

The Adaptive Caster
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Weighty Adjustments

The first time I tried to cast a heavily weighted fly was a humbling experience. I had become quite confident from my entire backyard casting practice, watching my jaunty little piece of yarn scoot out behind the loop like the ribbon in my daughter's pigtail. But then the scene changed to the big river, with big fish and big flies. My fishing buddy had just discovered what the smallmouth were taking. He was nailing them - big bronze brawlers - and I wasn't. In a blend of gloating and mercy, he tossed one of flies up to me. It hit the bottom of the canoe with a resounding thud. Uh Uh...

I was horrified at the creature in my hand. It was a mutant Woolly Bugger, a Darth Vader of streamers. It couldn't have been made for a fly rod. It had dumbbell eyes I could have done curls with, an oversized hook, and enough chenille, rubber, and Crystal Flash to be entered in a parade. How was I supposed to get this thing moving? Even if I could, it would surely bonk me on the back of the head, bang the side of the canoe, or fly off like a stray bullet.

And it did all those things, all afternoon. My 'Nam veteran buddy didn't help by continually yelling, "Incomiiiiing." I was exhausted and shell-shocked on the ride home, and longed for the controlled environment of backyard casting. After two days of self-pity, I pinched some shot on the leader of my practice rod, dug through my casting books, and attacked the weight problem. I've learned a little since that day. I'm still no expert, but at least I didn't have to buy a hardhat and I save more energy for gym workouts and honey-do lists. I'll summarize.

First, don't abandon your casting fundamentals; just adapt them. Fly-casting, even with weighted nymphs and streamers is nevertheless a process of unrolling a flexible line to a target. The fly may offer resistance or ballistic belligerence because of its bulk or weight, but you then must adjust your basic cast to impart just enough energy through the loop to keep the fly aloft and to turn it over at the end of the cast. Don't expect to make the same graceful, calligraphy loops you do with a #18 Adams. But you can learn to cope with the weight, actually use it to load the rod, and sling it a fair distance.

What follows applies to heavy weighted streamers and nymphs. The same adjustments, with some variation, apply to sinking lines and to bulky air-resistant flies. Compared to an unweighted fly, a weighted fly sinks and falls faster, is harder to get moving and harder to stop and turn around. You must adjust to each of these properties.

It sinks deeply in the water.

That's why we are fishing with it. The mass of the fly and the water tension on that long column of line and leader flexes the rod heavily as you try to pick up the line. As the fly breaks through the water surface, the resistance is dramatically reduced, and your effort launches it out of the water column like a sub-based missile. Your rod seems to recoil into your back cast, and that can cause you to rush back to catch up. This premature overloading and recoil, i.e. jerky acceleration, can give you a world class tailing loop and start a chain reaction in your false casting that is not pretty.

* Adjustment: Lift or roll cast the fly to the surface before picking it up. Don't try to pick the fly through the water column and back cast in one roaring motion. And don't try to pick up as much line as you would with a lightly weighted fly. Roll cast the line to surface; roll cast twice if you have to. Even if you can't roll cast it, lift the line smoothly to the surface. As soon as the fly is at or near the surface and at a low angle behind line/leader connection, load the rod using the surface water tension as an anchor, and back cast immediately but smoothly. You are performing the loading portion of a water haul cast. Don't let the fly sink back or you will have to dredge it up again. Resist the temptation to yank the fly out of the water with great power. Too much power too early in the stroke leads to tailing loops and tangles. Don't make it worse.

You can also use the water haul at the end of the back cast. Let the back cast line touch down on the water without letting the fly sink and then start loading of the rod coming forward. Don't allow the fly to rest more than a second or two. To get a long graceful forward stroke, reach back with the rod until the tip is almost touching the water. Just as the line is about to come off the water, accelerate forward. This maneuver gives you room to make a long forward stroke and minimizes the need to false cast. If you are fishing in a stream, let the current swing the fly to the surface on a downstream drift, reach back, pick up smoothly, and make your water haul directly back up stream. It is particularly helpful if you are wading deep, where the backcast has a tendency to hit the water anyway.

It falls quickly in the air.

Unless it is being pulled along smartly by the unrolling loop, the weighted fly is headed to the center of the earth. That gives you two problems. One, timing at the end of the stroke becomes more critical. Waiting too long to come forward on the back cast for example will allow the fly to drop sharply and "hinge" the line. Coming forward too soon will give you and the rod tip a real jolt when the fly gets yanked back in the opposite direction. Problem number two is that the fly tends to fall gradually even during its straight flight. Like a heavy bullet it will crash short of the target.

* Adjustment: Keep line tension throughout the cast. Watch the back cast closely. Try to make the back cast flow into the forward stroke seamlessly. Don't drift the rod very far after you stop on the back cast and don't shoot a lot of line on the back cast.

This is the place for the Belgian cast, also called the elliptical or oval cast. With this cast, you make a sidearm back cast and sweep it around at the end into an overhead delivery on the forward cast. Instead of stopping to wait for the back cast to unroll, you pull the line and fly through a rounded path at the end of the back cast to make the change in direction less abrupt. This allows you to maintain constant pressure on the line. Since there is no pause at the end of the back cast, there is less time for the fly to drop. Because you make the back and forward movements in different planes, there is less likelihood of the fly hitting you and the line tangling and you can throw a wider range of different trajectories on the forward cast. Detailed directions for performing the Belgian cast are found in "Casting Circles: The Oval" by Tom Jindra in the Summer 2001 issue of the Flyfisher (FFF) magazine and on page 105 in Mel Krieger's The Essence of Fly Casting.

* Adjustment: Throw a wider loop. This doesn't mean a reversion to the sloppy crescent loops we experienced as beginners. This is a well-energized candy cane; smoothly unrolling without wiggles and kinks, but a foot or so taller to keep the fly farther overhead and moderate how violently it turns over. The line unrolling around a large loop is moving more slowly than around a tight loop and is meeting more air resistance. It slows down more easily and gives the fly more room to make its turnover at the end of the cast. To get a more open loop start your power snap, a.k.a. speed-up-and-stop a little earlier in the stroke and don't stop the cast so abruptly.

* Adjustment: Tilt the rod slightly off vertical. This moves the rod tip's (and thus the line's) path outside your shoulder on your casting side. There is less chance of a fly hitting you even if it drops too low. You can return the forward cast off vertical or use the elliptical cast to swing back around to a vertical forward stroke. (See Belgian Cast description).

* Adjustment: Incline the forward cast a little. As the loop turns over and the leader extends itself, the energy pulling the fly horizontally is fading fast. However, gravity is still pulling the fly vertically and can dump it in the water too early. You must give the leader plenty of room to turn over the fly and let it drop into the target. So you have to make sure you have enough incline in the forward cast trajectory. Don't raise the forward cast too much or try to push the cast up at the end of the cast or you'll be squeezing the space in which the rod has to flex and then unload – a recipe for a tailing loop. Just tilt the whole cast a tad - back cast a little down, forward cast a little up - to give you more tolerance out where the fish is.

It resists the unrolling of the loop.

You need a peppy loop to get and keep a heavy fly moving. You may need as much as 25% more power, but getting it is not a matter of just casting harder. You have to get the rod to help you. It is not just how much you bend the rod, but also how well you bend the rod that gives you effective power. This is especially critical with a heavy load where the rod's flex reaches down into the butt. If you try to get that power by shocking the rod (applying power and letting up too early), stroking short, or punching out front at end of your the cast, you can make the rod tip dip and then spring back. This sends the loop unrolling back on itself ...a classic tailing loop made worse since the tail now has weight of its own. If you try to get the power by making a big sweeping motion with your arm, you throw the loop open into an inefficient mess. If you cast too timidly, perhaps hoping that if you don't aggravate the fly, it won't come back and thump you, the fly may drop in flight and do what you most wanted to avoid.

* Adjustment: Lengthen and smooth out your stroke. Adapt principle of “long casts - long strokes”. You must give the rod enough time to fully flex and then unload without acutely dipping it and letting it spring back up.

Don't try to get rid of the fly quickly and forcefully just because it's big and ugly. And don't try to clip the stroke off at the end, perhaps a conditioned reflex from our “chuck and duck” encounters with weighted flies. A short, powerful stroke will flex the rod drastically in a short distance, dip the rod tip frantically, and send a loop out front with a tail between its legs. Take time with a longer stroke to reach down in the rod and coax those expensive graphite fibers into service. Try to feel the weight of the line and fly through the rod butt into your hand rather than out at the tip. You will probably have to open your stance and tilt the rod to the side a little to extend your stroke, but it will be worth it.

Smoothing out the stroke is also important. Every sharp move with the rod against that stubborn lump of metal can result in bumps and zigzags in the line. Be deliberate yet fluid in your stroke, as if you were painting a big line across the sky without leaving dabs and blotches. Anticipate the end of the backstroke where the fly gets yanked around and be ready to start forward when you feel the clunk behind as the fly straightens out. Watch the back cast and forward cast for signals about how to adjust and smooth out the cast. Keep the stroke long to give yourself a more time to smooth out slack in the line. Don't punch the cast at the end of the stroke. Think more of sliding or slinging it, as if you were casting a piece of peanut butter. Easier said than done, but that's what practice is for. Take a weighted fly out in the yard or to the practice water and work on it.

It keeps moving, once it gets moving.

Casting a weighted fly is like towing a vehicle with a rope. The vehicle behind will continue in its path even though the tower has started to stop or to turn. A sharp change in direction, like the end of the back cast, is very dicey. If a weighted fly has emotions, it wouldn't enjoy the experience. It will swing wildly and tug against the rod tip spasmodically, creating slack that plague the rest of the cast. At the end of cast, as the leader turns over, the fly keeps on going down, i.e. “kicks” down and “hinges” the leader. This tendency can be used if you want to drive the fly deep into the water. (See the casting literature about “tuck” casts.) But, if it happens on the back cast, it becomes doubly difficult to start forward stroke well.

* Adjustment: Minimize or eliminate false casting. The more false casts you make, the more times you change the line's direction and the more opportunity the fly has to act like a puppy on a leash. Because things are moving more quickly, timing is more critical, and you get tired, errors often accumulate through a series of false casts. Besides, the fish are in the water, not overhead, and that's where you want the fly to be.

If you do false cast, do not carry a lot of line overhead. Don't allow more than the belly and a couple feet of running line out of the guides. Shoot the rest. The difference in energy transmission between the belly and the running line can become critical when you are hauling weight around over your head. Also, tiny errors in direction are magnified through a longer line. If the fly loses tension and drops at the end of a stroke on a long line, it is really low by the time it (hopefully) passes you.

* Adjustment. Round the path of the fly and keep constant tension on the stroke. (See the Belgian cast description above). Use the O-ring technique with the thumb and forefinger of the line hand to maintain contact with the line and keep it from tangling in the guides.

Tackle Adjustments

Try a heavier line and/or a more abrupt taper. A heavier line can help load the rod more easily and carry weighted flies better at longer distances. Try one size larger than the nominal rod rating. Lines with shorter and steeper front tapers turn over heavy flies more easily. For fishing with weighted nymphs at close range, say 30 feet away or less, you can still use a pretty light line.

Shorten the leader to 6 feet or less. With subsurface flies, you don't have to worry as much about drag-free drift or leader-shy fish. Better yet, change your leader to one with a heavier butt and a heavier tippet. If you have to use a long leader, for example in drifting nymphs, keep the loop open and controlled to avoid tangles.

Consider a heavier and stiffer rod. I like a slower rod to help get the rod loaded into the butt sooner and to encourage throwing bigger controlled loops, but you may prefer a faster rod. Don't go overboard unless you are going to be fishing a lot with the big stuff. Most of us switch between light and heavy flies during a day's fishing without the luxury (or taking the time) to change rods, so it is more reasonable to concentrate on adjusting the casting than on buying an arsenal of rods and lines for an array of fly types. You'll end up carrying more tubes and making more trips back and to the vehicle than a Federal Express driver.

Always wear a hat and sunglasses. And use barbless flies. You could get hit. And if you need to pull the fly out of your hide, the going is a little easier.

Don't be put off by the number of adjustments. As always, the devil, or getting rid of him, is in the details. However the adjustments described here come quite naturally and seem to complement one another. Before you know it, you will be launching those heavy streamers and nymphs rigs out there with grace and confidence. Just about the time your buddy starts catching them on #26 midges....

MINI-CLINIC AND PRACTICE CARD CASTING WEIGHTED FLIES

1. Roll cast to the surface and water haul.
2. Cast in an oval – side cast back, around a circle, vertical cast in front
3. Apply power in long and smooth strokes.
4. Keep constant tension throughout both strokes – back and front. Learn the Belgian cast.
5. Minimize or eliminate false casting – shoot the line more for distance.
6. Open the loop, but keep it controlled.
7. Incline the forward cast a little.

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