

{THE METHOD}

# FINESSING THE FLY

Steve Cullen explains how to elevate your skills to outwit the wildest trout and grayling



**STEVE CULLEN**  
is a guide, instructor and all-round game-angler with a wealth of knowledge.

*“The technique demands patience, precision and a deep understanding of watercraft. But the rewards are immense”*

**T**HERE IS A QUIET ART TO FLY-fishing that only really comes to light when the water is gin-clear, the fish are wise, well fished for, and the margins between success and failure are measured in fractions of a millimetre.

It's in this challenging fishing environment that the immeasurable benefits of light tippets and small flies are revealed, particularly when stalking big grayling or trout in pressured waters.

I recently visited the Ribnik in Bosnia, at the toughest time of the season – high summer, low flows, with bright sun from dusk till dawn and with daytime temperatures hitting 40 deg C – and well, you can imagine. Add to that, there were more anglers than I have ever seen on any river anywhere; good ones too. Things could not be more challenging.

This isn't your usual grayling fishing, lobbing bombs in fast heavy water. It is so far from it that it

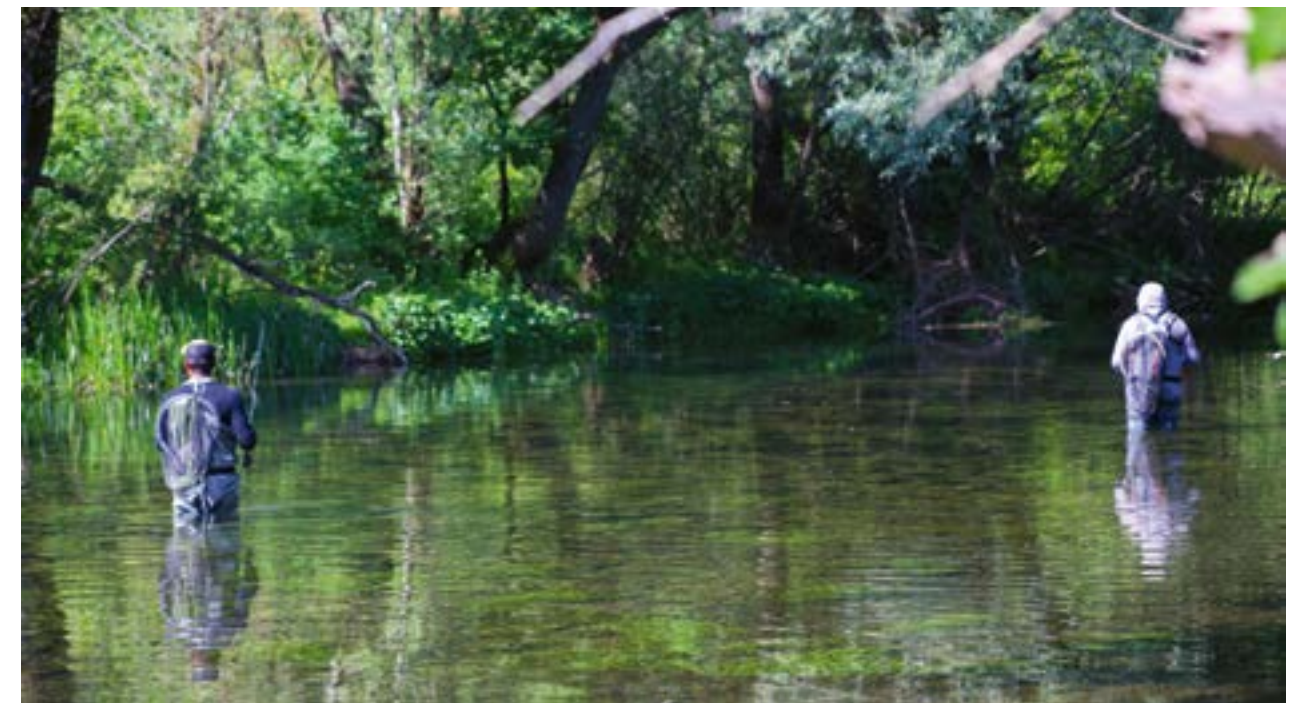
is a completely different ball game. It is finesse fly-fishing at its most refined, using tippets as light as 0.07mm diameter and flies no bigger than a speck, tied on teeny size 26 hooks.

The technique demands patience, precision and a deep understanding of watercraft. But the rewards are immense: close-up, visual takes from large, educated fish, caught not through luck, but because you got everything right.

So let's take a closer, more in-depth look, covering the use of long tapered leaders and tiny nymphs, sight-fishing tactics and the importance of adapting these Continental lessons to our own low, warm UK rivers during summer and autumn.

## WHY FISH SO LIGHT?

There are two primary reasons to scale down to tippets in the 0.09mm to 0.07mm range and flies in the 22 to 26 class: ➤



Anglers fish very close to one another in Bosnia's clear streams





Bosnian beauty: the prize after an exacting approach

# 1. Presentation

In ultra-clear water, fish spook easily. A thick tippet creates micro-drag, disturbs the water surface, and reduces the fly's ability to drift in a natural manner. A fine tippet cuts through the surface film effortlessly, allowing even the tiniest of nymphs to behave like the real thing. That's crucial when you're trying to fool fish that have seen it all - trust me, the ones that I was fishing for could name the tying thread used on the nymphs.

# 2. Stealth and pressure

In heavily fished waters, grayling and trout will actively ignore anything that looks even slightly suspicious. Worse, they will sulk on the bottom once anything arouses suspicion.

They may sit in full view, but cast too short or slap your line on the surface, and they'll melt away or go into a huff. On Continental rivers, the Ribnik being a prime example, this is the rule, not the exception. Many of these rivers are strictly catch-and-release, and will see thousands of visiting anglers every season, and yet still hold magnificent, but incredibly wary fish. Success comes only to those who adapt and overcome.

## THE LONG AND CORRECTLY TAPERED LEADER

To present a fly delicately and keep your presence far from the fish, a long, progressive leader is essential. Standard 9ft leaders are hopelessly short for this kind of work. We're talking 14ft, 16ft, even 18ft of leader before attaching tippet. This allows you to stay well back from the targeted fish, often using long, slack-line casts or reach casts while still achieving a drag-free drift. Drag-free is crucial.

The taper matters massively. An aggressive, steep taper will slap the fly down with force. A fine, progressive taper helps transfer just enough energy to extend the tippet and nymph without jerking it unnaturally into place - the perfect turnover. Hand-built leaders graduating down in subtle steps can give you the control and finesse you need, but there are

*“Use barrel knots to form the leader and blood knots for the tippet ring and fly, but do not tuck them”*

Holding a size 26 fly with forceps and using a cap-mounted magnifier can help you tie them on



workarounds with long 14ft shop-bought ones - as long as they continuously taper before the tippet.

Always add your tippet separately. If you're fishing 0.07mm, add at least 2ft of it to the end of your leader. It acts like silk thread in the water, practically invisible, incredibly supple and offers exceptional presentation.

Use barrel knots to form the leader and blood knots for the tippet ring and fly, but do not tuck them.

I use a delicately tapered weight-forward three-weight fly-line, which just allows the rod to flex and load.

## TINY NYMPHS

Many anglers in the UK will balk at size 26 nymphs: “I can't see it to tie it on” or “You'll never land anything on that!” But the reality is different. Large grayling, more so than trout, are often suspicious of bulkier flies, especially in pressured or clear water conditions. When they're feeding in shallow riffles or slowly sipping emergers, small is not only effective, I promise you, it's essential.

Patterns like size 24-26 baetis, shrimps and midge, and at times bare-bones, unweighted or lightly-leaded flies, imitate the minuscule naturals that grayling feed on most of the time.

My nymphs are never heavy. I use lead wraps or small beads, 1.5mm-2.5mm. My preference is for lead wraps, but that only works on hooks of certain sizes, so you may prefer beads.

These flies don't ‘attract’ in the traditional sense;

instead, they blend in perfectly, triggering confident takes from otherwise uncatchable fish.

The key is to get them in the right place, and that's where stealth, leader control, a great pair of polarised glasses and reading the water come together as one.

## SIGHT FISHING

Nothing beats the thrill of sight-fishing to a visible, slow-swaying grayling in calf-deep water. You spot her holding station, swinging gently, inspecting the current for morsels. She's big - 50cm big - and the riverbed around her is pale, the sun illuminating everything around her. Any wrong move and she'll spook. ➤

First, stand back and use polaroids to spot fish



Finesse is needed when striking with fine and almost invisible 0.07mm leader







Get as close as you dare to your quarry

*“The fly gently drops in upstream and you watch the fish, not the fly, as your offering drifts down to her”*

You keep low, stay well back, maybe crawl on your knees or use streamside vegetation to mask your silhouette. Do everything you can to make sure that you remain unseen. You extend your leader, pulling line from the reel. You make the one cast count: blind cast to the side to gauge distance and then your cast proper toward the target. The fly needs to land upstream so that it has enough time to sink very slightly – not too deep. You need that fish to lift – it’s your visual indicator. The fly gently drops in upstream and you watch the fish, not the fly, as your offering drifts down to her. You see her lift... tilt... and pause. That’s your signal.

This isn’t passive, blind nymphing. It’s proper hunting.

It’s what fly-fishing becomes when you strip away the clutter: just you, a well-tied fly, and a fish that you’ve earned.

#### BEING TECHNICAL TO BE TACTICAL

Using 0.07mm tippet takes some adaptation. You must be very careful on the strike, as I found out to my cost on more than one occasion. It’s easy to get over-excited when a huge grayling or trout takes your nymph. The lift should be soft and deliberate; the fish

are always hooked. There must be no sudden jerks of the rod tip, or you will get snapped.

Your knots must be perfect. Use tippet rings to protect your connection between leader and tippet – the smaller and duller the better. When using such fine tippet, it’s important that you check it often – one wind knot and the game’s over. I change tippet after each fish.

The key with these tippets is also a softish rod that protects ultra-light tippet from any shock during the strike and fight – big grayling fight like fury. Many modern 10ft-11ft rods in the 2wt-3wt class are the standard for this. They may also help with reach, letting you keep more line off the water and extending your drift. However, I love a nine-footer and the accuracy that it offers me, especially along tree-lined banks.

Perhaps most importantly: fish with confidence. Yes, the tippet is light. Yes, the fly is tiny. But if done right, you can land serious grayling without issue. I had two fish over 50cm, 2½lb-3lb in old money, and you can catch them more often than if using heavier gear. Let the rod do the work, keep steady pressure, and avoid sudden movements.

#### STEALTH IS EVERYTHING

Big grayling and trout, especially in sight-fishing situations, spook easily. Stalk them properly, minimise wading, if you must at all, then stay well downstream – fish from your knees if need be. Think carefully about where you stand, where your shadow falls. Get as close as you dare – the less distance, the less chance of drag. You’ll set the hook better too.

Use the environment around you to your advantage – overhanging trees, bankside cover, rocks – to break your silhouette. Move slowly. Even the crunch of gravel can make fish bolt. Be as quiet as a mouse.

On most rivers, there are fish that have been cast at a hundred times. To fool them, you must be different.

#### FINAL THOUGHTS

There’s something deeply satisfying about this style of fly-fishing. It strips away the brute-force aspects and replaces them with precision, feel and understanding. Fishing light tippets and tiny nymphs with long leaders and a stealthy approach isn’t just a method, it’s a philosophy and one that we don’t really apply here in the UK – maybe we should.

It’s about mastering your craft and reconnecting with what makes fly-fishing such an intense pursuit. You don’t need to hit the water with a chest pack full of everything – just the right gear, good eyes, soft hands, patience and the will to get close enough to your quarry without being seen.

Next time your local river drops low and clear, don’t hang up your rod. Go small. Go soft. Go stealthy. ■

PHOTOGRAPHY: STEVE CULLEN



Steve uses a foam-rimmed net that floats and retains the fish in water

#### FINESSE IN THE UK



PETER GATHERCOLE

The conditions that I describe above aren’t restricted to the Ribnik, Sava, San and Traun in Bosnia. This summer and autumn, many UK rivers have suffered from prolonged low flows and clear, warm water. It’s in these situations that the ultra-fine tactics mentioned will succeed.

Whether you’re targeting wild brownies in the pool tails of the Derbyshire Derwent or giant grayling in the Test, the lessons of long leaders, fine tippet and stealthy sight-fishing will pay dividends.

Here’s how to apply the approach:

- Read the water differently: With low flows, fish shift into slightly deeper runs and shaded areas. Use polarised glasses to spot them and don’t rush your casts.
- Scale everything down: A size 20 dry-fly or size 24 nymph on 0.08mm tippet may be the only way to fool a sulking grayling or spooky trout in a slow glide.
- Always use a single fly for a perfect drift, better accuracy and no hingeing, as well as to play fish in areas where two flies could cause disaster: among weed and obstructions.
- Cast less, move more: Positioning is more important than distance. One perfect cast from a crouched position is worth ten random flails at the water. Treat each fish as a one-shot opportunity. Let the line drift to your side, roll the line to to load the rod, make one false cast and go!
- It is always better to cast at a fish from directly behind or slightly to its left or right. This offers minimal drag and it ensures you stay out of sight. If the leader and tippet are correctly tapered, most modern rods will deliver the fly with ease. A single fly allows you to keep the casting loop tight.
- Keep cool: Fish are stressed in warm water. Handle them with care, use barbless hooks, and don’t prolong the fight. If the water is too warm – above 19 deg C – consider leaving the fish in peace entirely – common sense should prevail.
- Finesse works in winter too, although then bugs and shrimps are a better option than nymphs. Grayling will move into quite shallow water in winter. They’ll shoal, increasing their competitiveness, which means they’re easier to target than individual fish.
- Deep water makes targeting fish tricky. You must use very heavy flies and then accuracy is lost, or you must rely on a fish rising far to intercept a fly – something that rarely happens unless it’s a dry-fly over 1ft-3ft of medium-paced water.