

A GUIDE TO FISHING AT HALLINGTON

RECOMMENDED FLIES, METHODS AND TACTICS

BY

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INTRODUCTION

The two reservoirs at Hallington are relatively low in nutrients, the water is generally quite clear with a light peat stain. The main aquatic fly life is midges and sedges with smaller numbers of upwings (including mayfly) and occasionally stonefly. In a water with fairly low productivity, terrestrial insects are an important food source for the trout. Terrestrials are blown or fly in from the surrounding trees and farmland and fall onto the water surface, sometimes in large numbers, and this soon results in rising trout.

The shortage of aquatic food and the steady trickle of terrestrials results in a trout population that are generally looking towards the surface for their food. When conditions are right and fish are rising, good sport can be had with a dry fly. Since many insects trapped in the surface film are small and black, it follows that small black flies fished on or close to the surface are a good starting point. When there is a large fall or hatch of one particular type of insect the fish can become a bit more selective and a close copy of the food item may be needed.

It is surprising how close to the bank the trout will come, often into water only knee deep. However, being water supply reservoirs, the two lakes can be subject to large fluctuations in water level and this can upset some of our theories about trout behaviour and where our quarry may be found. Nevertheless, it pays to have a few casts before wading in and not to wade too deep or you may be standing where you should be fishing! It is sometimes best not to wade at all. Trout that are close in are probably feeding or looking for food but they must also feel safe from cormorant predation. Cormorants generally attack trout from below and behind but they can't do this in shallow water. However, attack from above by ospreys is a different matter. We shouldn't begrudge these magnificent birds the occasional trout and it is always interesting to watch them fish the lakes, hovering here and there until making a mighty crash dive onto the unsuspecting victim.

Whatever the season, be prepared to move around the lakes and change methods/fly until you find fish and get a response. A big mistake is to flog away in one spot with a particular method if you are not getting takes. Just because a fly worked there one week, doesn't mean that it is going to work the next. When walking the banks however, make sure that any anglers you are passing know you are there, they could be about to propel their backcast in your direction! Watch the water for rising fish. If you see one along the bank, mark the spot and go and fish for it, in short, always cover a rising fish as soon as you can. They are probably feeding and are catchable if you can get your flies over them before they move on.

TACKLE

Rods, reels and lines are largely a matter of personal preference and you generally get what you pay for, so buy the best you can afford. Rods rated 5-7 up to 10' long will all do the job with the longer rod handy for fishing from the dam walls where a high backcast may be needed. At times you may want to cast a long way so weight-forward lines are preferred. The

current large-arbour trend has produced a lot of overweight fly reels and even those labelled 'lightweight' by the manufacturer can weigh more than you think. There is little point in buying the latest 3 ounce rod only to lumber it with a half-pound reel. Go for the lightest you can find, your wrist and elbow will thank you for it. A note on using tackle, the club has several members who are qualified instructors and a couple of hours of casting instruction can save a lot of frustration in the long run. Learn how to cast properly from the start to avoid developing bad habits! Check out the club's website at www.westwaterangling.co.uk for details and other items of news and interest. For more up-to-the-minute information on the fishing, have a chat to anyone in the car park, we are a friendly bunch!

A line tray is very useful when bank fishing but it is surprising how few anglers use them. They will add yards onto your cast with no extra effort, prolong the life of your valuable flylines and are a boon when wading with both floating and especially sinking lines. Other essential items are polarising sunglasses, a wide-brimmed hat and a tube of high factor sun cream. Always protect your eyes especially on a windy day when a stray fly could hit you in the face. Baseball caps are very fashionable nowadays but they do little to protect the ears and sides of the face from the sun, far better stick to a wide-brimmed hat on sunny summer days. Use the chinstrap to prevent it blowing off when it is windy. Speaking of clothing, be prepared for inclement weather and dress appropriately, buy the best waterproofs you can afford, cheap ones may let you down eventually.

This is probably a good time to mention leader material. There is a vast range of monofilament line available. For many anglers, standard nylon has been overtaken by fluorocarbon and co-polymer which are both thinner for a given breaking strain. They are more expensive than standard monofilament but the cost is small compared to what you have spent already on rods, reels, flylines and membership. Fluorocarbon has the advantage of sinking quickly (ideal for early season nymphing) and is quite stiff. This means that tangles and wind knots are relatively easy to undo. Co-polymer is more like standard mono but stronger, it floats if greased and eventually sinks if left untreated. Whichever you use, go for a clear or pale green variety. The old brownish-purple 'Maxima Chameleon' is a great line for sea-fishing but trout can see it from a mile off. If you are a user, you could double your catch rate if you switch to a clear leader material. Maxima make clear and pale green versions of Chameleon so why not try those?

Any fish caught and killed can be 'spooned' and the stomach contents examined. Wash the marrow spoon contents into a small white plastic dish half full of water. Even though you may have caught it on something totally different to its chosen food items, this can still provide valuable information, especially if the fishing gets difficult later in the day. This is when a close imitation may work a lot better than a lure or more general pattern.

APRIL AND MAY

For the first few weeks of the season, a wide variety of lures will take fish. In fact lures will take fish right through the season and some anglers fish nothing else. On cold windy days it can help to get the flies down to the fish and this means fishing some 4 to 6 feet deep. Unless flies are fished slowly and are heavily weighted, a floating line is often not suitable and a sink-tip or an intermediate is a better option. If you don't have a sink-tip line, it is worth carrying a selection of 'Poly Leaders'. These are available in various lengths and densities and when added to the end of your floating line, will convert it into a sinking tip line. If you are not occasionally snagging up on the bottom, you are probably not fishing deep enough. Be prepared to lose a few flies.

To help avoid snags it is possible to fish a booby or some other buoyant fly on a fairly short leader using a sinking line. Because fish tend to swallow this type of fly, this method should only be used if you intend to kill the fish you catch, and it is not a suitable technique for catch-and-release. If you intend to release fish, always use barbless or debarbed hooks, barbs are easily crushed down with a small pair of pliers or artery forceps. To protect the fish, there are specific instructions on catch-and-release in the clubhouse and in the rule book. In fact, all members should take the time to familiarise themselves with all of the rules. Many anglers think that when using barbless hooks, fish will be lost too easily. In fact the loss rate is pretty much the same as barbed hooks and I fish barbless nearly all the time. There is a lot written about the effects of catch-and-release on a fishery. My personal opinion is that it helps keep a fishery sustainable but can also make the fish wary of the angler's fly. However, the fish still have to eat and it is up to us to make our offerings look and behave like natural food items. In doing so, this will surely make us better anglers.

Some effective early-season lures are: Cat's Whisker, Viva, Black Fritz, Yellow Dancer, Dawson's Olive, Olive Tadpole, Irving's Inducer etc. The list is endless but after catching fish on one particular colour, be prepared to change to a different coloured lure if the fish lose interest.

If you don't care for lure fishing and sinking lines, a floating line and a long leader with 2 or 3 weighted flies will usually work well if conditions are suitable. First choices might be Montana Nymph, Hare's Ear nymph with a gold bead head, Stick Fly, Leaded Shrimp etc. Choice of fly is not as important as the depth it is fished at. The fish are hungry and curious at this time of the year, are mostly freshly stocked, and will have a go at most things provided you fish at their level. Another effective method is the bung where flies are suspended under a floating indicator. ThiLike it or loathe it, this technique has taken fly fishing by storm. On its day it is devastatingly effective with many anglers using nothing else on stocked stillwaters. For the thinking angler it should just be another method to have in the repertoire, to be used when appropriate, along with everything else. Although it is a relatively modern method of fishing and has been likened to using a coarse angler's float, it would probably suit the physically less-able and older angler since casting and retrieving can be reduced to a minimum with a reduction in fatigue and the resulting aches and pains.

Mild settled weather early in the season may result in a few rising fish and these will probably be taking hatching midges (buzzers) or small terrestrial beetles. Both are difficult to see on the water surface but empty midge pupa shucks floating by in the surface film should give you a clue. A Shipman's Buzzer and a Foam Beetle fished on the surface, both size 14 or 16 and black, should work well. Other dries to try in similar sizes would be a CDC Shuttlecock or an 'F' Fly. Alternatively, try a small black or olive midge pupa suspended 2-4 feet down under a large dry fly as an indicator. A size 10 Klinkhamer with an orange wing post is a good choice for an indicator. Fish static or retrieve very slowly. The midge pupa artificial is often called a 'buzzer' but it is actually the adult fly which buzzes when in flight.

Once fish are up in the water, more general unweighted patterns can be fished off a floating line, for example, Diawl Bach, Cruncher, Black and Peacock Spider, Hare's Lug, Pheasant Tail Nymph etc. Established wet flies are also very effective and some of the oldest are well worth a swim. A Bibio will catch fish anywhere, anytime. Add Zulus, Blue Zulus, Clan Chief, Invicta, Ken Muter's 'Dribbler' etc. to your fly box. It is always worth having a few casts at the inflow points where fish may congregate but be aware of the 'catch three fish only' rule in these areas.

The first major falls of terrestrial flies usually occur during May and this will please those anglers who prefer the visual experience of dry fly fishing. Hawthorn flies will appear on the water surface during the warmer days and the fish will feed heavily on them. The 'Hallington Hawthorn', Black Hoppers and greased-up Black and Peacock Spiders will all catch their fair share of fish. These are generally tied on size 10 and 12 hooks. Watch out for the smaller black gnat which can appear at the same time and usually outnumbers the hawthorn fly. A size 16 imitation is needed for this fly. A Double Knotted Black Gnat is also a very effective pattern and floats well. The best place to fish is the bank with the wind blowing from behind you. This is where the naturals will first appear on the water and where the fish will expect to find them, especially along the ripple edge a few yards out. A simple choice of fly and the wind from behind makes for easy and memorable fishing but make the most of it because it only lasts a few short weeks. In years with a cold wet spring, Hawthorn flies and Black Gnats may only appear in small numbers or even not at all.

Another fly you may come across in late April, early May and later in the summer is the dung fly. This is rather like a small housefly but yellowish brown in colour and it pays to have one or two imitations in the fly box just in case. A dubbed yellow body and a brown cock hackle on a size 12 or 14 hook will do the job if greased to float. Finally, don't forget that all brown trout must be released if caught during April. This is not a club rule but is written into the local fishery bylaws. On the plus side, they can be killed right up to the end of October, rather than only up to the end of September.

JUNE AND JULY

Good fishing can be had in early summer. Providing conditions are right, a couple of dry flies on a 12-14 foot leader of 6lb fluorocarbon would be my first choice. Warm conditions, light winds and cloudy skies mean the fish will be near the surface looking upwards for food. The first significant hatches of sedges are occurring in the evenings and aphids, beetles and mayfly are present by day. Large numbers of small black terrestrial flies are also present. Many of these have a touch of orange or red on them and this is worth adding to your imitations. Particularly successful dry flies are the G&H Sedge (orange body) and Sedgehogs with body colours of orange, yellow, brown, green and black. A size 12 is generally the most useful. Smaller flies tied in sizes 14 and 16 include Grey Duster, Griffiths Gnat and Black Gnat. If you tie your own flies, try a size 16 or 18 green-bodied Griffiths Gnat as an aphid imitation. Spoon your fish and tie imitations of what you find. The fish can get quite selective at times, especially when feeding on aphids so a good imitation is often needed. If you do see the large mayfly hatching, don't automatically put on an artificial. In my experience the fish seem to be quite scared of such a large fly and only rarely take the adults here. I have only occasionally found an adult fly or nymph inside a fish. It is still worth carrying one or two imitations just in case, as I have spoken to fellow members who have had some good fishing with them.

Of course there will be days that are unsuitable for dry fly fishing and some conditions can make fishing difficult. My least favourite would be a combination of strong gusty winds and bright sunshine. The strong wind can limit the places available for fishing for the bank angler and the brightness keeps the fish away from the surface. In these conditions I would try to fish in deep water, especially from the dam walls, using early season tactics. I would always include a size 10 or 12 midge pupa or bloodworm on the point of my leader. Midges hatch throughout the season and pupae or empty shucks are almost always present in 'spoonings'. Try various colours such as black, olive, red, brown and ginger until you get a response. Keep on the move, take a pace or two each cast and cover plenty of bank. Don't get rooted to one spot unless you are sure there are catchable fish in front of you. When you do get a fish, always have a few more casts in that place in case you have come across a small shoal of takers. Bear in mind that tentative takes and plucks when fishing near the bottom could be from small perch so if you can't hook the takes or if you catch one, move a few yards away from the shoal. Carefully let go any you catch, they are valuable food for the large brown trout that inhabit the lakes and may also help tempt the cormorants away from our trout.

Another insect to watch out for in June is the damsel fly. The adult male is a bright electric blue and the female is a drab olive in colour. The fly has a large olive-coloured aquatic nymph that swims to shore to hatch into the adult. The swimming motion is similar to a small fish and they generally swim just under the surface. This makes them an easy target for feeding trout and the result may be a splashy rise which can be mistaken for a rise to a large surface fly. An imitation of a damsel nymph or a small olive tadpole fished off a floating line should produce results.

During calm July and August evenings you will probably see a blizzard of small white flies coming off the water, this is the 'Angler's Curse' or Caenis to give it its proper name. Once the trout switch on to these tiny upwing flies they become very selective and getting them to take an artificial of any description becomes almost impossible. Probably your best bet is to skate a large dry sedge past their noses in the hope of distracting one. You may catch the occasional fish but it can be very frustrating and the best answer is usually to go to the pub!

Also in July and sometimes earlier, small coarse fish (pin-fry) may appear, these will be perch or dace and are sometimes present in large shoals. They are very noticeable when the water is flat calm and cause small dimples and ruffles on the water surface. Trout can occasionally be seen taking them by swimming along at the surface and trying to grab them. Small fish imitations can work very well at times, either floating or below the surface. Try a deer-hair or foam-backed imitation at the surface tied on size 10 or 12 nymph hooks. Size 10 Peter Ross, Silver Invicta or Sinfoil's Fry should work below the surface.

AUGUST AND SEPTEMBER

The quality of fishing during the summer months really depends on the weather and it is now that using the boats can be a real advantage. On long hot days the fishing can be difficult but a boat gives easy access to deep cool water where fish are more likely to be lurking. A return to deeply fished lures, boobies and the like will often produce fish when the sun is beating down and all seems hopeless. Watch out for the large shallow area towards the west end of the west lake, you could damage your propeller or run aground! For bank fishing, it is often the evenings that offer the best chance of some sport, especially with the already mentioned dry sedge patterns. Plan to fish from mid-afternoon until as late as the rules allow during a hot calm spell. During cooler cloudy conditions dry fly sport can be good throughout the day and as well as sedges, a crane fly imitation or Daddy-Long-Legs should be on your leader. Patterns tied with a foam body are excellent and can provoke some violent rises especially if the fly is moved slowly using a figure-of-eight retrieve. Be careful not to point the rod straight down the line or you could get snapped. When fishing large dry flies I find it best not to strike immediately but to draw the line gently until some resistance is felt before lifting into the fish. It may be that the fish has only splashed at the fly in order to sink it and the slow draw on the line could provoke a more positive take. Of course, it is most exciting when there is a huge splash, an arm-wrenching pull and the fish is hooked with no input needed from the angler!

Black gnats may reappear at this time, coarse fish fry will still be present although obviously larger, midges, beetles, aphids and small black terrestrials may all be about. Match the hatch where you can. Coarse fish can often be frustrating, especially dace. They will take dry flies under but rarely get hooked and the rise is a much more gentle affair compared to a trout. They are sometimes a welcome challenge to catch if the conditions are not good for trouting and some are a good size. A good size for dace that is! As with perch though, they are a shoal fish and a move of a few

yards along the bank should get your flies out of their way. You may elect to put up with their interference because if they are rising, there will often be a trout or two nearby.

At this time of year the two reservoirs are generally at their lowest levels and it may be useful to carry a pen and paper with you when out fishing. Now is the time to take note of contours and features that will be covered by water next Spring and might be fish-holding areas when the new season starts. A mobile 'phone with a GPS facility might also be useful, particularly if boat fishing.

OCTOBER AND NOVEMBER

In recent years the fishing season at Hallington has been extended to the end of November. The last two months of the season can make for difficult fishing, it can be a few weeks since fresh stock fish were introduced and of the fish that are left, many have been caught and returned. Most will have experienced the angler's fly in one way or another and may be quite wary and hard to tempt. On the other hand, the fish respond to falling temperatures and shortening days and seem to try to fatten up for the winter. With the right flies and tactics some good sport can still be had and there will still be some insects about which the angler can imitate.

On mild, calm, cloudy days, my preferred method would be a couple of dry flies, a long cast and a slow retrieve. Always include a sedge pattern, they may still be hatching at this time of year and they are a good mouthful for a hungry fish. There may also be some daddies about. As usual, watch out for rises and get your flies over them as soon as possible. In a breeze, rising fish will usually swim upwind, so if you didn't get a good look at the rise and you're not sure which way the fish was travelling, casting upwind of the rise is the best bet. Judging the speed of the fish and where to land your flies to intercept it can be tricky but is very rewarding when you get it right. In fairly calm conditions, watch for a fall of money-spiders which drift through the air on strands of silk. When they land on the water in numbers, the fish will take them avidly. It is sometimes difficult to see what the fish are taking, the spiders are so small. A single small black or brown dry fly fished on a 3 or 4 pound leader should catch fish in these circumstances. Leave the fly stationary or retrieve very slowly. Hold the rod parallel to the water so there is a buffer of slack line hanging from the tip. This can prevent the light leader from being broken or the small hook from opening out in the event of an enthusiastic take. Most takes though, will be slow and deliberate and hard to miss, so just lift gently into the fish rather than striking hard.

Unfortunately many autumn days are cold and windy, there are few insects about and no fish rising. These conditions can dampen the enthusiasm somewhat but all is not lost. A floating line and 2 or 3 small nymphs, Crunchers, Diawl Bach or midge pupa imitations will usually catch fish. Go for as long a leader as you can manage, let the flies sink well down on a fluorocarbon leader, and retrieve slowly. If your point fly occasionally trips along the bottom, you are doing it right. Takes can be quite gentle so watch the line for unusual movement or use a brightly coloured yarn indicator at the flyline/leader junction. If fishing across the

wind, the flyline can be pushed along too fast to get the flies deep enough, a sinking 'Polyleader' or midge-tip line can help a lot to slow things down and allow the flies to achieve a suitable depth. Above all, don't stay in one place, keep moving slowly along the bank, fish carefully and patiently and you should get the occasional fish.

Lures can still be effective, especially if they resemble small fish. Cat's Whisker, White Tadpole and Grey Zonker are worth trying. Fish as deep as you dare without snagging the bottom. There are volumes written about fry-feeding fish in the angling press, most of it referring to the large Midland reservoirs during the latter part of the season. It rarely seems to happen up here in the North-East and if it does, it is usually only the odd single fish making all the commotion. Having said that, this is the time of year when you have the best chance to connect with one of the very large resident brown trout especially if using a fry pattern. Double figure fish are caught every year as they move towards the feeder streams in an attempt to spawn. Without the large head of coarse fish in the lakes to feed on, these big fish would not be here.

Booby fishing is another effective method for the autumn, especially if the weather is bad. From the shallow natural banks an intermediate sinking line will do the job but for the deeper water from the dam or from a boat, a medium or fast sinker is more appropriate. Take care when fishing from the dam walls, the stones can be slippery when wet. Flies can be booby versions of those lures already mentioned. Again, not a method for catch-and-release but almost certainly guaranteed to get you a fish or two to take home.

IN CONCLUSION

This little guide should be read in conjunction with the attached table 'Hallington Fly Life'. The table should be self explanatory and a close examination will reveal why some flies are more effective than others. It will be updated on a regular basis and if you have any observations you would like to add, please email me at "philipbilbrough@gmail.com"

There are plenty of anglers here who are eminently more qualified than me to write such a guide and they would probably say 'Well, he's missed so-and-so out' or 'he's not mentioned such-and-such'. This is because I have tried to keep it fairly comprehensive and not over-complicated as it is very much aimed at the angler new to Hallington and those less-able members who may sometimes struggle to catch. There is a lot more information available if you want to delve deeper, a look at the bookshelf in the clubhouse lounge would be a good starting point. There may be some science involved but at least it is not rocket science!

The flies I have mentioned work for me and if fished correctly will also work for you. There are many more being invented every day, some are deadly, some are useless and there is a huge number in between. I'll leave it to you to sort the wheat from the chaff. You will quickly develop your own list of favourites. Of course there are things that I have deliberately missed out, like what my favourite fly patterns are and where to find the best fishing spots on the lakes and such like. These are all

things that you need to find out the hard way, by being out there and trying to catch fish. You should want to catch fish and it is the need to catch that drives experimentation in tackle, techniques and artificial fly development.

I still meet members who insist on only fishing dry fly or only fishing with lures. Often when they are struggling to catch, the rest of us are enjoying some of the best fishing in the North-East if not the country. With a little thought and effort, their fishing could be so much more rewarding. Successful fly fishing is all about anticipation, observation, flexibility, perseverance and learning. Mind you, a bit of luck and some common sense helps as well. I would never dream of going home after just a couple of hours because the fishing was dour. My very next cast could catch me the fish of a lifetime, they are out there somewhere, it is up to us to be persistent and winkle them out.

One of the best bits of advice I can offer to anyone is to go and talk to the one angler who seems to be catching more than everybody else. We anglers can sometimes be solitary individuals but are usually willing to give advice and even the odd fly to help our fellows. Spend some time watching how the flies are being fished, the method is often more important than what is on the end of the line. Better a quiet, friendly chat than a loudly shouted question along the bank! However, if you do stop for a chat, be sure to stand on the opposite side of the casting arm in case you get hit by a sudden strike!

Finally, being able to tie your own flies is a huge advantage, anything you can tie will be equal or better than the shop-bought variety and will also be more likely to match the hatch. It is an achievement to catch a fish on a fly you have tied yourself and even better if you have tied it for a particular situation and it improves your sport. If you want to learn to tie your own or just improve, why not join the Fly Dressers' Guild? There is a Northumbrian branch which meets every month and is run by enthusiastic local fly tyers. Visit www.flydressersguild.org for details or drop me an email.

N.B. The opinions expressed within this guide belong entirely to the author and are not necessarily shared by other members of Westwater Fly fishing Club.