

Hooking Salmon On The Fly

This article was posted by ABK on the SalmonFishingForum

There has probably been more written about hooking fish on the fly than any other aspect of the sport, but much of that which has been in the past is merely regurgitated literature from past authorities. Today anyone taking up salmon fishing and reading books on the subject finds that there are as many ideas on the hooking of a salmon as there are books relating to the topic, and find themselves confused not knowing which practise to follow. Some contemporary anglers, including myself are starting to question the methods preached, and used by those still adhering to the old techniques.

When a salmon comes to a fly the two main practices are to either feed slack, or tighten as soon as a fish is felt. The first of these I question in some detail, because as soon as we give the fish slack line, its opportunity to eject it instantly rises to 50%. The majority who fish in this fashion strongly believe that the fish need to be fed line in order to secure a good hook hold. By feeding them line the logic behind this idea is that the current will pull the fly into the corner of the fish's mouth. This is all very well provided that the fish does not turn in the same instant as taking the fly, however a lot of fish that decide to take our fly will usually follow it round and take it either by turning away or towards the angler, or by taking hold of it and continuing on upstream before tailing back downstream with the current. If we look at the first of these, Figure 1, the fish that turns away from the angler when given slack line. Some of these fish will stand a good chance of being hooked, as the line is pulled downstream by the current dragging the fly into the right hand side maxillary bone of the fish's jaw. See Figure 1. However if the fish turns towards the angler see Figure 2, then the chances of the fly being pulled out of the fish's mouth will be greatly increased, because as the fish turns and heads downstream the current will start to pull the fly out of the fish's mouth, particularly if it is still open. If these fish are hooked at all, it is usually in the lower or upper lip, and as a result frequently come off.

Feeding slack line to a fish that has taken, and moved forward as shown in Figure 3 in the same instant will only be hooked if the current is strong enough to pull the line downstream before the fish starts to tail back in the current. If the current is strong however the hooks maybe pulled in while the fish is still moving forward, but if the current is slow, then the fish may start to tail back at a faster rate than the flow and if this happens the chance of the hooks being pulled out of the salmon's mouth will greatly increase. The overriding factor with the slack line method is the way in which the fish takes our fly, this and this alone will determine whether or not it will be hooked or not. Because of this fact of it not always being possible to tell which way that a fish has taken my fly the uncertainty

makes me tend to shy clear of it.

Fish that move forward and suck in your fly, and then keep moving forward before tailing back downstream in the current, as shown in Figure 3 are the very devil to hook, because by the time you realise that they have taken your fly the chances are that they will have ejected it before they have tailed back far enough for it to register as a pull on the line. It is very difficult to detect these takes, because very often the fish will merely suck the fly in and carry it forward in a pocket of water between its open jaws. The only indication that the angler gets with this taking behaviour is a feeling similar to that when the fly comes into a slack dead section of water. If you suspect that this type of take has occurred start pulling in line at a good rate of knots, feeling for the fish as you do so. If it has closed its mouth you will feel the fish and the rod should be lifted into it, however if the fish keeps its mouth open the chances of hooking it will not be good, because all we will be doing is pulling the fly out of the fish's open jaws. One thing to watch is the two or three yards of line that you have just pulled in, don't let it get tangled around anything. As if you do feel the fish, and tighten into it, it generally disappears quickly once the fish realises what is going on.

Practitioners of the slack line method point out that if the water temperature is on the low side during the spring or late autumn the fish will come to and turn on the fly in a much slower fashion. This I can accept and if there is perhaps a time to give slack then this is it, but many who fish the slack line method also do so during the warmer summer months. This I cannot accept, because this is when we should in actual fact be lifting into the fish, and not feeding line, because the fish will be rising to them much more quickly due to the warmer water temperatures. Many anglers who fish for grilse complain that they are very difficult to hook. If they are the same people who are in the habit of giving line then I am not at all surprised, because these fish usually rise, and snap at flies in a trout like fashion and because of this they should be tighten into. I do not know of any trout anglers who feed line!

My own preferred method of hooking salmon is to tighten by lifting the rod progressively into them. This is because until someone can prove to me that a salmon takes a spinning bait differently from a fly then I am quite content to lift the rod, and pull the hooks home as soon as I feel the slightest resistance. Anyway with the small modern outpoint trebles the force needed for them to penetrate beyond the barb is minimal, and the force transmitted along the line that tells the angler that a fish has mouthed his fly is usually enough for these hooks to take hold. At this point I merely lift the rod until I feel the weight of the fish. I see no logical reasons for feeding a fish slack that already has taken my fly into its mouth, and given it a good tug. I have yet to meet anyone who when spinning for salmon pulls a yard or so of line off their reel at the moment of

the take. **The governing factor which determines how well fish are hooked with any method employed is in the direction in which it moves or turns after it has taken the fly.** Because we seldom see the take there is no "one" right way, or wrong way, there is only the preferred way.

Without any doubt if the fish turns away from the bank from which the angler is fishing, the fish will be well hooked, but if it turns towards the bank from which we are fishing, or moves forward in the same instant then the chances of it being hooked well, will not be so good. I can recall fishing one day late in the season on my local river, when a run of fish came into the stretch I was fishing. To cut a long story short I hooked played and lost 5 fish, all within the space of a few hours. At the time I put it down to just bad luck, but on reflection four of the fish that took turned towards me and was on for only a very short period of time. The final fish of the day turned away from me, and was only lost at the very last minute when the hooks came away, just as I bent down to tail it out. This instance in itself might not prove much, but since then I have been more observant when it comes to the direction in which a fish turns or moves in relation to where I am fishing from at the time. By doing so I have come to the conclusion that the only way in dealing with most fish is to lift the rod progressively into them immediately they are felt. Most of the fish which turn towards me after taking the fly, if tightened into at once, are nearly all hooked in the top left hand side of the mouth, whereas the ones that are tightened into, that turn away from me, are almost without exception hooked in the corner of the right hand jaw. In both cases the hooks very well in.

Some fish will merely pluck at the fly, and as far as I am concerned this is connected with a feeding response. I believe that this occurs when fish are very fresh run and still have their feeding instinct still partially intact, they are merely touching and tasting This type of taking fish is very difficult to hook. One method that works reasonably well is to keep the dressing well within the bend of the hook. This solution came to me one day by pure chance, I had been fishing away most of the day and was becoming very frustrated, because I had hooked and pricked a good number of these "devils". I tried all sorts, changing up, changing down, tightening and yes feeding slack line, but all to no avail. After a while I went full circle and returned to the fly that I had started the day with, a small Silver Stoats Tail tied on half inch of Biro refill. After tying the treble to the line I pushed the hook right into the end of the tube. The bends of the treble where now hard against the end of the tube. Next Time down the pool I took a fish of 16 lbs firmly hooked in the roof of the mouth and lost two others during play. The only difference now was that the hooks where now within the hair. Before they where extending about half an inch beyond the end of the tube.

The one take that I have not mentioned yet is the one that occurs when the

fly has come to the dangle below the angler. If the fly comes to the end of its swim, and merely hovers with the force of the current any fish that do take at this time are usually not well hooked. I suspect that they have followed the fly round, and for some reason remain uncertain right up to the last moment whether to take or not. The take if it does come is generally from my experience a tentative one, with the fish being very lightly hooked on the end of their noses. One method to that I now use to overcome these tentative takes on the dangle is to increase the flies water speed by pulling in a yard or so of line before the fly gets to the dangle. This action usually results in the fish being well hooked, possibly because it arouses the fish's predatory instinct as it sees the fly escaping and heading off upstream. By speeding the fly up and pulling it away from the fish we usually get a much more positively response.

Not all fish respond to the fly in the same fashion, the four fish that turned towards me in the incident described earlier all took in a similar way, but this I think is extremely rare. I have witnessed fish from the same group reacting to the fly in a completely different fashion, with some turning away , and othersturning towards me. I have tried to tabulate results from my diaries to see if the different takes fall into a specific pattern in relation to light conditions, time of day, freshness of fish, or clarity of the water, but there appears to be no consistency. I have tried all the other methods of hooking fish, rod point held high to create droop, with line held between index finger and the rod handle, being released the instant a fish takes. Another method tried was holding the rod at the point of balance with the handle tucked under my arm. The theory being that by the time I had felt the fish and moved the rod into the standard position the time delay between one position and the other being enough for the fish to turn. One technique used was fishing off the reel. This method allows fish to take line directly from the reel, and then after perhaps a yard or more had been pulled off clamping the line against the handle and lifting into them. Bill Currie uses this method to great success and describes it as "**letting the reel speak**". I have discovered that the last two techniques work relatively well when fishing with the sinking line and large flies early or late in the season, but after 30 years of fishing for salmon on the fly I prefer to tighten as soon as I feel the fish. Each method works well at times, however no method seems to work all the time, it is therefore just a question of trying each technique, and sticking to the one that produces the desired results. Tightening at once is my choice, because for me the hooking to landing ratio is far greater by using this technique than any of the other methods described, and tried. I like to use methods which I have confidence in and by tightening into fish as soon as I feel them I am happy, because this technique has landed me over 75% of all fish hooked for me, whether they took small flies fished just subsurface on a floating or a 2 inch tube on a sinker.

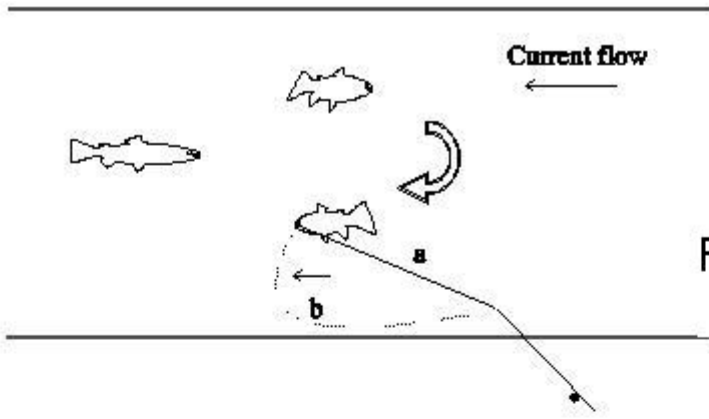


Fig 1

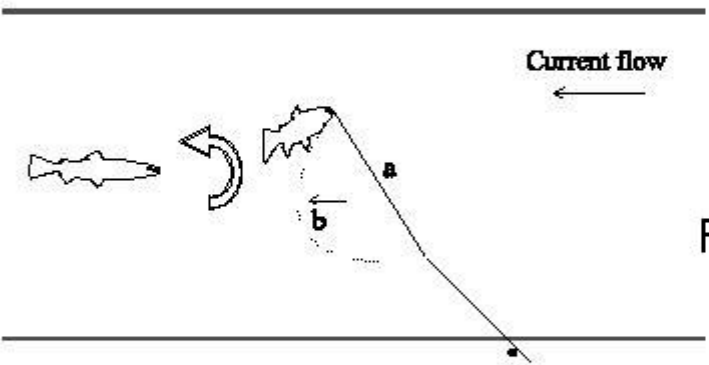


Fig 2

Fig 3

