

Destination Casting—Planning and Practice for Fly Fishing Trips

by Dave Cleaves

Many of us have a fly-fishing bucket list — places we would love to fish and different species to pursue. Too rarely and maybe magically we have an opportunity to make one of those dream trips happen. In all the excitement and details of planning the trip, we should not forget to brush up and perhaps adjust our casting skills for the new experience.

Fishing in new places can be fun. And frustrating. Nature did not arrange trees, channels, currents, and rocks to make casting easier for you, just because you are on vacation. It can be disappointing to rudely discover casting challenges and conditions you had not bargained for.

If you want all your surprises on the dream trip to be positive, do a little research on the kinds of situations you will be casting in and get in some casting practice focused on meeting those conditions. The time spent in working through unfamiliar moves can give you more appreciation for what it takes and more confidence in your ability to handle it. That is better than trying to learn a new casting stroke in real time – combat casting – which can detract from the enjoyment of the trip and instill bad habits that carry over into future fishing. For example, it is better to have confronted a hard wind pounding you erratically from multiple directions by practicing in windy conditions. It can help you rediscover and reinforce the reality that success is not about casting harder – which usually leads to tangles and tired arms – but about adjusting your form to maintain efficient loops and keeping slack out of the casting stroke.

I try to practice meeting expected situations before every fishing trip. One reason is that I have the athletic ability of a downed log and muscle memory that is fleeting at best. The other is that unless I force myself to try new things, I'll revert to the same familiar moves which often don't work in new situations.

New destinations offer many opportunities for fly-casting freak outs:

- Heavy flies, awkward multiple fly rigs, and sinking lines
- Moving water – fast, uneven, and intersecting currents, tidal flows, wind-driven waves
- Uncooperative fish – always moving, hiding in hard-to reach places, spooky, generally not playing fairly
- Obstacles – zombie vegetation that surrounds and closes in, and fly-hungry trees
- Boats that pivot and pitch or cluttered with gear, beloved fishing partners, protrusions that tangle lines
- Slippery, uneven wading
- Wind – not just straight-on resistance but also that annoying shuffling of loose line on the boat deck or in your hand or nasty ruffling of your casting loops as they try to unroll
- Others...? I have a list of my own bad surprises and mistakes. It is very long and full of regrets.

Depending on the kind of fishing you are headed to, here are some casting skills you may want to work on:

- **Trout:** Accuracy at different distances, roll casts to help you deal with obstructions behind you or quickly pick up line from the water, and reach mends to position your line in faster current between you and the fish to allow the fly to drift unhampered by the current.

- **Bass:** Hauling - pulling the line with the opposite hand - to speed it up against resistance (big buoyant flies) or meet distance challenges, and oval or elliptical back casts to keep weighted lines and flies from banging the back of your head or tangling on the forward stroke.
- **Saltwater:** Hauling and making longer strokes to cast bigger flies longer distances; dealing with wind from all angles including minimizing false casting; picking line off the water quickly and stripping line back faster to attract moving fish.

You know how to cast, right? If the answer is no, don't be afraid to get some instructions. Look at the range of different casting movements and skills in the [Fly Fishers International \(FFI\) Casting Challenge and Learning Center](#) and on the [Casting Challenge Overview and Practice Guide](#) on the SVTU website for how-to text and video references. There are many great casting skills books available including those from Orvis, LL Bean, and other sources that describe these casts and line handling moves and how to apply them on the water. The FFI has [a network of certified instructors](#) who can give you preparation advice and in-person help in tuning up for the trip. These instructors – located all over the world—stay connected with each other and may be able to help you find another instructor or other contact in the area you are headed. As an FFI instructor, I have many times worked with colleagues to help a person prepare for an upcoming trip to their area. And there are several recurring casting clinics available locally to help work through issues or try new casts. Fly casting clinics are regularly offered by [Antietam Fly Anglers](#) (MD), [Tidal Potomac Fly Rodders](#) (DC metro), [Goose Creek Casting Club](#) (VA), [Potomac Valley Fly Fishers](#) (MD), and our own Seneca Valley Chapter of Trout Unlimited.

If you are an experienced caster, you may think that worrying about casting might somehow spoil the thrill of anticipating the trip for a lifetime. Could it really be that different from the casting situations you have already encountered? Don't take a chance. A long cast on your home water may not be long enough in your destination waters. The wind you avoided by choosing days and places at home may not be avoidable on a trip that lasts a couple of days or even a week.

Even if your trip involves the tutelage of a good guide, don't expect him or her to correct your casting in real time. You have to do your own preparation and learn when and how to ask for help. You don't want to waste precious time correcting casting flaws or pawing out line tangles when the fish of a lifetime glides into your casting vision.

Surprise your guide and your fellow travelers. Practice before hand. The heart of the grumpiest guides can be softened by a client who casts well and can respond to their advice on presentation. Practice helps you prepare in privacy and allows you to get in touch with a variety of casting moves and the feedback you get from the line and loop. You may not have the time to master different casts, but you'll be better able to ask for help as you work through the challenges of a new place.

You can borrow the experiences of others to help set up your practices and start to wrap you mind and body into what it feels like to cast in those settings. Both brain and body may be less inclined to waste time being surprised and ready to make needed adjustments when new challenges arise.

Call ahead. Ask your guide or someone else who has fished there to describe the conditions you are likely to encounter. Ask about the types of water, flies and rigging to be used, casting distances, boats or wading situations, maybe even specific casts or line-handling that might be important. You can translate this information into casting drills and get a feel for what you will be experiencing.

Watch online videos about your destination or places like it. Watch them twice, once for the dazzling big fish sequences, and again to note the conditions and techniques being portrayed and how the participants are casting.

Use local waters as training environments. Moving water in local creeks offer opportunities to improve presentation casts and mends even though it may be for bass and sunfish rather than trout in the Rockies. Local ponds and lakes offer plenty of targets for sharpening accuracy at all distances with a realistic array of obstructions and conditions. Casting to our local carp or smallmouth bass in low, clear water can provide great preparation in positioning, stealth, accuracy at longer distances, and coping with wind.

Mix it up. Casting in unfamiliar conditions may demand constantly changing line lengths, positions, fly sizes and weights. The need for adjustments in casting change come unexpectedly as weather, current, casting barriers, and other combinations of factors remix. The flexibility to adjust from one set of casting moves to another a skill that can be improved through practice. Sports performance research has shown that practice that varies the context – e.g. casting to targets at different distances in different orders – improves overall accuracy and helps retain the skill longer. So don't be afraid to mix it up in your practice; you can bet that the water of your dream trip is not going to hand you targets the size of hula hoops at a predictable 30 feet out.

Some preparation can prime you to recognize those lessons in the making and extend the value of that dream trip beyond the photos and memories of beautiful settings and exciting fishing. Once you have had to recenter your casting principles and skills in a new situation, you have gained confidence to handle “new” places back home, waters you may have passed up in the past. It never hurts to be able to handle the wind – a gift from your first bone fishing trip. Or to be able to change tempo and shoot moving and varied targets from a drift boat – a takeaway from that trip on fast moving Western rivers that can only help you back home with smallmouth on local float trips.

So, try prepping your casting for the next trip. Do the research. Anticipate the kinds of situations. Start early. And work through the unfamiliar casting demands. You will have more fun on your trip and probably return with some lessons in casting and new confidence that you can apply to your fishing in local waters... or the next trip in your bucket list.

Have fun. Write to make me jealous.

Dave

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