

**Brant Oswald post to Midcurrent.com's
"Ask the Expert" Column**

"How To Hook Fish On Tiny Flies"

Moderated by Philip Monahan

Question: How can I better set the hook when fishing size 20 and smaller hooks? I have such a hard time getting small hooks into fish—even small fish, especially when swinging emergers. I get frustrated feeling the tug, only to set the hook and pull the fly right out of the fish's mouth.

Joshua B., Belgrade, MT

Answer: This is a very common problem, and I threw the question out to some guide friends who regularly fish with tiny patterns.

Brant Oswald—a Livingston, Montana, guide best known for his mastery of the Paradise Valley spring creeks—addressed Joshua's question so fully that I won't even try to paraphrase him. This is brilliant stuff:

"As I guide, I find that teaching people how to hook fish more effectively makes a big difference in the number of fish landed. Even experienced anglers who are well above average in overall skills have rarely thought much about this part of the game. Somehow, when clients measure up their success at the end of the day, they tend to forget the fish they missed or lost right after the hookup. I feel I have done the lion's share of my job when I put a client in position to get the fish to eat the fly, but I won't get credit for any help until the fish is in the net, so I work on this more and more.

Since Joshua's question is about small hooks, I am assuming our arena of discussion is trout fishing in moving water. Let's start with the issue of hooking fish—with any size hook. The first thing I would say is that most anglers are used to the idea that they need to plan their approach in terms of presentation—staying low enough to keep from spooking the fish, combining angle of approach with casting technique to minimize drag, etc.—but they rarely consider how those angles affect their ability to hook the fish.

So my first suggestion is just to include hooking angle in the factors that make up your streamside strategy. You have to think about the fish's position and the combination of currents he is in when you are rigging terminal tackle and presenting the fly. The idea is to extend the visualization to what your response should be when the fish actually does take the fly. Most anglers have one method of striking—just yanking back or lifting the rod tip—and this works in lots of cases. As long as the striking action removes all of the slack in the line and leader quickly and the strike isn't violent enough to break the tippet, the fish is usually hooked securely enough to be landed.

But a better approach is to try to plan the response. Maybe the best general rule is to strike downstream whenever possible. With the fish facing into the current, striking on a downstream angle will tend to pull the fly into the corner of the fish's mouth, affording

the angler a secure hookup. When you're making a classic up-and-across presentation, the instinctive response of yanking back or up usually works okay. But if the fish is only slightly upstream, or is across or slightly downstream, striking on a steeper downstream angle with the rod tip will produce better results. Downstream presentations always create hooking problems because the natural striking response tends to pull the fly away from the fish, back out of its mouth. A good first step is for the angler to consider hooking angle as part of the whole fishing situation, rather than thinking a successful hook-set automatically follows a strike. Getting better at anticipating the strike during a given presentation also makes setting the hook easier, but that's another issue altogether.

Joshua's specific question is about setting the hook with small hooks. With small hooks, the problems with hooking angles are exacerbated, and one first needs to realize that the percentage of successful hookups will go down with very small flies, even with the most thoughtful and skilled striking technique. If the angler is a fly tier (or is willing to order custom-tied flies), one solution is to use hooks with wider gapes (relative to shank length) to maximize a small hook's purchase. Over the years, I have played with offsetting the hook point slightly on very tiny flies, but I confess I have never seen a systematic improvement in hooking ability.

Joshua's question also mentions swinging emergers. This fishing situation—fishing small flies, fishing downstream, and fishing on a tight line—is a worst-case scenario for successful hook sets. When the fish moves to a swinging fly and opens its mouth and flares its gill covers, the tight line presentation may prevent the fly from being flushed into the fish's mouth. A related problem is that the small flies are being fished on light tippet, and a solid strike (by fish and/or fisherman) may just result in a break-off, anyway. One trick is to not set the hook at all, as the fish may come back to grab the fly again if a violent hook set doesn't take the fly completely away from the fish. Like a strip strike when fishing a fly on a retrieve, let the fly come tight before you react, even if you feel the fish whacking at the fly. But fishing downstream, on a tight line, with tiny hooks means that coming tight may not happen all that often, as Joshua has discovered. If I were trying to give Joshua some concrete advice, here is what I would say:

1. Strike on a downstream angle, when possible. (But not possible, when swinging a fly downstream.)
2. Use flies tied on a wide-gape hook, if available.
3. See if you can present the emergers on a different angle.
4. Accept the fact that the hooking rate will go down in certain situations. And this situation is one of the worst."