

From a Trout's Perspective

by Bill Forward

Artwork by K. E. Pack

We are just too quick to blame the fly! I guess it is about control. As a fly fishing guide, I have come to realize fishing provides a break from many of the things that control our daily lives. But when we are fishing, we are the ones in power. Sure, there are factors out of our direct control, like clouds, water clarity, regulations, phases of the moon . . . but we sure can control what is at the end of our tippet!

Notwithstanding those hatches when trout become very selective, flies get too much credit for whether we are catching or not. Perhaps the reason we are so infatuated with changing the fly is that on the surface changing the fly seems to be the quickest fix for a fishless situation. Well, it isn't! The **Fly** is only one aspect of a **PRESENTATION**. In addition to the fly, most fly fishermen agree that there are five other factors that influence a take, and they can be considered and adjusted far faster than a fly can be changed.

They are the:

- Location** we cast,
- Depth** we fish,
- Movement** we place on the fly,
- Equipment** we use, and
- Time** we fish.

Each of these elements is worthy of volumes of commentary. Each is so significant that no cast should be made without its due consideration. Each so noteworthy that any attempt at prioritization should be made with extreme care. Finally, and most importantly, each aspect of a presentation should be considered from the standpoint of the **TROUT'S BASIC NEEDS** of **Food, Protection (Cover and Current), and Temperature/Oxygen**, before a cast is made.

You are bright; I am sure you place considerable thought into your fly selection. Consequently, it is often not so much as "*What*" you are using, as it is "*How*" you are using it that is important. That is one of my major talking points. The others being "*Control!*" and "*Pay attention to detail!*"

So, rather than think about immediately changing the fly in a fishless situation . . . let's consider the five other elements of a presentation and a few accompanying tips. As you read each tip ask yourself: "**Is this related to food, protection (cover and current), and/or temperature/oxygen from a trout's perspective?**" To assist you in this activity I have associated a scoring grid for each statement.

Instructions:

1. **Check every box in the scoring grid that applies to the statement! A statement may address more than one trout need. You'll receive a point for each!**
2. **Some comments are just thoughts and not applicable (NA) directly to the needs of a trout.**

Example: "*Look for, and cast to, transition zones, like: foam lines, shadow lines, weed lines, mud lines, thermoclines, and transition currents.*"

Answer: Foam lines address **Food** and **Cover**. Shadow lines and Mud lines address **Cover**. Weed lines provide **Cover** and habitat for **Food**. Thermoclines address **Temperature** and **Oxygen**. Transition currents address **Current** concerns. All four must be checked:

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Food	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Cover	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Current	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Temp/O2	<input type="checkbox"/> NA
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SO GRAB A PENCIL AND GET STARTED . . .

LOCATION: If there are no fish where you are casting . . . you are wasting your time. I know that sounds rather sarcastic, however it is extremely profound! Consider the hours that you have fished in areas that were probably void of fish. Have a reason for fishing where you are casting. Stop and observe from a comfortable distance before you cast. Think in terms of the trout's needs: **Food, Protection (Cover and Current), and Temperature/Oxygen.** Take your time and rig with thought. Secondly, move; do not keep casting from or to the same spot! Most anglers stay too long in one place. It may have been a great spot, but after several casts, the fish have been "put down". Do not take my word for it; watch others fish. Time them. The ones that are moving and casting with thought are catching the fish.

1. Look for, and cast to, **transition zones:** foam lines, shadow lines, weed lines, mud lines, thermoclines, and transition currents. (Hint: See example!)

<input type="checkbox"/> Food	<input type="checkbox"/> Cover	<input type="checkbox"/> Current	<input type="checkbox"/> Temp/O2	<input type="checkbox"/> NA
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2. Look for raising fish or nervous water. Determine the direction that the trout is moving and feeding. Cast appropriately. Remember: *Not knowing the direction that the trout is headed, cast a little short. There is less of a chance of 'lining' the trout.*

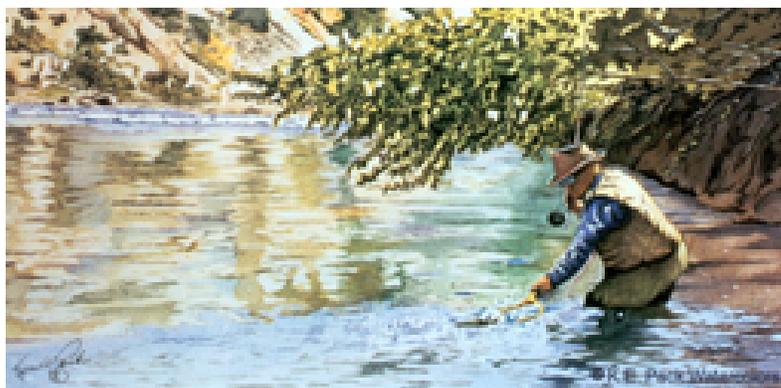
<input type="checkbox"/> Food	<input type="checkbox"/> Cover	<input type="checkbox"/> Current	<input type="checkbox"/> Temp/O2	<input type="checkbox"/> NA
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3. Trout generally face upstream in moving water. They also tend to face into the wind in lakes during a hatch, waiting for a morsel to come their direction; fish with the wind at your back.

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4. Shallow riffles will contain trout for a variety of reasons, particularly when shade provides cover.

<input type="checkbox"/> Food	<input type="checkbox"/> Cover	<input type="checkbox"/> Current	<input type="checkbox"/> Temp/O2	<input type="checkbox"/> NA
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DEPTH: It is estimated that over 99% of the food that fish eat is subsurface; if you do not see fish feeding on the surface, they are still feeding! Do not be so quick to use that dry fly. It is your job to present your fly in a natural or suggestively suggestive manner in the trout's feed zone for the longest time possible, no matter what the depth. Finally, good fly fishermen not only determine the depth of their target fish, but know why the fish are there.

1. Before looking for big fish in deep water, consider they do not go to deep water to feed; they go there for other reasons.

<input type="checkbox"/> Food	<input type="checkbox"/> Cover	<input type="checkbox"/> Current	<input type="checkbox"/> Temp/O2	<input type="checkbox"/> NA
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2. When there is a chop on the water fish are less fearful to come closer to the surface.

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3. A strike indicator signals a take, controls depth, and in wind adds a jiggling motion to your fly. Choose one that is easily adjustable and less prone to tangling. Better yet, use a large dry fly or an indicator (e.g. Stimulator or Grasshopper).

<input type="checkbox"/> Food	<input type="checkbox"/> Cover	<input type="checkbox"/> Current	<input type="checkbox"/> Temp/O2	<input type="checkbox"/> NA
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4. Temperatures vary greatly with regard to depth. Cold water holds a lot more dissolved oxygen than warm. Trout prefer temperatures between 54° F and 64° F. Use your thermometer. Don't have one? Get one!!

<input type="checkbox"/> Food	<input type="checkbox"/> Cover	<input type="checkbox"/> Current	<input type="checkbox"/> Temp/O2	<input type="checkbox"/> NA
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MOVEMENT: If the drag-free float of a dry fly is the basic mantra to dry fly fishing . . . then presenting your fly in an enticing manner at the correct depth and speed of retrieve/pause is the mantra of fishing beneath the surface. Some flies are tied as imitations of actual food sources (Blue Win Olives, PMDs), yet others are tied to stimulate a bite through movement and suggestivity (Wooly Bugger, Damsels). See the Denny Rickards interview, this issue. Knowing how, when, and what movement to use, if any, is imperative.



1. When stripping, try varied combinations of the length, speed, and pause. I find in still water the pause is particularly important, as this is often when the fish strikes. Most novices use too long of a strip, too fast, without a decent pause.

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2. Don't false cast over the area where you intend to present your fly. Overhead movements make fish nervous! Also, consider shortening your retrieve distances to the length of the combination of your tippet, and leader.

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3. Take unnecessary slack out of your line immediately, paying attention to where the line and leader meet. As you prepare to recast very slowly remove your line from the water. Secondly, note the depth and angle the fly rises through. Trout will often take the fly on that rise.

<input type="checkbox"/> Food	<input type="checkbox"/> Cover	<input type="checkbox"/> Current	<input type="checkbox"/> Temp/O2	<input type="checkbox"/> NA
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4. In a stream or river, swinging a nymph at the end of a drift will make it rise like a natural. Pause at the end of the swing for a possible take. Retrieve a little and pause again.

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EQUIPMENT: Think . . . *Always balance your system to your quarry and the fly you are going to use.* Use tippets and leaders that compliment your equipment, fly, and target fish. Catching small Sierran trout on the right equipment is a kick, especially in a location that you have discovered on your own. Over playing a large trout on light equipment can seriously harm it and take time away from catching other fish.

1. Before you leave your home consider where you are going to be fishing and wear clothing (shirt, vest, pants, hat, etc.) to blend in to the environment. Always use polarized glasses for spotting fish, structure, and eye protection.

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2. Fluorocarbon tippet is less threatening to fish because it has a similar optical density to water and therefore is less visible. It is stronger than monofilament of the same diameter. However, carry an appropriate receptacle (a 35 mm film cassette . . . remember that?) and dispose of it responsibly.

<input type="checkbox"/> Food	<input type="checkbox"/> Cover	<input type="checkbox"/> Current	<input type="checkbox"/> Temp/O2	<input type="checkbox"/> NA
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3. Learn and practice your knots: Nail knot, Blood knot, Double Overhand, Clinch, and a loop knot of your choice. Use the loop knot to attach a streamer, leech, or any fly that is designed to illustrate pulsation and movement to the trout. Fishing is not the time to practice something you can master before you get to the water.

<input type="checkbox"/> Food	<input type="checkbox"/> Cover	<input type="checkbox"/> Current	<input type="checkbox"/> Temp/O2	<input type="checkbox"/> NA
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4. Since water is many times denser than air sound travels much further under water than in air. The use of metal cleated-sole boots and metal wading staffs transmit sounds tremendous distances under water, alerting fish of a possible predator's presence.

<input type="checkbox"/> Food	<input type="checkbox"/> Cover	<input type="checkbox"/> Current	<input type="checkbox"/> Temp/O2	<input type="checkbox"/> NA
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TIME: I realize that once you are on the water . . . you are there, regardless of the time. However, time is a major consideration. Change is the only constant with time! The time of day (e.g. light), month (e.g. phase of the moon), and year (e.g. the seasons), all contribute to your fishing success and all must be understood from a 'trout needs' perspective. Strategies and



tactics that work one time of day (or year) will not work other times of the day (or year). Retrieve speed is a good example. Colder water reduces both the metabolism of the aquatic food source as well as that of the trout; consequently retrieves have to be slower in colder times, day, or year.

1. Referring to a hatch chart before you get to your destination is paramount. Nonetheless, being prepared for the emergence of hatches that are not totally predictable and/or occur for very short periods is wise as well (e.g. ants in the spring and terrestrials in the summer and early fall).

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2. Whether in a river, stream, or lake, elevated summer temperatures cause trout to reposition. Trout require much more oxygen at 75° F than at forty odd degrees. This, along with the fact that warmer water holds less oxygen, is why temperature and oxygen are often combined when considering trout needs.

<input type="checkbox"/> Food	<input type="checkbox"/> Cover	<input type="checkbox"/> Current	<input type="checkbox"/> Temp/O2	<input type="checkbox"/> NA
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3. Ever fished at night? Fish do! Trout not only use light to find their prey, but they are also sensitive to vibration and chemicals.

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4. In early spring and fall colder water is on top in a lake. Explore a bit deeper. Later, when the upper water becomes dense enough (heavier than the warmer water beneath), the lake turns over and waters mix.

<input type="checkbox"/> Food	<input type="checkbox"/> Cover	<input type="checkbox"/> Current	<input type="checkbox"/> Temp/O2	<input type="checkbox"/> NA
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<i>Your Score</i>	
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What does your score mean? Let me start by saying this activity is not intended to be an analysis of your ability; it is simply meant to encourage and challenge you to think from the trout's perspective, and not be so quick to blame and change your fly . . . and, hopefully, you may have gathered a tip or two along the way. There are 100 points possible. Scores will vary even among experienced fly fishers. If your score is 95 or above you are doing great. I will leave the interpretation to you. However, if your score is significantly below 90 you probably didn't take all aspects of the statements into account. Reset and try again.

Pay attention to all aspects of your **PRESENTATION:** Fly, Location, Depth, Motion, Equipment, and Time. When you catch a fish stop and ask yourself . . . *"What was I doing right from the trout's perspective?"* In answering consider the **TROUT'S NEEDS:** Food, Protection (Cover/Current), Temperature/Oxygen. Fly fishing is a sport of control. In fact, many say control is probably the single most important word associated with fly fishing. Stalk your prey like the predator that you are. Move slowly, stay low, and reduce your false casts to one or two. Tread lightly and remember if you suddenly see them chances are they have seen you. If you make a poor cast consider fishing it out rather than tear it off the water and recasting. Above all think in terms of the trout's basic needs. You are in control.

Bill Forward brings together a unique combination of knowledge of the Sierra, natural sciences and an enthusiasm for guiding and instruction. Bill owns **Forward Bound** near Lake Davis, CA.

Artwork courtesy of Kevin E. Pack
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