

STREAM ETIQUETTE – From Fling & Puterbaugh’s “Fly-Fisherman’s Primer”

FLY-FISHERS, HISTORICALLY, HAVE BEEN MEMBERS OF THE UPPER CLASSES, which is the sport’s blessing and curse. Because these early practitioners were from cultured backgrounds, fly-fishing evolved into a gentle, contemplative pursuit. Men, and later, women, acted in gentlemanly and ladylike fashion on the stream. Mannerly conduct is, historically, a part of fly-fishing and one of its real joys at present.

Unfortunately, the sport has also suffered because many thought it was only for those who wore ascots. It was assumed (and sometimes implied) that somehow fly-fishing was simply beyond the means and the understanding of us common folk. Some of that stigma remains, and we are constantly reminded of it when interested people often inquire whether they are capable of learning to fly-fish. Sometimes we even detect a note of concern about their “worthiness” to pursue such a lofty goal. It all needs to be put into perspective.

As we said in the introduction, fly-fishing transcends to boundaries of age, status or wealth. I isn’t so difficult that anyone with reasonable intelligence and hand and eye coordination can’t become proficient. On the other hand fly-fishing isn’t just another way of catching fish. It is more involved and requires more from the angler. To be a successful, complete fly-fisherman, you must expend time and effort to understand the fish, its behavior, and its environment. Then you will see that there is a heritage behind all that we do, a heritage that is worth preserving because it is what makes fly-fishing unique.

Our stream manner is the outward expression of that heritage and not only makes the sport more enjoyable for all of us, but serves to keep it the gentle sport that it is. Stream etiquette isn’t unique to those of us who fish with a fly. I have often shared a section of stream with spinner and bait fishers who displayed good manners. Neither is stream etiquette universal among fly-fishers; unfortunately, we can count some real slobs among our numbers. And there isn’t much difference between the slob and the snob; both represent our sport in its worst possible light. The rules of stream etiquette are nothing more than good common sense. But since they may entail things that the beginner might not think of, we’ll go over them so you will feel more comfortable on the stream.

TWO’S A CROWD

First of all, you should never crowd another angler. The temptation is sometimes very strong to fish the same water as those who are catching a lot of fish, but that is just as rude as cutting in on the serving line at a restaurant. Let’s say you come up to a pool where a fly-fisher is catching fish, or maybe it just looks like a good pool, but someone is already there. Most of us would stop well back from the edge so the fish wouldn’t stop eating and watch for a while. For one thing fly-fishing is a beautiful sport to watch, and, of course, we might learn something. If it’s a large pool, there is nothing wrong with quietly entering the water where the first person has already fished or going well beyond the angler and into a fresh section (*NKFF’s rule of thumb is to stay away at least a 100 feet or so*). If the pool isn’t large, you should go on to the next section (*of the stream – not that pool*) that you find fishable. I have often spent a pleasant day leap-frogging from pool to pool with another fisher that I didn’t know, watching him for a while as I passed “his” pools and he watching me as he passed “mine”.

BE FRIENDLY!

All fly-fishers have a common bond and should have an appreciation for the other members. If you meet another angler out of the stream, take a moment to share your experiences of the day. Maybe you can shed some light on the patterns that are working and contribute to his/her having a good day, or maybe he will share some insight he has gained that will improve your success. A nod of the head or a wave of the hand will serve as both a greeting and an acknowledgment of the others presence, if one of you is in the stream.

Perhaps more important than being friendly to other fly-fishers is being friendly towards other anglers who aren’t using flies. You may never know that the few minutes you spent talking with the non-fly-fisher and explaining a little about your equipment and the sport resulted in his conversion. But that’s how many of us got started.

My son and I were fishing the Elk River one year and had been having a banner day. We had caught and released dozens of fish and had decided to drive to another spot on the river when we met another fly-fisher coming along the bank. He was friendly, and when I asked how he had been doing he said that he had taken two or three fish but that things seemed to be slow today. I asked what fly he had been using, thinking that I would share our experience with him. He responded that he would rather not say. I then noticed that he had his fly cupped in his hand so that we couldn’t see it. I suppose that I should have been more charitable, but his selfishness ticked me off. So I decided not to mention what we had found to be the best pattern. We watched him for a while before we drove off, and, although he cast well and fished the right places, we didn’t see him take a fish.

I’ve never understood why some anglers are unsharing. Are they afraid that I’m going to catch all the fish and leave none for them? Do they somehow feel that the less successful others are, the more important their success becomes? I’ve just never been able to figure it out. Most of us delight in being able to help others by offering suggestions on what patterns and techniques work. Be one of us; we catch more fish (*sometimes*) and have more fun.

TAKE CARE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

The areas that we fly-fishers spend our time in are so beautiful; let’s keep them that way. Don’t ever litter. I know many fly-fishers who think nothing of picking up what litter they do find and carrying it out with them. It only takes a moment and will serve to keep the area as pretty as you’ve come to expect it. *NKFF’s rule of thumb for local trips is to pickup all trash where we park BEFORE we fish. We leave it in a garbage bag outside our car while we fish, then take it with us when we leave.*

RESPECT THE FISH

Any fish, be it denizen of cold-water, warm-water or saltwater, is a noble and worthy quarry, one which nature has blessed with temperament and instinct that make it a real challenge. Let’s preserve it! Many areas of the country now have restrictive laws regarding limits, and it goes without saying that the fly-fisher must adhere to those laws. If you truly enjoy pursuing the fish, why keep any? They are a renewable resource, but, more important, you are assured of continuing fishing pleasure, for yourself and your sons and daughters.

As you can see, the basics of stream etiquette are very simple. Be considerate of your fellow fishers *and the property through which the stream flows*, and you’ll always be a welcome stream companion.

“put ‘em back alive!”

CATCH-AND-RELEASE FISHING

By following a few simple rules you can be certain that released fish will live to be caught again. Remember that a fish that appears unharmed when released may not survive in not carefully handled.

1. **TIME is of the essence.** Play and release fish as rapidly as possible. A fish out of water cannot live for more than three or four minutes because of brain damage due to loss of oxygen. A fish played gently for too long may be too exhausted to recover.
2. **KEEP the fish in the water** as much as possible. A fish out of water is suffocating and, in addition, is many times heavier. It may pound itself fatally if allowed to flop on the beach or rocks. Even a few inches of water under a thrashing fish acts as a protective cushion.
3. **GENTLENESS** in handling is essential. Keep your fingers out of the gills. Do not squeeze small fish – they can be lifted and held easily holding them by the lower lip. Nets are helpful provided the mesh does not become entangled in the gills. Hooks and lines catching in nets may delay releasing, so keep the net in the water
4. **UNHOOKING:** Remove the hook as rapidly as possible with long-nosed pliers **UNLESS THE FISH IS DEEPLY HOOKED.** If deeply hooked, cut the leader and leave the hook in the fish. Do not tear out hooks roughly, Be gentle and quick. Small fish, especially, may die from shock from tearing out a hook. A freely bleeding fish should be killed and kept for the pan (*unless prohibited by law*).
5. **REVIVING:** Some fish, especially after a long struggle, may lose consciousness and float belly-up. Always hold the fish in the water upright, heading upstream. Move the fish forward and backward so that water runs through the gills. This is artificial respiration and may take a few minutes, especially in lakes. When it revives, begins to struggle and can swim normally, then release it to survive and challenge another fisher. You have done your job very well.

NKFF recommends using any of the hook disgorgers offered in many flyfishing catalogs. The “Ketchum Release” tools are very handy and easy to use.