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### Mending Your Ways - part 3

#### Problems in Mending

In the first two articles in this series, I have explored both the rationale for mending line and the range of techniques used to produce such mends. For this article, I polled a number of the best guides I know and compared notes about the typical mistakes we see anglers make when mending line. I have noted the methods these guides use to help their clients deal with mending problems, and I will outline some practice routines that will improve mending technique and produce better line control.

Although most anglers get in the habit of making a cast and then throwing one mend into the line, one of the mistakes I see most often is the unwillingness of anglers to continue mending after a good drift is set up. Making several successive mends will often allow very long drifts of the fly—the key to these long drifts is to make each mend before the line comes tight, so that a bit of controlled slack is preserved throughout the presentation. Mend often enough to maintain controlled slack throughout the drift (or introduce additional slack with "stack" mends). Transforming your presentation from a few inches to several feet of natural drift can make a huge difference in the number of strikes elicited from the fish.

On the other hand, multiple mends work only if the angler starts with slack and maintains it through the drift. Nearly every guide I talked to pointed to the opposite problem—if the angler starts with a tight line, continual mends will only insure that the fly is dragging constantly throughout the drift. Guide Rod Zullo calls this "overmending", if the mending move drags or sinks the fly. He says he uses the phrase "mend lightly" to get his clients to think about repositioning the line without moving the fly out of position or drowning it completely.

Todd Wester told me he thinks (since their tight line mending produces continuous drag) many of his clients would actually be better off mending less or not at all. This approach involves making a straight line cast up and across or throwing a single mend and accepting short drifts with minimal drag. Several feet of good drift may be better than a few inches, but a few inches is better than no drift at all.

Rusty Vorous approaches the same problem from a different angle. He says the biggest mistake his clients make in mending is to push the rod tip sideways without lifting the line or introducing additional slack into the presentation, a technique that moves the fly and creates drag. However, rather than get his clients to minimize mending, he deals with this problem by getting them to make every mend a stack mend, teaching them to throw more slack into the presentation as a matter of course.

While most of the problems the guides pointed out are the result of mends that appear to be too energetic (since they cause drag or move the fly out of position), I often see

my own clients make mends that aren't energetic enough—they mend the fly line a few feet away from the rod tip but leave a downstream belly in the tip of the line or the leader (or in its most insidious form, just in the last few inches of the tippet). Even though they have gone through the motions of mending, this downstream belly will still cause drag. This is especially true of reach mends—an upstream reach used to position line, leader, and fly on a single line of current—when the wind is blowing upstream. The wind will tend to kick the fly upstream on light tippet, leaving a downstream belly in the leader or tippet. I would rather see a more aggressive mend that moves the mend all the way to the fly—a key skill for the advanced angler is the ability to do this without moving the fly off the target current line. Admittedly, this takes considerable time and practice to develop a feel for how much force is required at various distances.

If the mend does move the fly, try to make the mend early, when the fly is still several feet above the fish, not just as it comes to the fish's lie. A slight amount of drag and a refusal is better than spooking the fish completely by yanking the fly away with a poorly timed mend.

### **Mending Practice**

The only way to learn how to mend is to practice on moving water. As with casting, the angler would benefit a great deal from practicing technique without actually trying to catch fish at the same time, as worrying about the fish moves concentration away from technique. I realize few readers will take this advice, since fishing time is so precious, but it is good advice. At the very least, work on technique during a slow part of a fishing day to allow more concentration on the technique to be learned.

Use a buoyant, highly visible (but not oversized) fly for practice. You want the practice fly to float reasonably well, so you are not spending all your time redressing it, but it should drown (as a real fly would) if your mends produce too much drag. A Wulff or parachute style fly will allow you to see the fly easily and detect drag when it sets in. Finally, don't make the practice fly so large that surface tension keeps it anchored in place while you jerk the line and leader around with poorly executed mends. (If you don't want a fish to interrupt your practice, break the hook off at the bend.)

Practice mending both upstream and downstream, and try both types of mends from opposite sides of the stream, so that you practice mending to both sides of your body. If you are comfortable holding the rod (and casting) with your "off" hand, try mending with each hand, as this will give you extra control in some fishing situations.

For your practice sessions, try to find a stream with a variety of currents to work on. Even if you spend most of your time on spring creeks and tailwaters, a freestone stream with more variation in current speeds may be a better arena for mending practice. A small stream is an excellent place to start—drag itself is easier to see at close range, and short mends are easier to execute. Eventually, bigger water will be needed to practice pushing mends out to longer distances.

Practice with a nymph and indicator (or a dry fly/nymph combination) as well as a single dry fly, especially if this terminal tackle is a major part of your usual fishing technique. The sunken fly and surface tension helps anchor the indicator and allows the back end of the leader and fly line to be repositioned more easily, but mending will feel different with these rigs, and practice is important for using them successfully.

Mending is one of the central skills in fly fishing, and I have tried to explain the reasons and method for this technique, as well as some of the problems encountered when anglers apply it on the stream. The real key to mending effectively, is not in the arm or rod or line, but in the brain. The ability to analyze each new fishing situation—the fish's position, current speed, water depth, casting angle, etc.—and to figure out how to control line, leader, and fly to produce a natural drift is what mending (and fly fishing) is all about.