

Leader Selection ~ A Basic Discussion

In previous newsletters, we discussed some of the basics of tackle selection. The section on “leaders” was quite brief, and more was promised. While most leaders look about the same, a close inspection reveals a number of very important differences. As you remember the leader is selected AFTER you select your fly. This is obvious to most, but some inexperienced fly fisherman may get a poor grade here, and as a result significantly reduce their fish catching abilities. Here are a few rules of thumb.

1. Leaders are constructed from a formula like the 60/20/20. That is, 60% butt, 20% mid-section and 20% tippet. There are other acceptable formulas like a 50/25/25, etc. but deviations should be done with some functional purpose. The butt section is that part that compliments the tip of the fly line. The midsection is the portion that helps reduce the power that is transmitted from the butt section to help give the desired power to the fly. Finally the tippet is the last power control portion, the deception portion, and the weakest link in the leader system.
2. Use the “Rule of 4” to give the approximate maximum “X” size of tippet to use for any given hook. You simply divide the hook size by 4 and that gives you the X size that will likely be your maximum. Thus a #16 hook will take a 4X tippet.
3. Heavier fly line will work better with heavier leader butt sections that are also made from stiff material. If you are buying leaders look at the package and it will show this information. You will see a guide such as trout, steelhead/salmon, bass, saltwater, etc. As always, when in doubt ask someone with experience for help.
4. Large, heavy, wind resistant flies require a heavier butt and are shorter and stiffer than a standard leader. These are the leaders you might use for bass bugs, streamers and many salt water flies.
5. When casting into the wind you need to shorten your leader and go up in X size of your tippers. You can also reduce the wind resistance of your fly selection. For example, a #16 Adams will cast much better in high winds than a #12. If you “need” that #12 Adams you might use 4X or even 3X tippet and shorten the tippet to perhaps 10”.
6. The smaller the fly, the flatter the water (smooth, glass like, etc.) and the spookier the fish go with a longer leader with a longer and finer tippet. For control try to keep the leader as short and as strong as possible. Sometimes this is a 14' leader with 7X tippet but more often it is no more than 7 ½' with a 4X tippet. I have seen more beginners using too long and too light a leader than too short and too heavy.
7. Sinking lines, full sink and sink tip, use much shorter leaders, often 3' – 6', than their floating counterparts. This is very important when fishing moving water. The water current will “lift” the fly far about the bottom and you will very likely not be in the feeding zone.
8. The connection of fly line to leader should be strong enough to easily handle the largest fish you can reasonably expect to catch. Most common is a nail knot but when you start targeting large fish like steelhead, large salmon, largemouth, strippers, etc. you may need a stronger connection. This is usually done with a loop in both the fly line and leader butt. They are then connected using a loop to loop joint. Many fly lines come with a built-in loop, especially in their larger sizes and in the salt water designs. Whatever knot is used in this fly line to leader connection it should be kept smooth using any number of materials designed for this purpose. Your local shop can help you with this. You do this to avoid any fouling while the line/leader is going in or out of the tip top.
9. When casting heavily weighted flies and/or leaders with strike indicators or split shot attached don't expect too much from your leader. A stiff butt section will help turnover the fly, but let's face it; this is more like “throwing” than casting.
10. Finally, there are a lot of exceptions to these “rules of thumb” and you need to be careful or you will develop a “sore thumb”!

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