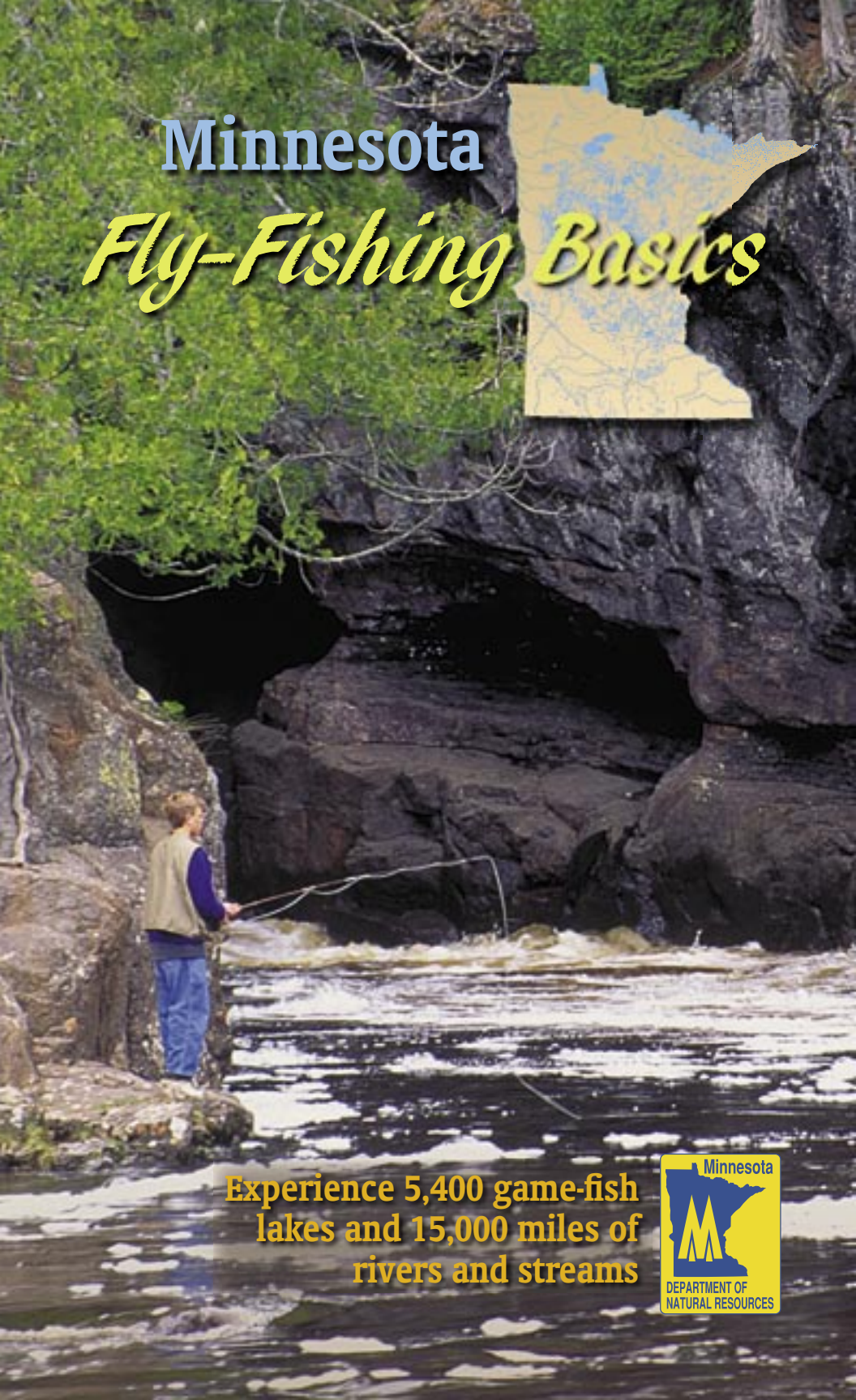
Minnesota

Fly-Fishing Basics



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Minnesota
DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Why Fly-Fish?

- Fly-fishing can be a fun way to fish for the first time or it can present a new challenge to a spin- or bait-casting angler.

- Fly-casting is a skill that brings great satisfaction when mastered. Some people find the activity of casting relaxing—others find it an effective method for finding fish.

- Fly-fishing is adaptable to many situations and species of fish. Walk a remote stream for trout. Wade a rocky river for smallmouth bass. Fish bluegills from the banks of a park pond. You can cast along a weed line from a boat for largemouth bass. Experience the thrill of a feisty pike on the end of a long rod.

Photo: MN-DNR

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Cover photo: Steve Mortenson

Rod, reel, flies, and casting illustrations by Amy Beyer, MN-DNR

MN-DNR
500 Lafayette Road
St. Paul, MN 55155-4040
(651) 296-6157 (Metro Area)
1-888-MINNDNR (646-6367) (MN Toll Free)
www.dnr.state.mn.us

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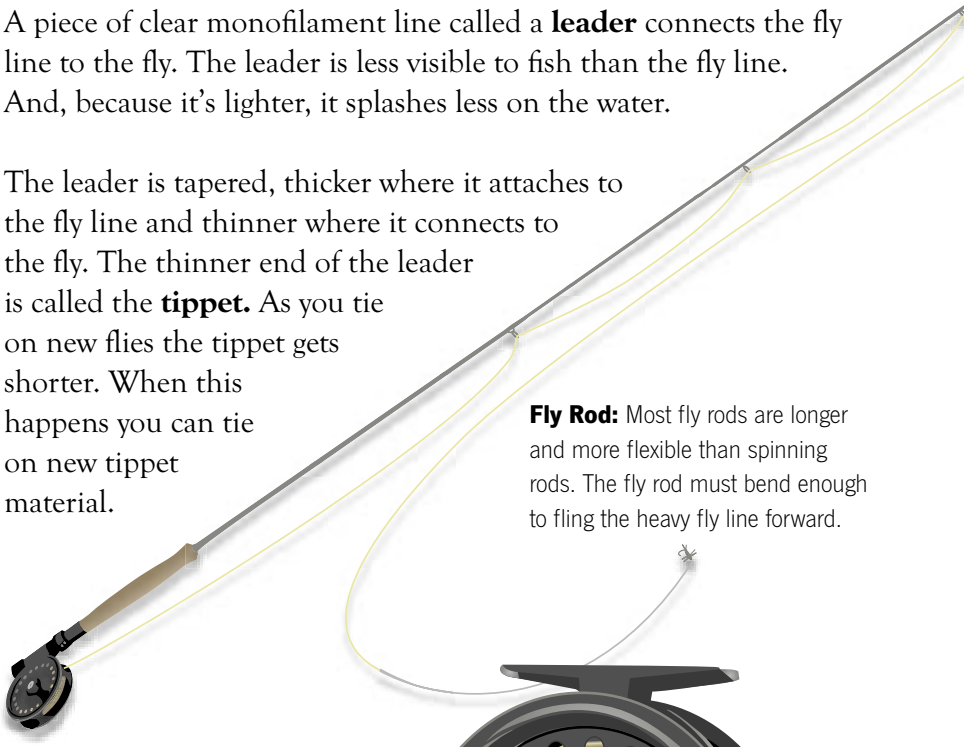
Equipment

Basic fly-fishing equipment includes a rod, reel, and fly line. Instead of baits or lures, fly-anglers use flies. **Flies** are small, lightweight artificial lures that are too light to cast with spinning tackle. To try to cast a fly with a spinning reel—imagine throwing a leaf!

Fly line is heavier and thicker than monofilament line. It's covered with plastic so that it floats on the water. The weight of the fly line propels the fly forward during the cast.

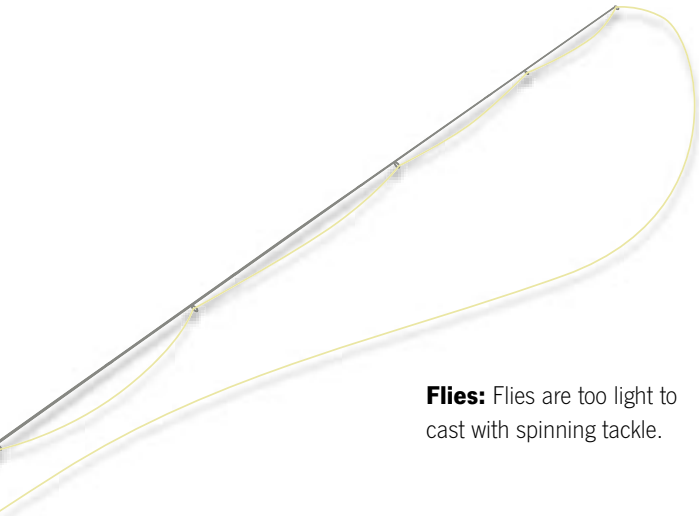
A piece of clear monofilament line called a **leader** connects the fly line to the fly. The leader is less visible to fish than the fly line. And, because it's lighter, it splashes less on the water.

The leader is tapered, thicker where it attaches to the fly line and thinner where it connects to the fly. The thinner end of the leader is called the **tippet.** As you tie on new flies the tippet gets shorter. When this happens you can tie on new tippet material.



Fly Rod: Most fly rods are longer and more flexible than spinning rods. The fly rod must bend enough to fling the heavy fly line forward.

Fly Reel: Unlike a spinning reel, a fly reel isn't used for casting. Its main purpose is to store extra line.



Flies: Flies are too light to cast with spinning tackle.

Buying Equipment

Start with a mid-weight (5 or 6 weight) fly rod, fly line of the same weight, and fly reel. Look for a beginner's package with a rod, reel, weight-forward floating line, and leader. Kits are available at sporting goods stores and can work well. Specialty fly shops offer beginner setups in a range of prices and provide helpful advice.

Basics:

- Mid-weight fly rod (5 or 6 weight) and fly line to match
- Reel
- Leader
- Extra tippet
- Flies
- Nippers or fingernail clippers to cut line
- Glasses or sunglasses—polarized sunglasses will help you see underwater
- Hat with brim

Extras:

- Fly boxes to store flies
- Vest or fanny pack for gear
- Waders
- Forceps or needle-nose pliers to unhook fish
- Landing net
- Fly floatant (paste, oil, or spray) to keep dry flies afloat
- Strike indicators—like a small bobber
- Small split shot to squeeze on leader to sink flies deeper
- Steel leader
- Knot-tying guide or card

Flies

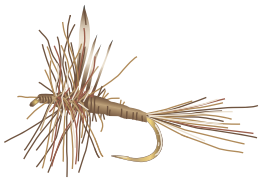
The object of fly-fishing is to fool the fish into thinking the fly is its natural prey. Flies imitate the foods fish eat in size, color, and shape. Flies can be made or bought in different sizes and patterns. The ones you choose will depend on what fish are feeding. Choose medium hook sizes (8-16) to start.

Surface Flies

Surface flies float. The fascinating thing about fishing with a fly on the water surface is that you can see when a fish comes up and bites it. Dry flies, terrestrials, and bugs are all surface flies.

Dry Flies

Dry flies imitate adult aquatic insects, especially mayflies, caddisflies, stoneflies, midges, and terrestrials. They are used mostly for trout, but other fish such as bass and panfish will strike a dry fly too. Some common flies are Hendrickson's, pale evening duns, Adams, and elk hair caddis.



Adams

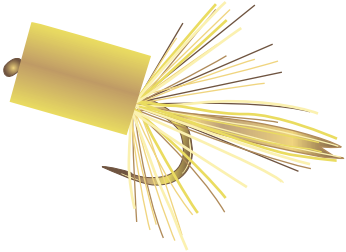
Terrestrials

Terrestrial flies imitate ants, beetles, spiders, caterpillars, crickets, grasshoppers, and other insects that live on the land and sometimes fall into the water. Twitch these flies to make them look like struggling insects. Look in the grass for the most common insects before choosing these flies.

Black Beetle

Bugs

Bugs include poppers, divers, and sliders. Twitch these flies forward little by little to disturb the water and attract fish. They imitate large insects, frogs, or mice. Dahlberg divers and frog imitations are good for bass and northern pike. Smaller rubber legged poppers work well for panfish.



Foam Popper

Sinking Flies

Sinking flies are made with heavy or absorbent materials so that they sink. Sinking flies include nymphs, wet flies, and streamers.

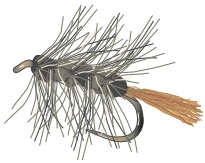
Nymphs

Nymphs imitate immature insects that live underwater. Nymphs are a big part of many fishes diets, including trout, bass, and panfish. Nymphs often catch fish when nothing else does. Hare's ear and pheasant tail nymphs are good in a basic fly box.

Hare's Ear Nymph

Wet Flies

These were probably the first kind of fly ever made. They are made of materials that become waterlogged quickly and sink, so they look like drowned insects and sometimes baitfish. Try a woolly worm in your fly box.



Wooly Bugger

Streamers

Larger predator fish, such as pike, muskies, large trout, and bass, are attracted to streamers because they look like baitfish. Retrieve these flies with a jerking motion to make them mimic swimming fish. Muddler or Clouser minnows, woolly buggers, and Mickey Finns are good basic streamers.

Mickey Finn

Specialty Flies

These are flies made for special situations. A fish-egg fly works in spawning season to catch rainbow trout. Crayfish flies work in summer when smallmouth bass are gobbling crayfish.

Crayfish

What Can I Catch?

Fly-fishing is not just for trout. Fly-fishing can be used to catch a variety of fish but works best to catch fish that feed by sight.

Trout

Rainbow Trout

Brook Trout

Brown Trout

Duane Raver

Location	Habitat	Natural foods	Most popular flies
Coldwater streams/Trout lakes	Deep pools, undercut banks, below riffles and boulders/Near surface when water is cool, watch for ripples from rising trout	Caddisflies, mayflies, stoneflies, scuds, small fish	Elk hair caddis, mayfly imitations, dark to black nymphs, bead-head (weighted) nymphs, scuds, wooly buggers, streamers

Sunfish and Crappie

Bluegill

Black Crappie

Duane Raver

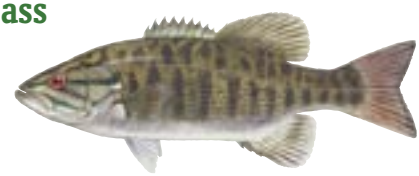
Location	Habitat	Natural foods	Most popular flies
Lake	Vegetated, near shore areas, around docks and fallen trees, sand bottoms	Small fish, insects, snails, zooplankton, terrestrial insects, amphipods	Wooly buggers, poppers with rubber legs, beetles, ants, bead-head nymphs

Largemouth Bass

Duane Raver

Location	Habitat	Natural foods	Most popular flies
Lake	Fallen trees and brush piles, under docks, lily pad bays, reeds	Small fish, frogs, crayfish	Streamers, poppers, wooly buggers, crayfish

Smallmouth Bass



Duane Raver

Location	Habitat	Natural foods	Most popular flies
Lake/River	Rock and gravel bottoms, rocky shorelines, riffle areas, slack water areas, current breaks	Small fish, crayfish	Streamers, poppers, wooly bugger, muddler minnow, Clouser minnow, crayfish

Northern Pike

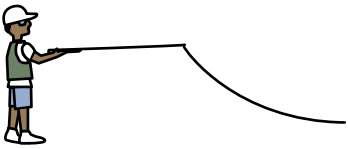
Maynard Reece

Location	Habitat	Natural foods	Most popular flies
Lake/River	Reeds, fallen trees and brush piles, weed edges, incoming stream mouths, slack water areas, current breaks	Medium fish, anything that makes a commotion on the surface	Clouser minnow, streamers, poppers, sliders, gliders (all large sizes)

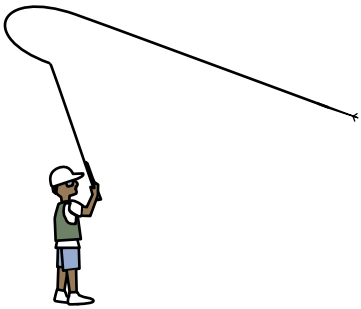
Casting

Back and Forward Cast

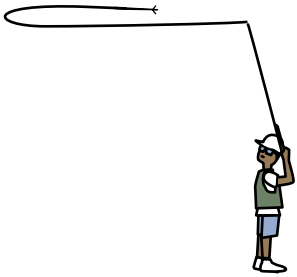
Used when there is plenty of open area behind you and when you need to move your fly further out onto the water. Practice this cast on land. Tie a piece of bright yarn onto the end of the tippet so you can see it unfurl.



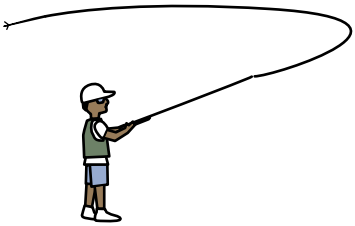
1. Pull out about three rod-lengths of line. Hold the rod out in front of you in your dominant hand and make sure there are no tangles in the line.



2. Bring the rod tip back in a swift, steady motion, stopping when the rod tip is pointing up and behind you.



3. Watch your back cast until the line unfurls.

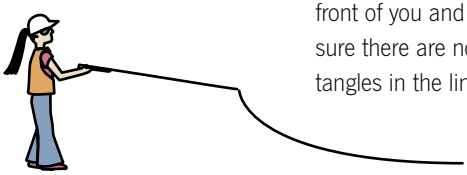


4. Just before the line straightens out entirely, bring the rod forward again.

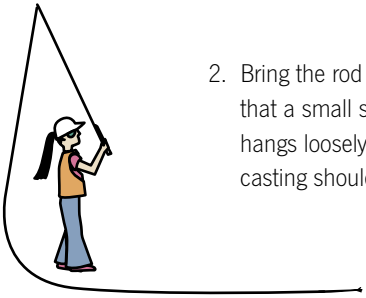
Basic Fly-Casting
Fly-casting takes a lot of practice. But, you can learn the basics in a few hours.

Roll Cast

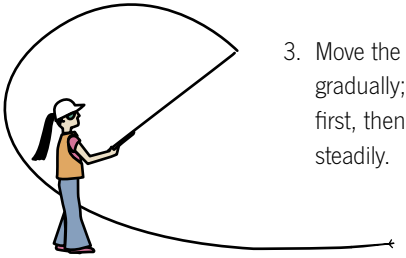
Used when there is not room behind you to cast. Practice this cast on the water.



1. Hold the rod out in front of you and make sure there are no tangles in the line.



2. Bring the rod tip back so that a small segment of line hangs loosely behind your casting shoulder.

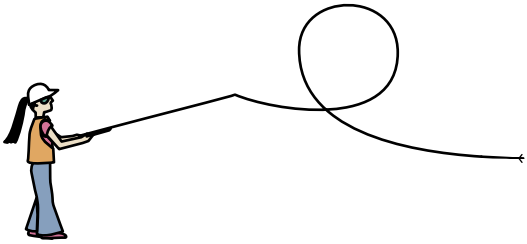


3. Move the rod forward gradually; slowly at first, then speeding up steadily.

Safety

- Wear sunglasses or other eye wear when fly-casting so the hook doesn't accidentally snag your eye. Polarized sunglasses will cut the glare on the water to help you see fish.
- Go fishing with a buddy.
- Wear a life jacket when fly-fishing in lakes or streams.
- Moving water can be especially dangerous, so always be careful when wading. Stay away from dams.

4. Stop when the rod tip is still pointing slightly upward and watch the loop unfurl.



Fishing Techniques

Fishing Ponds and Lakes

A good way to learn fly-fishing is to wade the shallows of a lake while casting a small popper for sunfish and bass, or a streamer for northern pike. Fishing is best in early summer, when sunfish are on their "nests" in water 2 to 4 feet deep. Wade quietly along the shoreline or in the shallows. Cast toward visible fish or their light, circular nests.

Casting the Fly

Pull two rod lengths of line from the rod tip and let another 5 feet of line hang from the reel down at your feet. Hold the rod in your right hand and the loose line in your left. Cast back and then forward. During the forward cast, release the line with your left hand. The weight of the line in the air moving forward should pull the line at your feet and extend the cast another 5 feet. This is called **shooting line.** The more line you pull from the reel and shoot, the farther you can cast.

Retrieving the Fly

After you cast, loosely hold the line against the rod handle with the first or middle finger of your casting hand. Then grab the line behind your casting hand with your line hand and quickly jerk the line to make the popper generate a popping sound on the water. This attracts sunfish and bass. If you're fishing for northern pike, the jerk looks like a swimming fish. Let the line fall in loops at your feet as you continue pulling in line.

Fishing Trout Lakes

Fishing for trout in lakes can be a lot of fun, especially when the water is cool in spring or fall. Use dry flies, nymphs, and streamers.

Stewardship and Courtesy

- Get permission to cross private lands
- Respect other anglers
- Pick up and take trash home
- Recycle monofilament line
- Follow regulations
- Release fish carefully

Fishing Streams and Rivers

Trout swim in coldwater streams, while smallmouth bass live in warmwater rivers. Both feed near fast water. Fish for them where choppy, shallow water, called a **riffle**, dumps into a deep pool. Fish swim below fast water, protected from the current by rocks or logs. They also rest in the "seams" between the fast water and the slow water near a bank until they spot an insect drifting in the water. Below undercut banks and overhanging stumps are other favorite hiding spots for fish because they can dash into the swift water to grab the food.

Approaching Fish

When fishing a stream or river, cast upstream. This way you can sneak up on the fish, which face upstream. Move slowly and stay low. If a fish sees you, it will dart away.

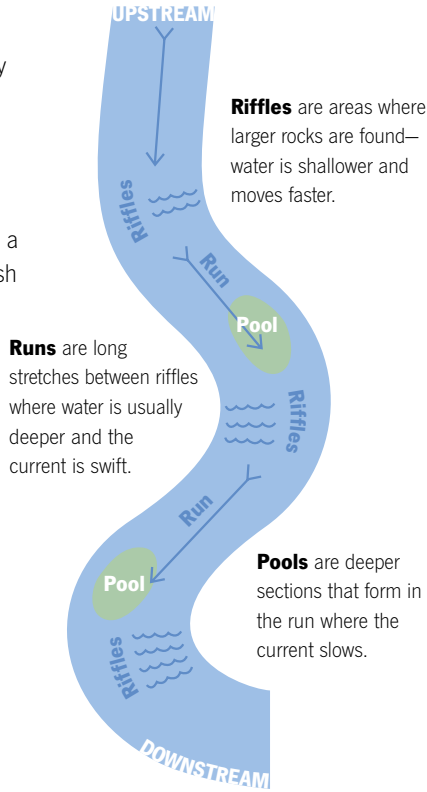
Surface Fishing

If you see a trout rising to eat insects, cast a dry fly a few feet upstream of where the fish broke the water. Allow the fly to drift over the area where the fish was feeding. This gives the trout a few moments to see your fly as it drifts overhead.

Underwater Fishing

If no trout are rising, they are probably feeding underwater on nymphs. Cast a nymph upstream into the fast water and let it drift naturally back toward you. Because it's hard to see or feel when a trout grabs a nymph, many fly-fishers put a small foam bobber, called a **strike indicator,** on their tippet. The strike indicator jerks when a trout bites the nymph. Lift the rod to set the hook.

Diagram of a Stream



Smallmouth bass feed underwater on small fish and crayfish, so try a streamer or crayfish fly. Streamers work well if cast across a stream and allowed to swing downstream in the current. Be sure to drift your streamer in water where the fish have not been disturbed. You can fish downstream using this technique. Weight a crayfish and jerk it along the bottom.

Catch-and-Release

Photo: MN-DNR

You may choose to keep some of the fish you catch for dinner (see the Minnesota Fishing Regulations booklet for seasons and limits) or release them so they can reproduce, grow, and be caught again.

How you land your fish will determine if it is able to survive when you return it to the water. Play the fish quickly and bring it to the shore or boat. Keep the fish in the water if possible and carefully remove the hook. Wet your hands before touching or lifting the fish to protect their slime coating. Hold it horizontally above the water for only a short time for viewing. Have your camera ready for photos.

To release a fish, cradle it in your hand in calm water, heading upstream if in a river, and move it gently from side to side until it is ready to navigate on its own. If a fish is hooked deeply, leave the hook in the fish and cut the line several inches above the hook.

> "Many go fishing all their lives without knowing that it is not fish they are after."
>
> —Henry David Thoreau

Where Should I Go Fly-Fishing?

If you need a map or information on what species are in a lake or stream, check the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Web site, or request one of the following brochures. Area DNR Fisheries offices can tell you about specific streams if the information is not available on the Web. See the Minnesota Fishing Regulations booklet for a fisheries office near you.

DNR Web Site

Lake Finder: http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/lakefind/index.html
Trout Streams: http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/fishing/trout_streams/index.html
Maps: http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/maps/index.html

DNR Brochures—Call 1-888-MINNDNR (646-6367)

North Shore Fishing Guide
Trout Angling Opportunities in Southern Minnesota
A Guide to Lakes Managed for Stream Trout

Other Resources

There are many ways to learn more about fly-fishing. The DNR's MinnAqua and Becoming An Outdoors-Woman programs offer beginning fly-fishing clinics. Information on these programs is available at www.dnr.state.mn.us or call 1-888-MINNDNR (646-6367). Look for fly-fishing courses offered by community education, angler groups, or sporting goods stores.

Check libraries, video rental, or outdoor stores for instructional videos. Several books, some for beginners, have been written about fly-fishing. Outdoor newspapers and magazines regularly contain fishing and casting tips. There are many Web sites that have information on fly-fishing and can help you find a fly-angler group in your area.

Photo: MN-DNR

Learning the Basics

Fly-fishing is a unique style of fishing that allows an angler to become familiar not only with the fish they seek, but the foods, habitat, and water-quality needs of those fish. In acquiring this knowledge, fly-anglers develop respect and admiration for fish and wildlife, and the environment in which they practice their sport.

Included in this brochure are tips on:

- buying equipment
- selecting flies
- where fish feed
- basic casting
- fly-fishing techniques
- and, where to fish.