Salt water: Stay down!	259
Fish On! (Now What Do I Do?!).	259
The Fight	260
Your rod is your best weapon	260
Help from the reel	260
The line helps too	260
The reel thing	261
Heads up!	261
Use the current	261
Running for cover	262
“What a jump! Hey! What happened?”	262
Rod up, reel down (pumping a fish)	262
Playing the fish	263
Light tackle takes longer	264
Landing or Boating the Fish	264
Should I use a net?	264
To kill or not to kill	266
Before you catch and release	267
Treating a fish properly	267
Revive and release	267
Catch, quickly shoot a photo, and release	268

CHAPTER 15: The Fly Fishing Wardrobe	271
Take It Off!	271
The Well-Dressed Fly Rodder	272
Dress like Robin Hood (green tights optional)	273
Keep the lid on	273
Don't forget your face	273
Waders: A Necessity	274
Gloves: The Hot and Cold of It	275
Vest or Pack?	276
Packs that pack the right stuff	277
Another option: Lanyard	279
Sunglasses: Function, Not Fashion	281
CHAPTER 16: Knots: A Few Will Do	283
A Brief Vocabulary of Knots	284
The Fisherman's Knot	284
The Surgeon's Knot	286
The Perfection Loop	288
More Good-to-Know Knots	290
The Orvis Knot	290
Lefty's Loop	290
Line to reel	291
Joining fat line to skinny line or wire	292
CHAPTER 17: Cooking Your Catch	297
Perfect Poaching, I Promise	298
Poached Fish	299
Pan Roasting for Crisp Skin	300
Crispy Skin Fillet	301
Frying Fish to Crunchy Perfection	303
Battered Fish	304
Baking Fish in a Salt Crust for Great Presentation	305
Salt-Baked Big Fish and Vegetables with Fresh Salsa	306
Tossing Whole Fish on the Grill	308
Grilled Whole Fish	309
PART 4: THE PART OF TENS	311
CHAPTER 18: Great Trout Streams	313
The Upper Delaware: New York and Pennsylvania	314
Henry's Fork: Idaho	316
The Missouri: Montana	317

	The Yellowstone: Wyoming and Montana	318
	The South Platte River: Colorado	320
	The Deschutes: Oregon	321
	Fall River: California	321
	The Au Sable: Michigan	322
	The White River: Arkansas	323
	The South Holston: Tennessee	324
CHAPTER 19:	Ten Trout and Salmon Bucket-List Destinations	325
	Argentina	326
	Chile	326
	New Zealand	327
	Iceland	327
	Alaska	327
	The Kola Peninsula	327
	British Columbia	328
	The Pyrenees, Spain	328
	England: Fly Fishing's Home Court	328
	Slovenia and Balkans	328
CHAPTER 20:	Ten Saltwater Bucket-List Destinations	329
	The Florida Keys: More Than Margaritaville	330
	Lands of the Maya: The Yucatan and Belize	331
	The Bahamas	331
	Cuba, Sí	331
	Kiritimati: That's Christmas Island to You	332
	The Seychelles: Far Away, and That's Good	332
	Montauk: A Frenzy of Fish (and Fishermen)	332
	The Outer Bank	332
	New Orleans: Reds in Bluesville	333
	Cabo San Lucas: Bigger Game	333
CHAPTER 21:	Eleven Good Reads	335
	He Wrote. He Fished. It Was Good	335
	The Modern Master	336
	In the Beginning	336
	Time and Place	336
	Fly Fishing's Ground Zero	337
	Trout Are the Best Reason for Many Things	337
	Guide Wars	337
	A Latitude Attitude	338
	The Way It Was	338
	Madness? I Don't Think So	338
	An Eleventh Book, If That's Okay with You	339

CHAPTER 22: Ten Great Online Resources	341
Catch Magazine	342
Flylords	342
Troutbitten	342
Southern Culture on the Fly	343
Midcurrent	343
Capt. Jack Productions	343
Trout Unlimited	343
Orvis Guide to Fly Fishing	344
The Slide Inn	344
Rio Products on YouTube	344
INDEX	345

Introduction

If you are new to fly fishing, forget about what you may have heard about fly rodding in the past. If you believe some people, fly fishing requires the touch of a surgeon, the body mechanics of an Olympic gymnast, and the serene soul of a Zen master. I know this isn't true because I am an okay fly fisherman and I fit none of those qualifications. The simple truth is I find that fishing with a fly rod is the most pleasant way to fish.

Baitcasting can be as demanding, and success with a spinning rig requires every bit as much knowledge of fish behavior. So, you really can't defend the position of fly fishing snobs that their sport is more challenging. The real difference between fly fishing and every other form of angling with a rod is that with conventional rods, the weight of your bait or sinker or lure carries the line, whereas in fly fishing *the weight of the line* carries the fly. This crucial difference requires that the fly rodder learns to cast in a special way, moving the line through the air like a very long bullwhip. This maneuver calls for a certain amount of timing and a whole lot of practice.

Most people cannot pick up a fly rod and begin to cast right away, but they can, after a few flicks, begin to use a bait-casting or spinning rod. Having taught many people to fly fish over the years, I promise you that I can have you casting and catching fish on your first day or two. You may not cast very far, and you may not catch very many fish, but you will be fly fishing. After that, the rest is just practice.

This is the second edition of this book, and a lot of years have passed since the first. Fly rods are made out of better materials; reels are better; clothing and waders have become more lightweight and breathable while remaining waterproof. New flies have emerged from the daydreams of a new generation of anglers. Tens of thousands of women have entered the traditional male domain of this sport. And the internet has made just about every question instantly answerable — though often with a few grams of salt.

But in spite of all the change, what has *not* changed are the fish, the insects and other bait they consume, and the fact that they live in rivers and streams, lakes and oceans. In our consumer society, products change often, as I am told they must if manufacturers are going to stay in business. But evolution moves at the same creeping pace that it always has, and — so long as the environment remains hospitable to fish and those of us who pursue them — the basics of fly fishing and all angling remain the same.

About This Book

Do you remember the kid in class who never did any more than he or she was told to do? The kid who tried to get by on a minimum of work and a maximum of relaxation? Well, that is my philosophy of fly fishing. If you are interested, there are thousands of flies to learn how to tie and hundreds of insects and bait fish to get familiar with. You could spend your whole life learning about these critters and very little time fishing. In this book, I promise you that I will simplify the number of flies you need to carry around, the number of casts you need to master, and the number of insects and other bait that you need to identify. You can, as I do, make it through your fly-fishing life in fresh and saltwater, for all kind of species, with 20 flies, a half-dozen casts, and three knots.

My goal in this book is to winnow through the gazillions of pages that have been written about fly fishing and boil them down to the stuff you *need* to know to begin fishing successfully. After that, you can spend the rest of your life learning everything else, or you can just keep fishing, which is a great teacher in itself. I strongly believe that after you get the basics down, the best education comes from spending time on the water.

Foolish Assumptions

There are three kinds of people who can use this book:

- » People who have never fly fished
- » People who have done some fly fishing
- » People who have fly fished a lot

For those of you who have never held a fly rod, you will find enough to get you started. You don't have to learn everything all at once. If you're already a fly rodder, you'll find plenty of tips and techniques that you can turn to right away without starting over at square 1. And you master anglers will, I hope, discover a few new and helpful things about where-to, when-to, and how-to fish more effectively. So, depending on where you fit on the scale of never fly fished, fly fished some, or fly fished a lot, you can skip those parts of this book that aren't important to you right now.

Icons Used in This Book



TIP

This icon flags information that will save you from making the same mistakes that took the rest of us years to unlearn.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Having the right fly, rod, hat, boots, and so on can make all the difference between striking gold and striking out. This icon flags the stuff you *really* need.



WARNING

From a hook in your finger to a dunking in the stream, text next to this icon will show you how to stay dry, comfortable, and, most of all, safe.



REMEMBER

With more and more people pressuring fewer and fewer fish, we all need to learn some basic rules of the road (what my mom called “common courtesy”).

Beyond the Book

This book comes with a free online Cheat Sheet that includes helpful reference material that you can peruse from your computer or mobile device.

To get this Cheat Sheet, simply go to www.dummies.com and type “Fly Fishing For Dummies Cheat Sheet” in the Search box.

Where to Go from Here

This book is a reference; you don’t have to read it from cover to cover. I suggest that you poke around, and when you find a topic that interests, you go from there. I’ve peppered the chapters with cross-references to related topics in other chapters. If you want to read this book from front to back, it will do you no harm, but like I said, skipping around works too.

1

The Basics

IN THIS PART . . .

Get a refresher on the general concepts of angling.

Discover all the equipment you need for fly fishing: rods, reels, line, leaders, and more.

- » Finding out what fish *really* want
- » Discovering what information you need (and where you can *find* it)
- » Getting a license (and why you *need* one)

Chapter **1**

What Every Fly Rodder Needs to Know

If you're reading this book, you probably have some interest in catching fish. Perhaps you have never tried to catch one, or you may have caught many and would like to improve your skills. Either way, whether you're a newcomer or a veteran angler, the equation remains the same — catching a fish requires three things:

- » A fish
- » An angler
- » Some fishing gear

What Is a Fish?

A *fish* is a cold-blooded animal that lives underwater, has fins, and breathes through gills. Some fish, such as eels, may not look as if they have fins, but they do. Other fish, such as manta rays, may look more like the design of a B-1 bomber, but they, too, live in the water, navigate with fins, and breathe through gills.

As far as the angler (that's you) is concerned, fish eat other fish, insects, and the occasional unlucky mammal, reptile, or other animal that finds itself in the water. Although some fish subsist on a diet of plants, *fishing* is the art of convincing a fish that the thing at the end of your line is an edible animal.

Whether you use a bait, a lure, or a fly, a fish usually strikes because it thinks that your offering is an easy meal. At other times, a fish, like any protective parent, may strike because it may think that your imitation animal is going to eat its babies — and no creature responds agreeably to that threat (although it needs to be pointed out that some fish will eat the young of their own kind).

How do I know it's a fish?

A biologist may need to know hundreds of parts of the anatomy of a fish. As an angler, you're only interested in a few of these parts (see Figure 1-1).

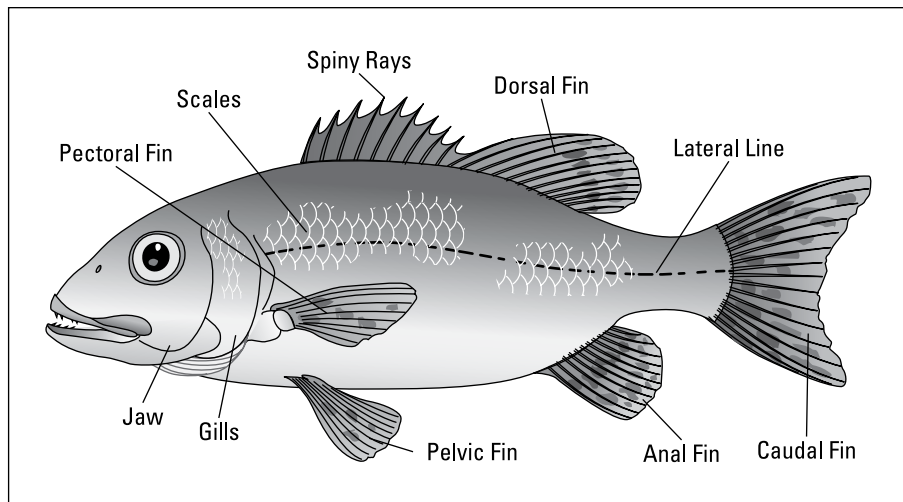


FIGURE 1-1:
Your average fish.

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The torpedo shapes of most game fish allow them to move easily through tides and currents. The fins propel and guide their movements. Gills enable fish to breathe by extracting oxygen from the water. The lateral line is a special sensory organ that enables fish to detect vibrations in the water (like the kind of vibrations that are made when you clank an oar on the bottom of a rowboat or when you tramp along the rocks in the bottom of a stream).

What does a fish want out of life?

On most days, a fish has only two requirements:

- » Finding something to eat
- » Avoiding being eaten

In other words, food and shelter are at the top of the priority list of every fish. At certain times of the year, making babies also goes on the to-do list. But by and large, in looking at any fishing situation, you should ask yourself these two questions:

- » What will the fish be looking for in the way of food?
- » How will the fish avoid predators while it is looking for food?

Figuring out the food

Knowing what fish like to eat can tell you a great deal about what kind of fly to use to seduce a fish into biting down on your not-very-good-tasting hook. Often, when you see a fish feeding, a close look at the water can tell you what food is available. After you have figured that out, your job is to tie something on your line that looks like that food. If a fish is taking something big, such as herring or shrimp, guessing the right food isn't very hard. However, as any frustrated angler can tell you, four or five kinds of food — little insects, bait fish, crawfish, worms, and the like — are often in the water at any given time. In these cases, some close observation is called for.

Be prepared to be stymied, because I often think fish have agreed on this unwritten rule: If there's a choice between large food and tiny food, eat something that is so small that it is just about invisible to the angler. Or at least, they have defiantly agreed to do that when I'm around.

Staying alive is important too

All other things being equal, a fish would spend all of its time in a safe place, where predators can't see it or reach it. But to get food, fish, like people, need to get out of the house and go shopping; and the time that a fish spends away from home is when the angler has an opportunity to catch the unwary fish. Although a fish in pursuit of a juicy meal may be a little less cautious than a fish lying under a rock, safety is always a prime concern; and no fish worth its fins *ever* chases food without having some kind of escape route close at hand. After you know what and where these escape routes are, you are well on the way to knowing where — and, more importantly, where not — to fish.

TWENTY THOUSAND YEARS OF FISHING

Although no one is sure exactly when people started to use fishing rods, we do know that Stone Age people used pieces of flint, bone, or wood to make fishing implements. Jumping ahead a few hundred centuries, the first real proof we have of people actually fishing with rods comes from drawings of the ancient Assyrians and Egyptians. Whether the Phishing Pharaohs used bait, lures, or flies is an open question.

Those ancient anglers used a wooden rod with a line attached to the end. It was very much like today's cane poles that many young anglers first use to fish for panfish at every lake and dock. We know that people were using reels a thousand years ago because pictures of rods and reels appear in China shortly before Marco Polo visited there. And the art of fly fishing was already well advanced in England when, in the 15th century, the most famous fisherwoman of all time, Dame Juliana Berners (an English nun), wrote her *Treatise on Fishing With an Angle* during this time.

By the time that Izaak Walton wrote *The Compleat Angler* in the 17th century, knowledge about the fish that lived in the rivers of Europe was well advanced, but Walton never saw a rainbow trout, largemouth bass, bonefish, bluefish, or golden dorado. As fly fishing has grown around the world, more and more types of fish have expanded the possibilities of the sport.

A fish can use one of three ways to escape being caught:

- » **Hide in the dark.** Look for fish to hang out in or near shadows. Also, expect them to be feeding when the light is low (at dawn and dusk — and sometimes at night).
- » **Hide under something.** If food is around, expect to find fish under nearby rocks, fallen trees, and undercut banks.
- » **Get down.** If you are a bear or an eagle, chances are you are not going to go very deep to chase a fish. So, even on a bright sunny day with no tree limbs or rocks to crawl under, a fish may stay in plain view, but in deep water.

Fishing versus Angling

People catch fish by using all kinds of gear (from spear guns to nets to bare hands). An *angler* is someone who angles (an Old English word for *fishing*) with a rod. This book is about angling. Figure 1-2 shows a *fly rodder* on the right, someone who angles with a fly rod.