



Five expert Montana fly-fishing guides identify the most common errors they see—and how to correct them.

BY PATRICK STRAUB

STRAIGHT FROM THE SOURCE



Fly-fishing is often a solitary affair. An angler, alone on the water, hopes to convince another living being to eat fake food made of feathers or yarn. But it also can be a social activity, where a pair or a group of anglers fish together and share in each other's successes and failures. Most fly-anglers are also more than willing to share their knowledge, especially with beginners. Fly-fishing books are invaluable, from technical manuals by experts like Gary LaFontaine, Lefty Kreh, Mike Lawson, and Rene Harrop, to the literary works of Thomas McGuane, David James Duncan, Jim Harrison, and John Gierach. Also helpful are fly-fishing videos and one-on-one instruction from experienced teachers.

In the spirit of the sport's educational tradition, I recently interviewed five Montana fly-fishing experts who were all willing to share the most important things they've learned from watching thousands of clients over the years. ►►

Author of *The Orvis Pocket Guide to Streamer Fishing*, *The Frugal Fly Fisherman*, and other fly-fishing books, Patrick Straub owns the Montana Fishing Guide School. He lives near Bozeman.



TOP TO BOTTOM: BARRY & CATHY BECK; LONE LAUBER

BRANT OSWALD

Owner, Brant Oswald Fly Fishing Services, Livingston
Home waters: Paradise Valley spring creeks and the Yellowstone River

Q: *Brant, you've been fly-fishing and guiding for more than 30 years. What are your top tips for people who are wade fishing?*

A: One, move slowly. Sudden movement spooks wary fish every time.

Two, stay low. Crouch, kneel, or even sit when casting. Learn to cast accurately from all three positions.

Three, wade slowly. In slow currents or still water, try to avoid pushing a wake in front of you. In faster water, move slowly enough so your feet aren't knocking rocks together. Sound travels very efficiently underwater.

Four, when approaching a piece of water, "Look before you leap." Even if the "bucket" seems obvious, don't go crashing into the water to get to it; take time to look things over. You may spot a fish in a place you didn't expect or observe feeding activity you hadn't noticed.

And finally, pay attention to shallows. Fish often move out of deeper water to feed in shallower lies during hatch activity, especially on tailwaters and spring creeks.



Brant Oswald

TOP TO BOTTOM: MARK RAISLER; BRANT OSWALD

Q: *What do you tell people who are coming out to fish with you or planning a trip?*

A: If you plan to use your own tackle and equipment, double-check all your gear beforehand to make sure it's in good shape. Consider taking everything to your local fly shop (or a destination shop when you get to Montana) to check lines for wear, ensure backing and leader connections are in good shape, see that reels are oiled, etc. And check your waders, boots, and rain gear. Guides carry backup tackle, but don't expect them to have replacements for your leaky waders, broken laces, or left-behind raincoat.

Q: *You teach casting at several guide schools and casting events. What's the most common problem you see?*

A: Tailing loops. That's when the top and bottom parts of the unrolling loop of fly line cross one another in midair. Tailing loops

Tailing loops kill accuracy, and the resulting wind knots weaken your leader and tippet.

kill accuracy, and the resulting wind knots weaken your leader and tippet. They also require you or your guide to spend too much time untangling leaders and retying knots. Most tailing loops are caused by the rod tip dipping during the forward cast instead of moving in a straight-line path. Hire an instructor and invest the practice time to minimize tailing loops.

MARK RAISLER

Co-owner of Headhunters Fly Shop in Craig
Home water: Missouri River

Q: *Mark, on your fly shop's daily updated online fishing report, you constantly stress the importance of mending when nymphing. What is mending, and why is it so important?*



Mark Raisler

A: Mending is the act of repositioning your fly line and leader so that the fly drifts with, rather than contrary to, the current. It requires either adding more fly line near the bobber, or taking line away. The most important part of the mend is where the leader is near the bobber, and that requires using the whole rod to move the entire line and leader, not just moving the rod tip a couple of inches. Go big when mending a nymph line.

Q: *On the Missouri, most casts to rising fish are from upstream of the trout, working the fly down the feeding lane. You advise anglers to make that first cast count and commonly point out that, when an angler is targeting a rising fish, "This is not a time to practice casting."*

A: The first cast a fish sees is the most important one. On a heavily fished river like the Missouri, landing your fly on the fish's head will spook it. If you have to make practice drifts, do it a foot or two to the side of the trout's feeding lane. Then, when you are ready, present the fly into the feeding lane.

Q: *What's the one piece of gear I should update the most?*

A: Your fly line is the most important piece of the equipment puzzle. Change your line after every couple hundred hours of fishing. And keep your fly line clean. Slippery lines shoot better and float better. Most fly shops sell a 99-cent fly line cleaning towelette that will change your day. It's the best dollar you can spend. People will shell out \$1,000 for a fly

rod but then not take care of their fly line.

Q: You see a lot of people in your boat. What do you find yourself repeating at the end of the day more often than not?

A: Practice your cast. Practice for 10 to 20 minutes a week, because muscle memory is huge in this sport. But if you get tired when practicing, stop and take a break. Bad habits creep into your game when you are tired.

DAN "ROOSTER" LEAVENS

Owner, Stonefly Inn & Outfitters, Twin Bridges
Home waters: Madison, Big Hole, and Beaverhead Rivers

Q: Rooster, you've traveled the world to fly-fish, spending roughly 250 days on the water each year. What have you found to be the most important part of fly-fishing?

A: Being able to cast well—far, close in, and into the wind. And for goodness sake, anglers need to slow down their cast. Too many are impatient and hurry the forward cast.



Dan "Rooster" Leavens

Pause on your backcast. That's the single most important piece of advice I can give.

Q: How does an angler learn to cast well?

A: Like anything, with practice. The more you practice, the better your accuracy. When I was a kid, I used to cast on my lawn for

hours. Before they come out to fish with me, I tell my clients to practice every day during their lunch break in the city park.

Q: What's another error you commonly see?

A: Casting too much over rising trout. Your first cast or your first drift is your best chance of hooking a fish. Make it count. A perfect drift on cast number seven is about as useful as a shovel with a hole in it. The fish have already seen your fly six times and have told you they aren't interested.

A perfect drift on cast number seven is about as useful as a shovel with a hole in it.

Q: Will "hot new" fly patterns help anglers catch more fish?

A: Not if those patterns aren't presented correctly. I think it's better to use the tried-and-true patterns, and fish them well. A Prince nymph on a drag-free drift will always out-fish some hot new nymph that gets dragged through the current.

Q: Any last tips?

A: Stealth. Whenever you are on the water, observe, tiptoe, and sneak around. And don't forget the classic olive Woolly Bugger. It should be in every angler's box, because it works in every water I've ever fished.

KELLY HARRISON

Lead instructor at Montana Women's Fly Fishing School and a guide for Grizzly Hackle Fly Shop, Missoula
Home waters: Bitterroot, Blackfoot, and Clark Fork Rivers

Q: Kelly, you guide on a huge variety of waters. What piece of advice works everywhere?

A: When a fish eats your fly, you need to commit to a strong hook set. A weak set can cost you a fish, even several moments into a fight or right as you are trying to net it.



Kelly Harrison

Q: Do you fish year round?

A: Absolutely. To get good, you must be willing to fish even during the cold months. And a bonus is that the off season is when there's less traffic on the rivers. But to do that, you must have good gear that keeps you dry and warm, not wind-whipped and frozen. And the same holds true in the heat of summer. Use clothing and headgear with sun protection, and always wear sunblock.

Q: What could all anglers do to improve?

A: One, learn what is too much or too little slack in your line when it's on the water. Too little can cause the fly to drag, and too much can cost you a hook set. Two, you have to present the fly so it looks real. A lot of times the exact fly pattern doesn't matter as much as how you're fishing it.

Q: You're one of the few Montana fishing guides who actually grew up here. What do you want

All of us should feel an obligation to keep our environment clean and healthy.

TOP TO BOTTOM: KELLY HARRISON; DAN LEAVENS

for the future of fishing in Montana?

A: I want anglers to take responsibility for their local rivers. If you see trash, line, hooks, or whatever, pick it up. All of us should feel an obligation to keep our environment clean and healthy.

JOHN SINDLAND

Longtime guide for Bighorn Angler, Fort Smith
Home water: Bighorn River

Q: John, the Bighorn can see hundreds of anglers in a day. How do you deal with the feeling of being crowded?

A: I think the key is to be respectful of other anglers by giving them the space and time they need to enjoy the experience—and hopefully they will do the same in return.

Q: What are some things that anglers can do to show respect to other anglers?

A: Politely communicate. For instance,

when you approach another boat, ask to find out where they plan to fish, and then adjust your plan accordingly. Something as simple as, "Hello. How's the fishing? Are you planning to fish upstream or downstream?"

Also, don't be a "hole hog" and fish the same spot for hours. On the Bighorn, I've seen guys hike in and set up a tent next to a good hole so they can fish it all day. At a fishing access site, be sure not to block the ramp. Load your gear away from the ramp. And when you return, quickly get your boat out of the water and off the ramp before you start removing gear so other anglers can use it.

Q: On a river like the Bighorn that has lots of trout but also lots of anglers, what advice can you give to help anglers in those situations?

A: Be observant. Look for subtle rise forms, pushes, and movements in the water column. Fish the nooks and crannies, and try fishing the areas that aren't as popular or



John Sindland

well-known. I have had some very good days fishing areas that don't receive as much pressure as the so-called hot spots. 🐟



TOP TO BOTTOM: JOHN SINDLAND; ED COYLE