

# FLY-FISHING

## *It's Not Just for Trout*

Try fly-rodding for different fish in different waters to get more out of your gear and hone your skills.

BY MARK VAN PATTEN | PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID STONNER

**A** recent trout-fishing trip brought to mind the joys of fly-rodding for all kinds of Missouri fish, choosing my fly patterns, gearing up, and heading out into the magenta light of early morning. I knew where a nice brown trout had made his home in one of my favorite streams, and I was betting he wouldn't be able to resist my partridge-and-orange soft-hackle fly. Sure enough, he hit it and put up a good fight.

After bringing him to hand, I sat down on a log at the edge of the pool and cupped his belly, allowing him to rest in the stream while we both caught our breath.



Black widow

### **Bluegill Go for Black Widows**

I had caught a large bluegill just the day before at a neighbor's pond. Adorned in spring spawning colors, he was larger than my hand with the fingers spread wide. I was certain it

would exceed a pound. I measured it against the stick-on tape measure on my rod, and it just passed the 10-inch mark. That monster bluegill had been fooled by one of my favorite bluegill flies, the **black widow**.

Bluegill are especially susceptible to black, slow-sinking flies. A lot of bluegill fly anglers, however, are like my wife, who is particularly fond of bluegill fishing, but will only fish with a popping bug. Seeing the water explode as a bluegill nails the popper just makes her day.

In 49 years of fly-fishing, I have yet to see an angler catch a bluegill on a fly rod and not be impressed by the experience. Aggressive fighters, bluegill can make you forget all your troubles when the line goes taut. They know how to use their disk-shaped bodies to put up a spectacular fight, with circling runs that will bend your fly rod nicely.

### **Hillbilly Bonefishing for Channel Cats**

Another common fish that will give you a breath-taking run is the ever-popular channel catfish, which you can find in most stocked



# PURCHASING A FLY ROD AND REEL

## Fly Rods

The single most important tool to a fly angler is the fly rod. Its job begins with casting fly line, leader, and fly to the fish. Once the fly hits the water, the rod is used to control the line and the fly. This is referred to as *mending*. When a fish picks up the fly, the rod's job changes again. The rod is now used to set the hook or drive the hook into the fish's mouth. The role of the fly rod changes once again when the fish is hooked. It is then used to keep a constant pressure on the fly line so the fish cannot pull off or throw off the hook. At the same time, it is being used to play or tire out the fish so it can be landed.

The majority of the fly rods today are between 7 and 9 feet long. These lengths can accommodate the majority of fishing situations. When you hear anglers discuss the weight of a fly rod, they are not referring to how heavy the fly rod is. They mean the size of the line the rod will cast. A 5-weight rod will cast a 5-weight fly line. Size and weights customarily fall into the following pattern.

Species	Fly Rod Length	Line Weight
Trout/panfish	6–8.5' 8.5' common	2–5, 5 wt. common
Bass, catfish, carp	8–10' 9' common	6–8, 6 wt. common
Bonefish and other small saltwater	9–12' 10' common	8–10, 8 wt. common
Tarpon and other large saltwater	9–12' 12' common	10–13, 12 wt. common

The above table is a rough generalization. There are many combinations available today in length and line weights.

For new anglers purchasing rods, here are some important points to remember:

**Buy quality.** Don't scrimp on the most important tool in your fly-fishing kit. A quality fly rod will not only retain its value, you will not have to upgrade to a better rod later. Always buy the best that you can within your budget.

**Buy rods with warranties.** Fly rods are expensive and many accidents do occur! Make sure that you are covered.

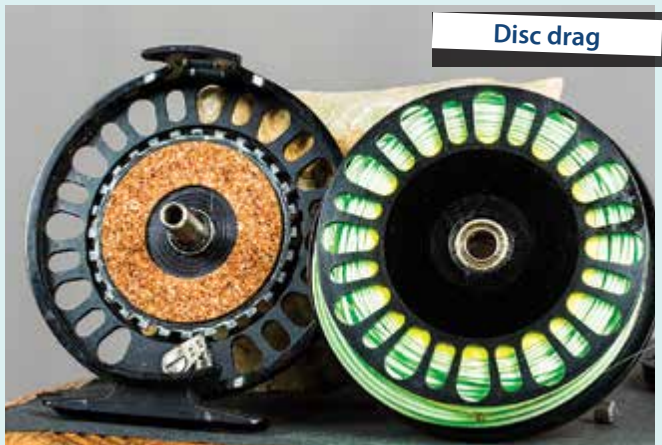


## Reels

The fly reel is an important tool. In combination with the fly rod, it allows more control over the fish. You can slow down a charging run and use it to wear down the fish to bring it to hand.

When fighting fish, the drag system of a reel comes into play. The drag is a mechanical, controlled pressure on the outgoing line. There are two types of drag systems that anglers use today. The click-and-pawl is the simpler, more common drag. It consists of a toothed gear that engages with the points of one or more pawls. These pawls keep tension on the gear and slow the spool down. This type of drag is sufficient for most types of freshwater fish.

The second type of drag, the disc drag, is used to battle larger and more powerful fish. This type of drag is the popular among most anglers today. The disc drag works much like the brake of a car; it has a pad, usually made of cork, on the inside of the frame. The pad keeps tension on the stainless-steel discs. The discs control the amount of tension on the spool that is locked down onto a pillar in the frame. A knob on the outside of the reel controls the amount of drag. The disc drag gives anglers a smooth and consistent amount of tension to help control more explosive fish like a trophy rainbow or a 16-inch smallmouth.



ponds around Missouri. Many anglers are not aware that pursuing catfish on a fly rod can be compared to fly-fishing for bonefish in the Caribbean. I like to refer to it as hillbilly bonefishing. When you fool a 5-pound catfish with a fly, you had better hope you packed a lunch. That struggle will take some time. A catfish will run repeatedly from one side of the pond to the other, not stopping to rest until you are ready to take a seat yourself. Just about the time you think the fish is ready to give up, it resumes with even more determination to break your line. Catfishing with a fly rod is something you will want to experience. Put that one on your bucket list — you'll be glad you did.

I can recall one particular catfishing trip when a fishing buddy and I took our float tubes to a private pond where it was rumored that the average-sized catfish would put fear into Godzilla. We were not entirely convinced until the first of the man-beating monsters grabbed a **Clouser minnow streamer fly** I had tied just for this adventure. I should have worn my cowboy hat and boots for that rodeo. That fish



Even a small bluegill caught on a fly can put a big grin on the face of young and old alike.

dragged my float tube and me back and forth across that 2-acre pond like I was a leaf. You could hear me yahoing a half mile away.

### Hard-Hitting Largemouth Bass

If you are impressed with head-shaking, jump-out-of-the-water fun, you need only make your way to any farm pond, lake, or conservation area pond. The largemouth bass is a hard-hitting predator fish just waiting for your fly to land on the water. Large **popping bugs** and any streamer fly that represents a small forage fish will entice these brutes to test your fly rod and are guaranteed to increase your adrenaline levels. The largemouth bass has a boney mouth, so the hook set needs to be aggressive. A heavier 6- to 7-weight rod with a fast tip is generally much stiffer than a trout rod. This will allow for a successful hook set and ease of casting larger flies.



Clouser minnow



To catch largemouth bass with a fly rod, use a heavier 6- to 7-weight rod with a fast tip.

### Smallies Like Minnows and Crayfish

While bluegill, channel catfish, and largemouth bass will give you and your fly-fishing gear a workout, there is one Missouri native that, ounce for ounce, will outfight any species of fish Missouri has to offer. I am referring to the smallmouth bass. Also known as smallies, bronzebacks, or brownies, smallmouth bass have an affinity for crawfish étouffée on a hook. If you can offer up a well-tied **crayfish pattern**, you have an excellent chance at fooling one into taking your fly. Smallmouth will also hit minnow-pattern flies such as the Clouser minnow.

Smallmouth bass like cool streams. They can occur in the same kind of water and habitat as trout, but they prefer a slightly warmer water temperature found throughout the Ozarks. While fishing the lower end of a blue



Popping bug



Crayfish pattern



ribbon trout stream where water temperatures are marginally warmer, I have occasionally hooked into a nice 15- to 17-inch smallmouth weighing in at a mere 1½ to 2 pounds but was convinced that I had a 5-pound brown trout on the end of my line. To my surprise, a beautiful flash of bronze would break the surface of the water.

### **It's All About the Skills**

I encourage you to buy, borrow, or gather up your gear and see for yourself that fly-rodding is not just for trout. As I often say, "If it swims and eats anything larger than plankton, it can be caught on a fly."

Casting for different kinds of fish in different kinds of water at different times of the year can help you get more out of your gear — and hone your fly-fishing skills.

In my view, mastering skills is the key to truly appreciating the art of the angle. You

begin by practicing various casting styles, then you study different kinds of aquatic insects so you can tie flies that actually look like them, then learn how to present the flies in a way that mimics their natural behavior, and, finally, land and release the fish you fooled.

Which brings me back to that big brown trout I fooled with my **partridge-and-orange soft-hackle fly**. When I felt its strength returning, I removed the barbless hook from its lip, and, with a flip of its tail, it slipped silently back into its feeding lane.

I always practice catch-and-release, and I encourage you to do the same. After all, these big fish are too beautiful to catch only once. ▲

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*Mark Van Patten learned fly-angling from his grandfather, who instilled in him a love for all things fly-fishing. Mark has been a Missouri Department of Conservation fisheries biologist working with the Stream Team Program for 17 years.*



**soft-hackle fly**