

NYMPHING by Bob Stockton

There are dry fly purists who shun nymphing for erudite reasons. Some consider it an "inferior" means to an end. Other, very competent and skilled fly fishermen, simply prefer dry fly presentation to going "down and dirty." This article shall not solve the dilemma of preferred sporting methods. Indeed, I consider nymphing extremely challenging. It requires great concentration and applied knowledge of Trout biology, dynamics of stream hydraulics, basic entomology and successful techniques. The purpose of this program is to share with you some successful techniques that, with some practice, can put you into very successful nymph fishing. These techniques have been adapted and refined on Western and Eastern rivers with equal distinction.

Nymph fish whenever there is no active hatch or evident surface feeding. In fact, nymphing just before an expected hatch can be very productive as the nymphs are active and moving in the water column. Fish key to this activity and feed aggressively. There is also a well respected theory that Mayfly nymphs move just before dark or before sunrise. Both periods are excellent times to nymph fish.

Equipment

Traditional methods, such as the Charlie Brooks method used sink tip lines or full sink lines. Other methods such as the Skues(genuflect here!)used a floating line, as did the Leisering Lift. Each of these methods was a modification or improvement of the preceding body of knowledge and each has merit. The techniques that we will discuss require very little additional equipment and all items can be carried in your vest for conversion from dry fly rigging to nymphing. Recommended rod length is 9-10ft. Any rod, 5wt-10wt, is acceptable. The preferred nymphing rod is soft tipped with a sturdy butt. The soft tip permits a quick set while preserving your delicate tippet(yes, I said delicate tippet . . . as will be explained later).

The line should be a floating line, weight forward or double taper is fine.

The critical elements of these techniques are the leader and terminal rig configuration.

For the"slinky"technique, you will need slinky weights made of parachute cord filled with varying amounts of lead or tin weights. In addition you will need a leader of 8-10ft. made with 3-4ft of HiVis line, barrel knotted to 8-12lb mono 4-5ft. In addition you will need a snap swivel, a black bead, barrel swivel.

For the California or "Big Horn" technique, you need only a standard 7-10ft tapered leader but you will also need either high visibility floating yarn or cork floats that can be purchased in most sporting goods stores or catalogues. Note, I said FLOTES, not little strike indicators! The floats are the size of large cherries or larger red or green bobber type floats. Both floats require the use of a tooth pick insert to affix the float in a specific location on the line.

Slinky Technique

This technique has been credited to our Canadian friends in British Columbia. It is devastatingly effective on all moderate-fast moving water or pocket water. Last year, I used it on the Madison

River, MT. catching eight beautiful fish in less than one hour. One Rainbow was 18" while a nice Brown of 16-17" fell victim to its charms. The following formula is utilized:

Four feet of high Vis line is barrel knotted to 4-5ft of 6- 10lb. mono or Maxima chameleon. The high vis. end is then tied to the fly line. Place a snap swivel on the mono followed by a black or clear bead. The bead allows the swivel to "swivel" against the barrel swivel without drag. After putting on the bead, tie on the barrel swivel. In my experience, this rig works better if two different size swivels are used. For example, the snap swivel can be a size 14 while the barrel swivel should be a size larger, i.e., 12 or 10. To the other side of the barrel swivel attach 12-15" of 4x tippet to the first fly. The first fly should be the larger of any combination of flies. The second nymph should be tied to the curved shank of the first fly with 10-14" of 5x tippet. It is critical to the success of the technique that the combined lengths of tippet material not exceed 30"! Anything longer, makes strike detection difficult and, more important, fosters snagging of fish in the pectoral fin or belly.

I usually use two nymphs in this rig. It obviously doubles your chances for a hookup and perhaps presents the fish with an attractor fly which if missed, gives it the alternative of the smaller fly. My lead fly is usually a size 12 or 14 hare's ear followed by the smaller anticipated hatch of the day. I particularly favor a small pheasant tail size 16 or 18 or a soft hackle, again size 16 or 18.

I often change the combination depending upon its success. For example, a Zugbug or Prince nymph is "de rigueur" if Rainbows are expected. The smaller, or dropper fly, would then be a caddis pupa or serendipity or pheasant tail. I have reduced the dropper on occasion to size 20-22 on 6x tippet under difficult conditions with considerable success. Experiment with various combinations of nymphs but always keep the larger fly as the first fly in the rig or you will get snarls and knots which will have you saying bad words! This rig cannot be "cast"!!! It must be slowly lobbed in a pendulum like fashion after retrieval from the downstream drift.

Now for the "method" of using the slinky rig. As you may have guessed, the high vis. line is the "strike indicator." The slinky will rapidly sink your nymphs to the bottom and slowly present them to the fish in their feeding lanes. The first or lead fly will be closest to the bottom. The second, or dropper fly, will drift up into the water column 4-12 inches. I want you to have a mental picture of this action as it is critical to understanding the technique. The weight of the slinky is proportional to the volume and speed of the water being fished. Slower water requires less weight, perhaps a 2-3BB slinky, whereas fast and deeper water requires much more weight such as 8-10BB slinky. The success of the method requires that this weight be adjusted so that the line moves through the water SLIGHTLY slower than the surface current. The longer the rod, the more water that can be covered effectively. The mono is the line that is in the fish zone. The High vis. should be in the water by only a few inches to one foot. A strike is "detected" when the high vis. line slows, stops, or moves differently than the normal flow. There is no "jerk" or pull when a fish strikes. The fish is simply inhaling the dropper or lead nymph. The fish "tastes" the nymph and in less than one-two seconds expectorates the artificial nymph. The take is detected when the drifts of the high vis line hesitates, slows, or twitches in response to the fish's ingestion of the nymph for those few seconds. You MUST BE WATCHING THE LINE at the point where it meets the water or you will miss the take and blithely drift the nymphs through the fish without a hookup. This technique requires CONCENTRATION! The slinky will be bouncing along the bottom. You must maintain a TIGHT LINE to the slinky to detect the strike. Your casts(or more appropriately lobs) should not exceed 15-20ft. up stream. If the fish are on the feed, 3-5

drifts through each seam, lie or riffle should take fish. If there are no takes after 6-8 drifts, cast to different water. Do not stand in one area all day. This is "run and gun" at it's finest.

As the fish will either take the nymphs on the first or second presentation or ignore them until you go away. I prefer to work upstream when nymphing. With this method, you can cover substantial water within 15-20 feet of your wading ability and catch numerous fish.

TIPS

Always check the nymphs for debris. Even a minute fiber of seaweed will preclude a take.

Never cast so far upstream or out into a stream that you cannot immediately tighten the line. This is a close and "intimate" method of nymphing, you cannot effectively fish beyond 20-30ft.

The drift ends just below you, it does no good to allow your line to straighten out below you.

Retrieve your rig when it drifts approx. 10-15ft below your position. The sweet spot is within 15ft of you. Line control is the secret of success, remember TIGHT LINE at all times.

After your upstream cast, tighten the line with your left hand(if you are right handed). As the line drifts toward you, raise the rod to maintain a tight connection to the slinky. When the line drifts below you, lower the rod until the drift is complete, then begin again etc. The slinky must be in contact with the bottom at all times. If you can't feel the slinky dragging or bumping the bottom, you're not doing it correctly.

The snap swivel permits the easy changing of weights, be certain to modify the weight as the condition's warrant.

Why use a slinky and not split shot? Because split shot gets hung up too often. The beauty of this method is that the slinky slides over, under, and around rocks and debris without a fatal hang up.

If you do get hung up, simply walk upstream 10-15ft and yank the line, the slinky will dislodge and you are back in business.

Finally, only use this method if you are interested in catching outrageously large fish, and many of them!

THE CALIFORNIA or "BIG HORN" METHOD

This method is equally effective and results in fabulous nymph fishing. It is sometimes called the high stick method. Generally, credit is given to Chuck Fothergill, Aspen, Colorado(sadly deceased, Aug., 1996) for developing the high stick or "outrigger" technique. Chuck's method was very similar to the slinky presentation, except he used heavily weighted flies and strip lead on the leader to get the nymphs down. The critical development was the line control by means of raising and lowering the rod during the presentation(thus, the "high stick"). This was not always easy for the inexperienced nymph fisher. In addition the take was difficult to detect as no strike indicator was used. Along came the "Big Horn" improvement. The genesis of this technique was that professional guides wanted to get their clients into fish, even when there was no hatch activity. They experimented with bobbers, and later, puffs of yarn coated with floatant, as a means to present the nymphs naturally and correctly. The secondary benefit of the floatation was to act as a strike indicator and aid in strike detection.

The improved method requires the use of a float or "cork" like bobber, ^{OR BUOY} It is the float that does the presentation of your nymph. I REPEAT, the Float must be allowed to present your nymph for this

method to succeed.

Use a standard tapered leader of 7-12ft tapered to 4x. String on the float and insert the toothpick to set the float at the desired depth. ALWAYS have the float to weight distance one and one half times the depth of the water to be fished. At the end of the leader tie on 12-15" of 4x or 5x tippet. Important! At this knot, pinch on a small micro shot. The purpose of the shot is only to suspend the nymphs below the float and keep them in the desired column of water, near the bottom. It does not need bottom contact(unlike the slinky method):

To the curved shank of your first nymph, tie 10-14" of 5x or 6x. Then tie on the second, smaller nymph. I have used this method with 7x and taken 18-20" Rainbows on the Putah River in the NAPA Valley, Calif. I have also used it successfully on local rivers and streams.

Line control is critical to the success of this method. As little fly line as possible should be on the water. In fact, this method would work best with no fly line but the purists would really howl.

Cast the rig up stream allowing the float to drift the nymphs for ideal vertical presentation.

Always adjust the float so that the nymphs are as close to the bottom as possible. The beauty of this method is that the float can easily be moved by simply removal of the toothpick, move the float and reinsert the toothpick to affix the float. Do not fish all day with one setting of the depth of the float. Again frequently check the nymphs for debris.

Again this is a close method of presentation unless it is done from a drift boat. In a drift boat the float can be for a hundred feet or more since the boat is drifting at the same speed as the presentation.

TIPS

Keep as much fly line OFF the water as possible. The weight of the fly line causes drag and defeats the vertical presentation of the float.

Use the largest float necessary to help in floating the rig. It also is a vital visual aid for those with poor vision.

The take will again be a "hesitation, stop or unnatural movement " of the float. Rarely, if ever, will the float sink like a bobber with a worm on it. Set the hook by simply lifting the rod. Do not jerk or yank the rod as this is a delicate rig.

The float can be replaced with Strike Indicator Yarn, popularized on the Big Horn and the San Juan. The disadvantage of the yarn is that it creates wind resistance. However, when properly used with flotant, the yarn works well. Another disadvantage is that to move the yarn, a special knot must be used and the yarn retied each time it is moved. If the water depth changes frequently, this can be a real hemorrhoid. Finally, I have seen some people use so much yarn that it looks like a sheep is in the water. Only a small tuft is necessary.

This method is the preferred method for slower, deeper water. It is successfully used on the Big Horn where the depth can vary from a few feet to twenty feet. It works well on the Delaware and the Ausable.

If you are really a dedicated nymphers, you can have a reel rigged with a level or weight forward two wt. line. Both the slinky and California method works better with less weight in the fly line. The fly line serves no specific purpose in either method other than to comply with the regulations and ethics of flyfishing. One famous author, from Pennsylvania, uses monofilament on his fly rod and that reduces the line drag appreciably. I can hear those purists again!

MECK 'S

Dropper Technique A/K/A Dry Fly Nymphing

This technique is very simple but very effective. During a hatch, I have taken as many or more trout on the dropper as the dry fly. It employs the use of two flies. One dry fly, either to match the hatch or a stimulator such as a Hopper, large beetle, Klink or a fly of your choice. The second fly is a smaller nymph either imitative, micro-nymph, soft hackle or floating nymph which mimics the emerger of the target species fly.

Method: Tie larger fly to 4X tippet(preferably), 5X if necessary due to slow, clear water etc. Tie 14" of 5X off the bend of the larger fly. I use Flurocarbon but regular tippet works OK. Tie second fly or dropper on the 5X tippet. Use Sink-Kote or similar product to sink the nymph and tippet material. Cast SLOWER than usual to avoid snarls.

Fishing the rig: After presenting the two fly combo, you will not be able to see the second fly or dropper. Rather, watch you lead fly intently. If it hesitates, moves or submerges, set the hook as a Trout has taken the dropper. This technique seems particularly effective on slower water where Trout key to emergers rather than Duns.

Movement Nymphing, A/K/A “Aggressive Nymphing”

Credit for this technique goes to Rich Osthoff, friend, guide and author. Reference is made to his books No Hatch To Match, and Active Nymphing.

This technique can be summarized as the study of MOTION, i.e., motion of the fly, motion ON the fly, and motion of the fly fisher.

A. Motion of the fly. Active Nymphing means using nymphs in the manner of a streamer. It predominantly requires the use of attractor nymphs which are weighted in varying degrees cast to suspect Trout lies and actively retrieved using strip, staccato strip, pulse, pump, hopping or hand shake technique.

Rig: Sturdy leader constructed as follows: 40” .017 (20# Maxima Chameleon (green)
14” .015 (15# “ “ “ “ “ “)
8” .012 (10# “ “ “ “ “ “)
8” .011 0X tippet
8” .009 2X tippet
20” .008 3X tippet

If 4X cut 3X to 10” add 20” 4X. If 5X is desired, cut 3X to 10”, 4X to 10” add 20” 5X.

TIP: Tippet length affects strength. Shorter tippet is LESS strong than longer tippet because stretch is reduced. Also more tippet causes less drag, increases sink rate. Tippet condition is more imp. than brand. However, my personal choice is RIO, Umqua or Orvis SSS. Fluorocarbon my choice is Grand Max.

Technique: Idea is to move the fly into the strike zone. Use weighted fly or unweighted depending on target. If fish are in upper water column, use unweighted fly. If deep, use heavily weighted or over weighted fly. My favorite is to use a lightly weighted soft hackle wooly worm, cast across the current and strip retrieve just sub surface. It is very exciting to observe a Trout “ bulge ” water as it chases the fly. Second technique is to use an imitative nymph cast across current and strip retrieve, staccato retrieve, pump retrieve or hop retrieve the nymph. Use split shot to enhance the sink rate but use fly which will rise a few inches off the bottom to entice strikes. Use strike putty one foot below your fly line to enhance strike detection.

Secret is to agitate the Trout to strike by imparting movement to the nymph. It can be accomplished by pumping the rod, lifting the tip to hop the fly on the bottom, or short strips. I do not use hand-finger retrieve, too slow and too awkward. Moving the nymph to inactive Trout is the single best technique to achieve success. Unless the water is too cold or hot, moving the nymph is dynamite in achieving success. It is a simple fact that a nymph which darts, pulsates, and is erratic will outperform a dead drifted nymph in most circumstances. Trout are predators, which mean they key on errant behavior, signs of weakness and vulnerable behavior. Movement triggers instincts beyond hunger, i.e., territorial behavior, aggression, reflex action opportunistic behavior. MOVE THE NYMPH using these techniques and you will SUCCEED.

B. MOVEMENT ON THE FLY:

Movement on the fly refers to building flies which are buggy, soft hackle creations which are NOT imitative but very suggestive of many food forms and trigger amazing strikes. I tie the soft hackle wooly worm as recommended by Rich Osthoff.

Hook	Tiemco 5262 or 5263 2XL or 3XL
Thread	6/0
Weight	wire wrap to desired weight
Tail	Tuft of Zonker fur or marabou
Underbody	Yarn to build body and save dubbing
Body	Blend rabbit fur and Antron cut short
Hackle	Two hen hackles, one smaller to match hook gap. One larger for front of fly

Tying Instructions:

1. wrap wire
2. tie in tail, leave bobbin at bend in hook
3. tie in yarn underbody
4. Tie in small hackle by tip then dub half way up body. Palmer first hackle half way up body.
5. tie in second, larger hackle by tip then dub front half of fly. Palmer second hackle forward.
6. MOST IMPORTANT, use wire brush to brush the fly until it looks like a fur ball coughed up by your cat! Ugly is beautiful!!! Buggy is the goal to create movement ON the fly.

C MOVEMENT OF THE FLY FISHER

Movement of the fly fisher is the third part of this technique. Present the fly to the fish once or twice the MOVE to fresh water. In my experience, if the fish sulks and doesn't take the first or second time, it will not take thereafter. Guide boats are successful because they present your fly to new fish with every cast or drift. You can do the same by moving constantly to get fresh fish.

TIPS:

- 1 Keep rod tip low in retrieves. It telegraphs the take faster and allows a better and faster set.
- 2 Night fishing cast to SHORE. Large fish move into the shallows for bait and your presentation must follow.
- 3 To remove split shot from leader hold leader on either side of shot and use forceps to squeeze at a right angle to the line. Remove the split in most instances instantly.
4. Snagged nymph? Pull line until you are able to touch nymph with tip of rod. Use tip to gently push nymph off obstruction and free it. Use caution and be gentle. Give up the nymph if necessary.
5. Improve your cast by using index finger. Raise index finger and point it down the handle toward the rod tip. It prevents over arcing of the wrist and prevents the dreaded trailing loop.
6. When casting nymph towards shore, use SPLAT technique. Splat the nymph with authority near shore and immediately strip it. It arouses the Trout and triggers awesome strikes

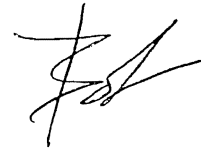
SUMMARY

"Even the most sophisticated Trout," says Al McClane in THE MASTERS ON THE NYMPH, "can be taken on a nymph sooner or later. The versatility of this type of fly is remarkable." Certainly it is. Versatility, effectiveness, and unequalled success are the hallmarks of the nymph. The flies can be classic nymphs, wet flies, or deadly soft hackles in the tradition of Sylvester Nemes. In every instance, the nymph usually out fishes other methods by wide margins. This is simply an observation, not a statement of philosophy.

We all do this sport for fun, enjoyment and exhilaration of spirit. This program is meant to assist you in achieving those worthy goals.

Recently, Charles Meck, in his successful book, PATTERNS, HATCHES, TACTICS, AND TROUT promoted a technique that combines nymph fishing with a dry fly presentation. Simply tie 20" of 5x or 6x to the shank of the dry fly and attach a small nymph, wet fly or emerger. This is yet another variation of the California method and can be very effective during a hatch.

Have fun and give yourself enough time to become effective at these methods. The rewards will be a "religious experience!"



BOB STOCKTON

ADDENDUM

For those who are new to nymphing or the "old timers" who have eschewed the "chuck and duck" methods of fishing, it can sometimes be daunting to decide where, when and how to try nymphing. Please accept the following suggestions:

1. **Where**

Any riffle or fast moving water.

Any pocket water

Any runs or seams on the edges of slower water or pools

At the tail of any rapids, particularly as it dumps into a pool

Near any undercut banks, overhangs or structure in the water (rocks, deadfalls etc.)

2. **When**

"Anytime" is appropriate but some times are better than others:

Early Spring use large Stone Flies, minnow imitations, or wooly buggers.

Prior to a hatch, nymphing with the nymph imitation of that species is particularly effective. In fact, drifting a nymph just under the surface **during** the hatch can result in numerous hookups of otherwise difficult fish.

Early morning or late afternoon is excellent, as it takes advantage of the "nymphal drift phenomenon" when seemingly thousands upon thousands of Caddis, Midge and Mayfly nymphs intentionally dislodge from the bottom and drift in the current before re-attaching themselves to stream structure or debris.

Between hatches or when there is no apparent surface activity by Trout.

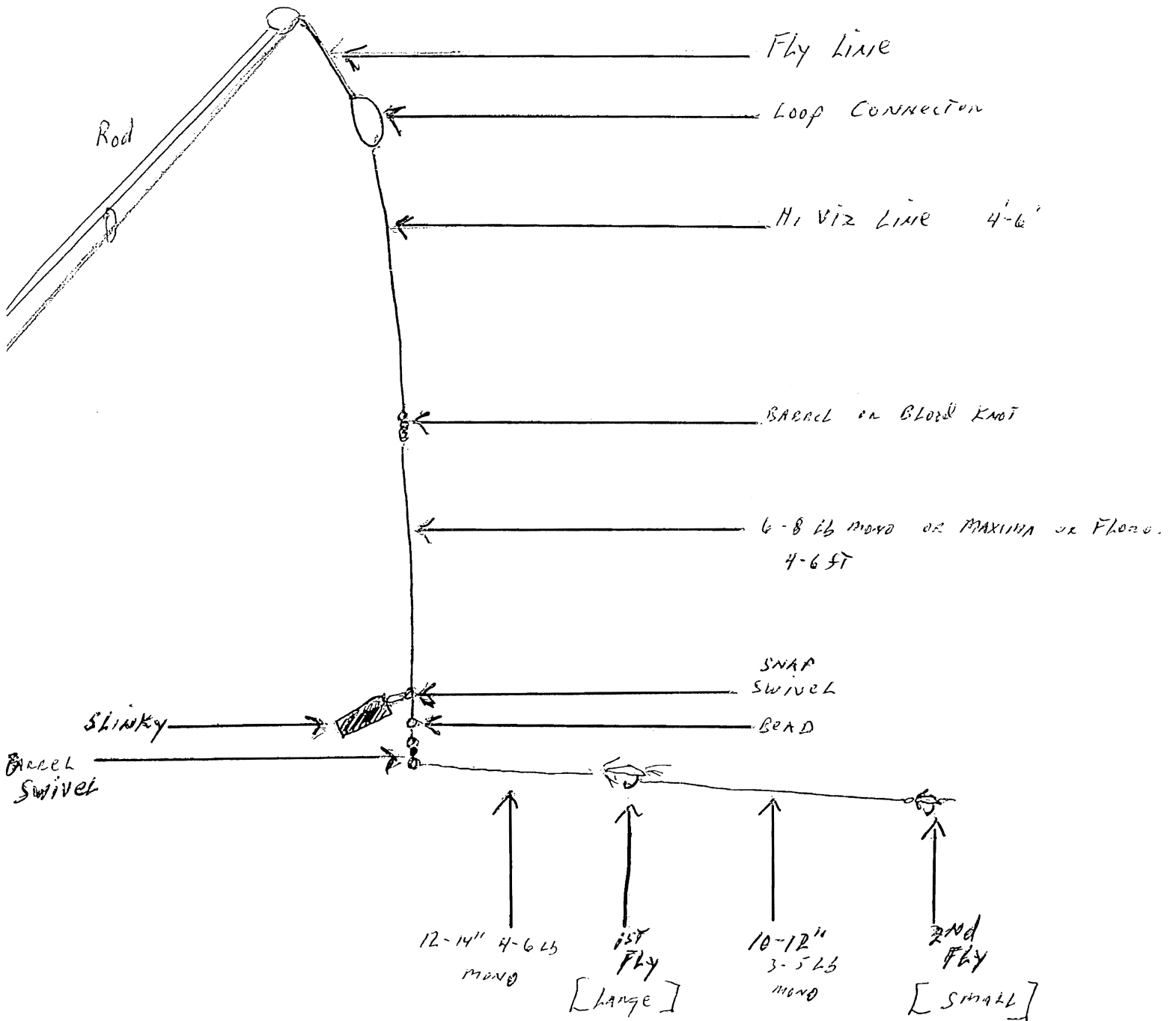
In the Fall when Trout are searching for large meals in anticipation of winter

3. **How**

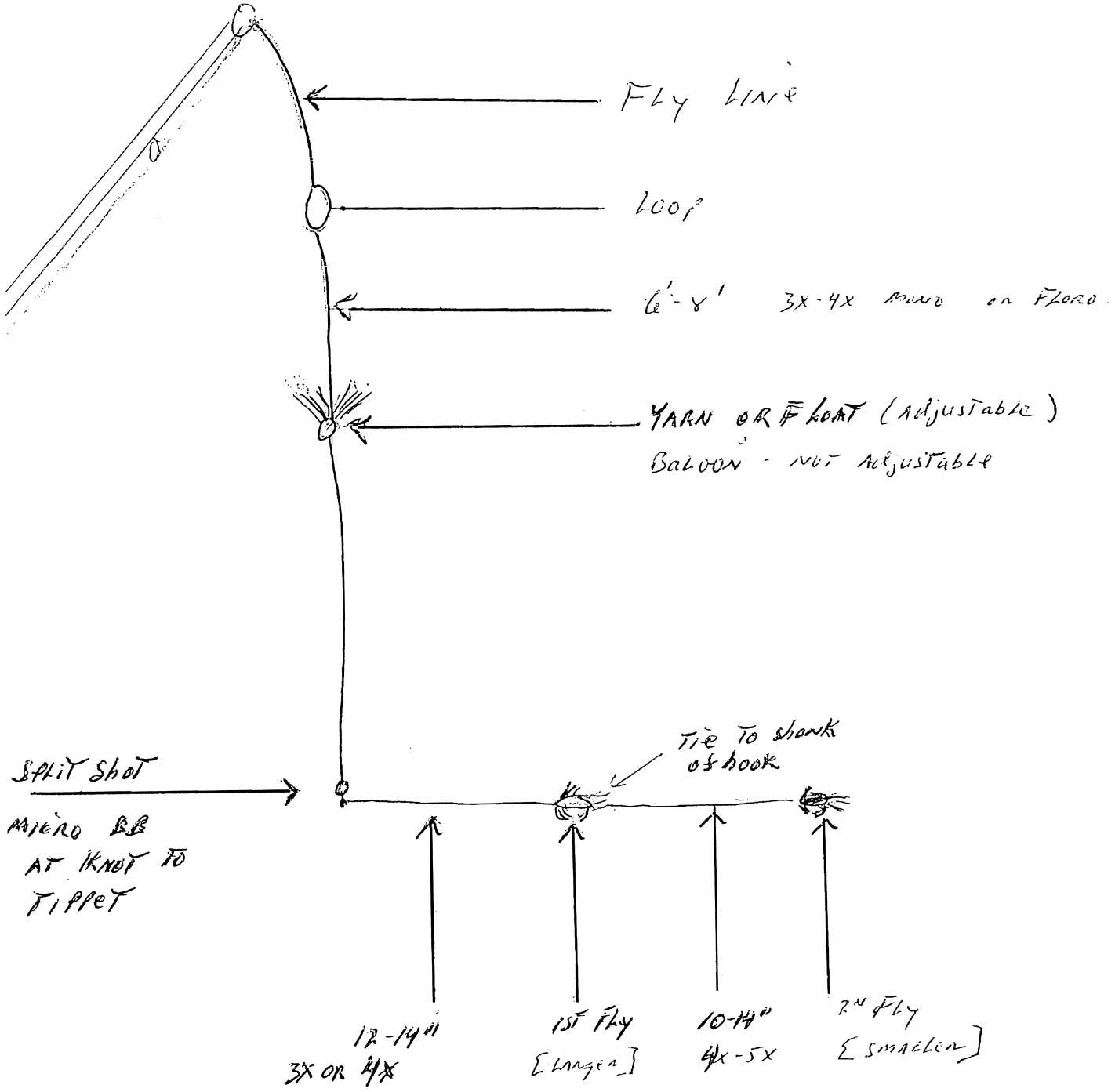
The slinky technique, the California technique, Meck's dropper or your own preferred methods can all be successful if you practice them and most importantly, **believe in them**. When you develop a sense of confidence in your abilities, you will be much more successful(in fishing, as well as in life!!)

GOOD LUCK

SLINKY Rig



California Rig



MECK'S DROPPER

