

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Finding out what fish *really* want
- » Discovering what information you need (and where you can *find* it)
- » Getting a license (and why you *need* one)

Chapter **1**

What Every Fly Rodder Needs to Know

If you're reading this book, you probably have some interest in catching fish. Perhaps you have never tried to catch one, or you may have caught many and would like to improve your skills. Either way, whether you're a newcomer or a veteran angler, the equation remains the same — catching a fish requires three things:

- » A fish
- » An angler
- » Some fishing gear

What Is a Fish?

A *fish* is a cold-blooded animal that lives underwater, has fins, and breathes through gills. Some fish, such as eels, may not look as if they have fins, but they do. Other fish, such as manta rays, may look more like the design of a B-1 bomber, but they, too, live in the water, navigate with fins, and breathe through gills.

As far as the angler (that's you) is concerned, fish eat other fish, insects, and the occasional unlucky mammal, reptile, or other animal that finds itself in the water. Although some fish subsist on a diet of plants, *fishing* is the art of convincing a fish that the thing at the end of your line is an edible animal.

Whether you use a bait, a lure, or a fly, a fish usually strikes because it thinks that your offering is an easy meal. At other times, a fish, like any protective parent, may strike because it may think that your imitation animal is going to eat its babies — and no creature responds agreeably to that threat (although it needs to be pointed out that some fish will eat the young of their own kind).

How do I know it's a fish?

A biologist may need to know hundreds of parts of the anatomy of a fish. As an angler, you're only interested in a few of these parts (see Figure 1-1).

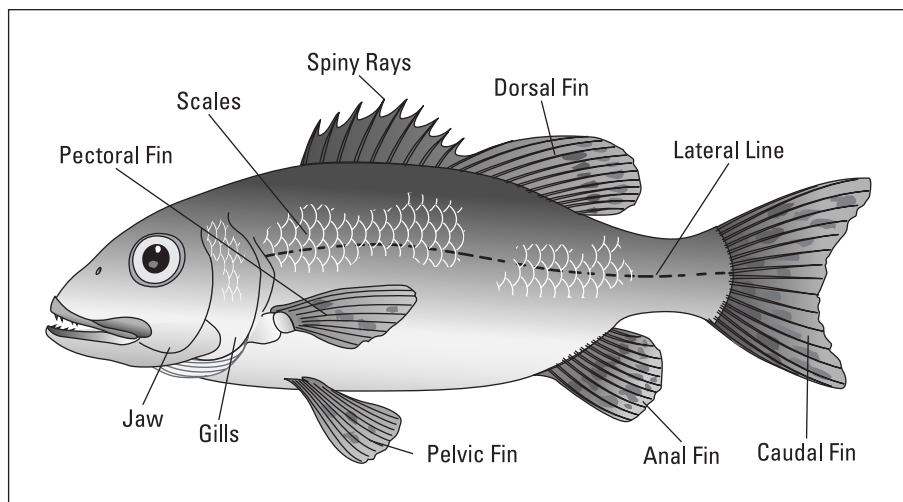


FIGURE 1-1:
Your average fish.

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The torpedo shapes of most game fish allow them to move easily through tides and currents. The fins propel and guide their movements. Gills enable fish to breathe by extracting oxygen from the water. The lateral line is a special sensory organ that enables fish to detect vibrations in the water (like the kind of vibrations that are made when you clank an oar on the bottom of a rowboat or when you tramp along the rocks in the bottom of a stream).

What does a fish want out of life?

On most days, a fish has only two requirements:

- » Finding something to eat
- » Avoiding being eaten

In other words, food and shelter are at the top of the priority list of every fish. At certain times of the year, making babies also goes on the to-do list. But by and large, in looking at any fishing situation, you should ask yourself these two questions:

- » What will the fish be looking for in the way of food?
- » How will the fish avoid predators while it is looking for food?

Figuring out the food

Knowing what fish like to eat can tell you a great deal about what kind of fly to use to seduce a fish into biting down on your not-very-good-tasting hook. Often, when you see a fish feeding, a close look at the water can tell you what food is available. After you have figured that out, your job is to tie something on your line that looks like that food. If a fish is taking something big, such as herring or shrimp, guessing the right food isn't very hard. However, as any frustrated angler can tell you, four or five kinds of food — little insects, bait fish, crawfish, worms, and the like — are often in the water at any given time. In these cases, some close observation is called for.

Be prepared to be stymied, because I often think fish have agreed on this unwritten rule: If there's a choice between large food and tiny food, eat something that is so small that it is just about invisible to the angler. Or at least, they have defiantly agreed to do that when I'm around.

Staying alive is important too

All other things being equal, a fish would spend all of its time in a safe place, where predators can't see it or reach it. But to get food, fish, like people, need to get out of the house and go shopping; and the time that a fish spends away from home is when the angler has an opportunity to catch the unwary fish. Although a fish in pursuit of a juicy meal may be a little less cautious than a fish lying under a rock, safety is always a prime concern; and no fish worth its fins *ever* chases food without having some kind of escape route close at hand. After you know what and where these escape routes are, you are well on the way to knowing where — and, more importantly, where not — to fish.

TWENTY THOUSAND YEARS OF FISHING

Although no one is sure exactly when people started to use fishing rods, we do know that Stone Age people used pieces of flint, bone, or wood to make fishing implements. Jumping ahead a few hundred centuries, the first real proof we have of people actually fishing with rods comes from drawings of the ancient Assyrians and Egyptians. Whether the Phishing Pharaohs used bait, lures, or flies is an open question.

Those ancient anglers used a wooden rod with a line attached to the end. It was very much like today's cane poles that many young anglers first use to fish for panfish at every lake and dock. We know that people were using reels a thousand years ago because pictures of rods and reels appear in China shortly before Marco Polo visited there. And the art of fly fishing was already well advanced in England when, in the 15th century, the most famous fisherwoman of all time, Dame Juliana Berners (an English nun), wrote her *Treatise on Fishing With an Angle* during this time.

By the time that Izaak Walton wrote *The Compleat Angler* in the 17th century, knowledge about the fish that lived in the rivers of Europe was well advanced, but Walton never saw a rainbow trout, largemouth bass, bonefish, bluefish, or golden dorado. As fly fishing has grown around the world, more and more types of fish have expanded the possibilities of the sport.

A fish can use one of three ways to escape being caught:

- » **Hide in the dark.** Look for fish to hang out in or near shadows. Also, expect them to be feeding when the light is low (at dawn and dusk — and sometimes at night).
- » **Hide under something.** If food is around, expect to find fish under nearby rocks, fallen trees, and undercut banks.
- » **Get down.** If you are a bear or an eagle, chances are you are not going to go very deep to chase a fish. So, even on a bright sunny day with no tree limbs or rocks to crawl under, a fish may stay in plain view, but in deep water.

Fishing versus Angling

People catch fish by using all kinds of gear (from spear guns to nets to bare hands). An *angler* is someone who angles (an Old English word for *fishing*) with a rod. This book is about angling. Figure 1-2 shows a *fly rodder* on the right, someone who angles with a fly rod.

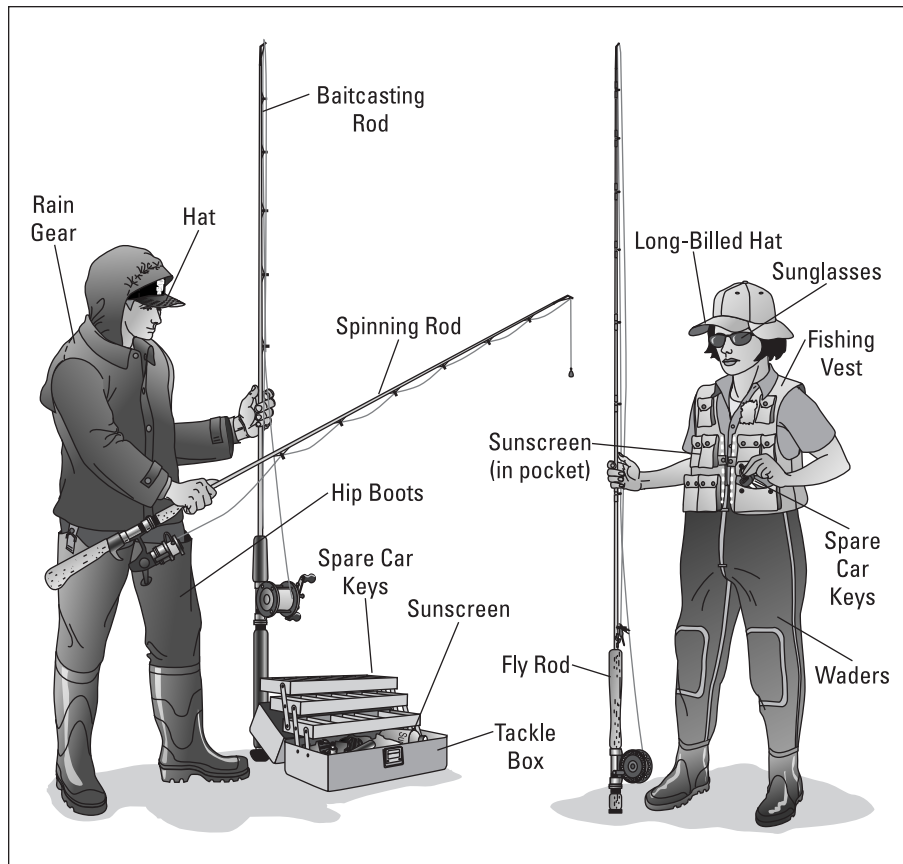


FIGURE 1-2:
The complete fly
rodder.

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Your main tool as an angler is, of course, a fishing rod. Rods come in all sizes, and they are made from many different materials. Some rods are made from graphite or other space-age composites. Some rods are made of fiberglass. Other rods are made of bamboo. Which rod is best for you?

Your choice of rod depends on the type of fishing you do. Figure 1-3 shows the three basic types of rods. Like everything else these days, you can spend a little, or you can break your piggy bank on the purchase of your rod. Take my word for it: If you're a novice, you don't need to reach too deep in your pockets to get started. Buying the most expensive rod would be like buying the Secretariat so that he could pull a milk wagon: You'd wind up with more horse than you need, and you probably wouldn't know how to get the most out of Secretariat anyway. Save the expert gear for the experts and start off with a good, serviceable starter kit. Reputable manufacturers such as Sage and Hardy make affordable choices, and Orvis can get you in the game with a perfectly fine rod even more economically.



FIGURE 1-3:
Some standard
rods.

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How Do I Learn? Who Do I Ask?

If you've never fished at all, don't worry. I didn't really start to fish until I was in my 20s. Still, the best time to begin to fish is when you are a little kid and a parent, grandparent, uncle, aunt or sib gets you started with a simple rod and a worm or some balled-up bread on a hook.

But if you weren't lucky enough to begin fishing as a youngster, you can become an angler (or a better angler) in any number of ways.

Parents

Fishing with Mom and Dad is a good place to start, but Mom and Dad need to be patient. Type-A parents who hover over their children, correcting and criticizing, are not very good fishing instructors. Parents who stop teaching and start fishing the minute that they see a catchable fish are better off not teaching. Jack Hemingway, oldest son of Ernest Hemingway, was a fishing fanatic. Jack's dad, was also a fanatic fisherman as well as a great writer, so you would be inclined to think that Papa Hemingway was one heck of a fishing teacher. Good guess, but wrong; Jack once said that in all the years that he went marlin fishing with his dad, he was actually allowed to hold the rod exactly once! Before you decide to teach your child to fish, make a resolution to let your youngster do the fishing while you do the watching.

Friends

Friends are great teachers. Or maybe it is more accurate to say that you can learn a great deal from friends. I have always learned (and continue to pick up tricks) from fishing buddies. The thing to remember about friends, like the thing about parents, is that fishing is not a competition between anglers. Fishing is a contest between an angler and a fish. Many people have difficulty accepting pointers and advice from friends. If you want to be a good angler, be willing to accept help. This doesn't mean that you have to listen to every opinionated gasbag who comments on your style. After you pass the beginning stage, you can always go off by yourself. It's perfectly fine to say, "I'm going to try that next pool for a while. I'll meet you later by the big rock." This technique will get you out of earshot of any self-appointed font of wisdom.

Fly shops

In the USA, wherever you find good-to-great fly fishing, you are probably going to find a fly shop. Often, they are small businesses run by people dedicated to

fishing and fisheries. They need all the support they can get. They are hard to beat when it comes to local knowledge, including special killer flies that you may never have thought of. Unless you want to have a deep technical conversation during their busiest times — say opening day of trout season or during the peak of the tarpon run — you'll pick up a lot from conversation with the staff (or fellow anglers who are hanging around). You can return the courtesy by spending a couple of bucks. I guarantee there's something essential but inexpensive that you forgot in your hurry to get on the water.

Guides

Hiring a guide has turned out to be among the best angling investments I have ever made. Many anglers try to impress their guides with stories of the places they've been and the fish they've caught. They bristle when their guides make suggestions to improve their fishing techniques. This is downright silly. Guides are on the water a few hundred days per year. They can almost always teach amateur anglers something. Apart from listening for a guide's advice, anglers can also learn by keeping their eyes open and observing what the guide does. As the great Hall of Fame catcher Yogi Berra once said, "You can observe a lot just by watchin'."

AVOIDING THE HEARTBREAK OF RODBREAK

Although both cars and fishing rods are products of modern technology and use similar materials, I've noticed that cars have a nasty tendency to break and/or lose fishing rods. The minute your rod gets near a car, the rod is in danger of being mugged. If you put a rod on top of the car while you take off your boots, I promise you that one day you will drive off with the rod on the roof and the rod will fly off and be lost forever (if not crushed by the truck behind you). If you lean a rod against your car's tailgate or rear bumper, it will someday find a way of wedging itself into the hinge of the trunk or tailgate. When you close the trunk or tailgate, you will be reminded of the rod's location by the crunching sound that it makes as it breaks in two. If you try of putting the rod on the vehicle's floor beside the front passenger seat and placing the rod so that its tip is pointing toward the back seat, I can almost guarantee you that you will break off the rod tip someday. Basic rule of thumb: If a rod can be broken by putting it in or near your car, the rod will be broken.

If you don't have a rod rack specifically designed to hold your rod on the hood and/or roof of your car (see Chapter 2), the best cure for "Rod Wrecking Car Disease" is to break down (disassemble) your rod and put it in a case.

Some guides are patient, but others are like a hungover Marine drill sergeant; they feel that they have to browbeat every angler into an obedient zombie. I strongly advise you to take the time and effort to check out your prospective guide before you end up on the water with someone you can't stand. Before you book a guide, talk to him or her on the phone if you can. Email is good too. Be clear on the guide's policy if you have to cancel your booking. Some guides take the same approach that the National Football League usually takes to scrubbing a game; they go fishing no matter what the weather and expect you to pay in full. Finally, remember this: Only a less than candid guide *guarantees* fish. Don't expect the guide to feel sorry and give you a refund if you don't catch anything. If the fishing is crummy, you may get a discount or a refund, but that practice is the exception rather than the rule.

Schools

These days, you can take lessons for all the things that people used to pick up somehow as part of everyday living: cooking lessons, parenting lessons, personal trainer sessions, and (most importantly for this book) fishing lessons. Fly fishing, being a pretty pricey sport, is taught in all kinds of places — from sleepaway camps to an hour in the park or on the lawn. Many fly shops offer a free introductory lesson and an hourly rate for a private lesson. Look for two kinds of fishing knowledge in a fishing school:

- » **Fishing technique:** How to cast. How to hook, fight, land, and sometimes release a fish. When I began fishing, I went to a casting clinic for two days, and attending that clinic was the most valuable thing I ever did on the way to becoming an angler.
- » **Fishing lore:** How does one read the water? What are the fish taking? What different flies should you try and when? These questions are the kind that a beginner's course can start to answer. That being said, I find that people are more often frustrated by lack of technique than they are by lack of lore. If you can't use your rod and if you don't know how to tie your hook to your line, your fishing session isn't going to be very productive.

Online: My inbox runneth over

When I wrote the first edition of this book, the internet was an infant. That has changed big-time. There is so much online that, as the saying goes, it's like trying to take a sip of water from a fire hose. It's tempting and really easy to disappear down the YouTube rabbit hole. I'm speaking from experience here.

PRIME LEARNING DIRECTIVE: LOOK!

I can give you no more valuable piece of advice than this: *Watch the water!* Can you see fish feeding? How are they feeding? Are they slashing through a school of bait? Are they lazily cruising, looking for the odd bit of food? Are birds feeding on bugs or bait in the water? Does the water contain currents within currents, and are fish feeding in the seams between currents? What places look as if they would provide the best protection for a fish who wants to be near food and safe at the same time?

No matter how good an angler you become, you can always be more productive on the water if you stop to look first. We all want to rush from the car and immediately heave our lines into the water, but you can do a million percent better if you study the water before you start fishing.

I'll try to point you to some good basic sources. From how to cast, to how to tie flies, to how to fight and land a fish, the internet overflows with how-to, when-to, where-to, and how-not-to photos, videos, and podcasts. When searching for videos to answer a fishing question, I always try to look at two or three before I consider the question answered. I do the same thing when searching out a recipe. In fishing, as in cooking, there is often no single "right way" to do something, and it's worth sussing out the lay of the land before you commit yourself. If you are thinking of visiting an area, by all means check out the links for local fly shops. They know what's hatching, what flies work, and what shape the streams are in. If a picture is worth a thousand words, a video is worth a thousand pictures.

Websites come and go, but there are some that survive in the realm of the digital survival-of-the-fittest. In Chapter 22, I recommend some that I find helpful/inspiring/informative. You won't go wrong if you remember these:

- » **howtoflyfish.orvis.com/video-lessons**: For overall, all-purpose knowledge, the series of Orvis videos is terrific. Many feature angler and author Tom Rosenbauer, who knows a lot but comes across as Everyman.
- » **www.intheriffle.com**: Their YouTube channel is easy to understand and covers just about all the how-tos you'll ever need.
- » **www.rioproducts.com/learn/videos**: Informative and wide ranging. Fun to watch. I still go there to remind myself how to Spey cast (use a two-handed rod). For some reason, I always need a tune-up before trying it.

Four Things I Wish Somebody Had Told Me about When I Started

So you know what a fish is, what it likes to eat, and where it lives. You have your brand-new rod and reel, and you are ready to go. Let me clue you in to a few things to avoid in *all* fishing situations!

Bad vibrations

When it comes to fishing, there are no such things as “good vibes.” In fishing, all vibrations are generally bad. I am talking about clanking oars on the bottom of your aluminum boat, running your motor near feeding fish, or wading through a quiet pool like a 250-pound fullback busting through a gang of linebackers. Check out a fish’s special sensory organ called the *lateral line* shown earlier in Figure 1-1. This organ basically enables fish to “see” vibrations.

Why would a fish want to detect vibrations? Predators make vibrations. To a fish, vibrations mean that danger is nearby (like, for example, you).

Trying to do more than you really can

Trying to cast absolutely as far as you physically can is one sure way to fire off a lousy cast that will land in the wrong place and spook fish or hang up on a tree limb. Trying to wade in rougher water than you can comfortably handle guarantees a dunking or at least a few pretty hairy moments exiting from the stream. Taking your boat into heavier water than it was designed to handle is one way to wind up as shark bait. Fly fishing is not a sport of extremes. Stay within your capabilities.

Shadows of evil

Hawks throw shadows on the water. So do bears, eagles, ospreys, otters, alligators, raccoons, fishermen, and anything else that eats fish. Through thousands of generations of breeding, those fish that weren’t afraid of shadows were eaten. In this way, natural selection has bred extreme caution into any fish that you will be interested in catching. So take note of the sun (or on bright nights, the moon) and be careful to keep your shadow away from the fish.

Your Budweiser hat

Don’t get me wrong. I have nothing against loud, garish clothes. After all, if you can’t escape the Good Taste Police when you are out fishing, you need to find a

new pastime. However, Day-Glo fishingwear on a stream or lake is not the ideal camouflage. If you're out for a day trolling on the ocean, well, go ahead and wear whatever you want.

The Dog Ate My Homework (Or Why You Need a License)

Like you, I'm not crazy about paying taxes. However, I don't have a problem with paying for my fishing license. Clean streams, public access, stocking, disease eradication, senior citizen programs, and junior programs all are paid for, in large part, by fees paid by anglers. In this age of downsizing and trimming of government programs, you can be sure that some legislators would go after funds now spent on fishing if anglers were not on the pay-as-you-go system of yearly fishing licenses.

Rules change from place to place, but in general, only small children and senior citizens are exempt, or partially exempt, from license fees. Some states do not require them for saltwater fishing, but a growing number do. Almost every state requires that you have your license in your possession when fishing.

If you are an out-of-stater, chances are that you'll pay a higher fee than in-state residents do. I have no idea why this practice isn't considered unfair gouging, but it is the law, so don't fight it. After all, who needs hassles on a fishing trip? The point, or at least one of the points, of going fishing is to leave those kinds of problems back in the everyday world.



REMEMBER

Know the rules. Is your license up-to-date? Do all fish have to be returned to the stream? Are barbless hooks required? It's a good conservation practice even if they are not. Is there a certain time of day that you are not allowed to fish? In all my years I have only been checked twice. One of those times was in Russia and one of our group had his rods confiscated. You kind of hate when that happens, but I guess it beats being sent to a gulag.

ADVICE FROM AN OLD-TIMER

Remember that fishing is one of the few things in life that you can keep improving as you grow older. As the patron saint of angling, Izaak Walton, wrote three centuries ago, "Angling may be said to be like the Mathematics, that it can ne'er be fully learnt; at least not so fully, but that there will still be more new experiments left for the trial of other men that succeed us."