

Brant K. Oswald  
©1999, 2005, 2013

## "Mending Your Ways"

Mending is one of the most important line control skills in fly fishing. In fact, this skill is so basic that most anglers, once they progress beyond neophyte status, take it for granted that there is nothing more to learn. However, my experience as a guide (and an informal poll of other guides) tells me that many anglers don't even understand the concept of mending, and very few are really adept at applying it properly in fishing situations. What follows is an attempt to explain mending and suggest a variety of ways to use it more effectively.

### Uses for mending

Mending is the process of repositioning the line on the water—this allows the angler to control the amount of force exerted on the line by the current, which in turn allows control over the effects of drag on the fly. The most common use of mending is to minimize drag on a cross stream or up-and-across cast, when the angler is attempting to get a dead drift presentation of a dry fly or nymph. Because the line is usually lying across currents moving at different speeds, the fastest line of current will push a downstream belly into the line, causing the fly to be dragged across the current in an unnatural manner.

Since the most typical fishing scenarios involve casting the fly into slower currents (along bank cover, near the edges of logs and midstream boulders, the slower side of a current seam, etc.) and having to deal with line on faster currents between the angler and the target, the most common mend is an upstream mend. An upstream mend counters the effect of the faster currents by creating a "mirror image" upstream belly in the line, allowing the fly to drift naturally in the slower water while the current pushes against this newly created slack. It is sometimes possible to make several successive upstream mends to extend the length of a drag-free float.

Unfortunately, this basic upstream mend is often the only technique that an angler learns. I see many experienced anglers on the stream who try to apply their personal variation of this mend in every possible fishing situation. As you might suspect, this mend is very helpful in some combinations of currents and casting angles, but it will completely ruin the presentation in others. It is important to remember the goal of mending is to produce a good drift; if mending doesn't produce the intended behavior in the fly, it is pointless exercise.

One of the difficulties in mending for most anglers is that their technique eliminates slack in the line and leader, rather than creating slack or moving it to a new position. If the angler starts with no slack, and starts yanking on the line at the rod tip, the fly WILL move. At worst, the mend will negate casting accuracy by pulling the fly out of the fish's feeding lane or cause enough drag to spook the target fish.

## **Basic Rules for Mending**

There are several useful rules that follow from the difficulty in mending without moving the fly. The first rule: don't mend if it isn't necessary. In some situations, a quartering upstream cast will provide a reasonably drag-free float without any additional manipulation of the line. This is especially true when there are not big variations in current speed between the angler and the target, and in faster water, where a small amount of drag is not as noticeable to the fish. In some difficult situations, a fish may be tucked into such a hard-to-reach lie that a mend is physically impossible. Low overhanging tree branches, for example, may leave no room for a mend. In other situations, the mend may be possible, but pointless. I often see anglers throwing big mends in a short upstream cast in fast water. These mends accomplish very little (except wear out the caster's arm), and a big pile of slack in fast water can make it very difficult to strike the fish if it does take the fly. A common spring creek scenario is to cast across surface weeds into an open channel. The angler can mend as much as he wants in this situation, but the weedbed is not going to move.

A second rule is to start with a slack line presentation before making the mend. If you wait until drag sets in, and then try to mend, the result is a longer—but really awful—drift. In my own mind, I think of mending as mending slack, rather than mending line. Especially when trying to make several mends in the same drift, it is critical to get ahead (and stay ahead) of drag. This often means the mending process is nearly continuous throughout the drift—any hesitation will allow the current to catch up and allow drag to ruin the float.

A final rule: don't make the same mend on every cast. Creating a drag-free presentation of a fly is challenging—and intriguing—because it requires the angler to consider so many variables: the position of the fish, possible angles of approach, wind direction, direction and speed of the current, etc. The angler must be a problem solver, adapting casting and line control techniques to each fishing situation.

One important application of this rule is to recognize the utility of downstream mends. When a fish is holding in faster current, and the cast must be made across slower water, a downstream mend is needed to keep line, leader, and fly moving at the same speed. In many cases, the best way to deal with slow water at your feet is to make a closer approach. That is, don't try to cast across a piece of slow water into faster water, but get close and reach across the slow water with the rod tip. However, it is reasonably common in spring creek and tailwater fishing to encounter a fish sitting on the edge of current, and the only possible approach is across a shallow flat with little current. A closer approach here will only spook the fish, and a command of downstream mending will be the only chance for success.

In the next article in this series, I will discuss the actual physical techniques for producing line mends, including methods for introducing additional slack once the line is on the water. I will also suggest some ideas for mending practice.