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"Strike Indicators for Spring Creeks and Tailwaters"

Many of us are drawn to spring creeks and tailwaters because these rich environments produce heavy hatches of aquatic insects and offer the angler consistent and predictable dry fly fishing. On the other hand, the spring creek angler encounters periods—in almost any given day of fishing and especially over the course of a full season—when there is no surface activity at all. The dry fly purist may choose to fish with terrestrial patterns or attractors, but presenting nymphs in a dead drift manner is the most reliable fishing method during these periods. For most anglers, this nymph fishing involves a strike indicator. In my roles as guide, instructor, and former fly shop employee, I have often been asked about the best ways to rig indicators for spring creek fishing. Here are some thoughts that may help you choose the best system for your own fishing.

Before discussing the specifics of indicator fishing, I should acknowledge that some anglers consider the use of any indicator to be repugnant, if not downright unethical. "It's not really fly fishing", they say, or "I might as well fish with a worm and a bobber." Because of the use of (mostly) traditional tackle, fly fishing involves a set of self-imposed handicaps that we embrace as part of the sport. Although modern sinking lines allow us to fish deeper water than ever, a flyfisher will never be as efficient in deep water as a troller with a downrigger or a spin fisherman armed with several hundred yards of monofilament, a baited hook, and a heavy bell sinker. A good fly caster can handle plenty of wind, but not as well as a good baitcaster throwing a big spoon or leadhead jig. In many ways, the "inefficiency" of fly fishing is its defining characteristic.

Even among the fly fishing community, the sport is defined variously. Some anglers fish choose to fish nothing but dry flies, others refuse to fish a sinking line, and still others fish weighted flies but turn their noses up at split shot on a leader. What we need to recognize is that these definitions carve up the sport along arbitrary lines, and that one angler's vision of fly fishing is not morally superior to another.

What is a strike indicator? A strike indicator is anything that can be attached to the leader to let the waiting angler know that the drift of a sunken fly (or nearly invisible small dry fly) has been intercepted by a feeding fish. Therefore, the defining characteristics of an indicator are that it should float and it should be visible to the angler.

When explaining indicator systems to beginning anglers, I hear several nearly universal questions, and it might be a good review for experienced anglers to consider these questions about the basics of indicator fishing.

1. Do indicators spook fish? Absolutely. But for most anglers, the tradeoff in using an indicator is a positive one—for every fish scared away by the splash or shadow of an indicator, several are hooked by detecting strikes more quickly than could be done without the indicator.

2. How far from the fly should the indicator be? As with most important questions, the real answer is that it all depends. In this case, it depends on the depth of the water being fished and speed of the current. Even in an idealized situation (in which the fly would hang straight down from the indicator), the fly needs to be at least as far from the indicator as you wish the fly to be from the surface of the water. In the real world, the angler must increase this distance to allow for turbulence and slack in the leader. I usually recommend the indicator and fly to be separated $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 times the depth being fished.

3. If adding split shot or other weight to the leader, how far from the fly should it be placed? I prefer to minimize added weight, so I put the shot as close to the fly as possible to maximize its effect. If the distance is too great, the weight may be on the bottom, but the fly may ride up much higher in the water column. At the same time, I don't want the presence of the weight to interfere with the presentation of the fly--that is, I don't want the fish to see the weight instead of the nymph. In practical terms, I usually put the weight 8-10" away from the fly.