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## Reading Flats Fish

Before Presenting the Fly, Let the Fish Tell You How to Do It

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As a fly-fishing guide in central Florida's Mosquito Lagoon, I'm often asked some recurring questions when meeting my clients. "What type of fly are we going to use?" they may ask. Or, "How do the fish fight?" And of course, the most common: "Where do I place the fly?"

My answer to the last is always the same — it's situational. You've got to let a fish's behavior dictate how it wants to be fed.

Every day provides numerous situations requiring differences in how and where the fly needs to be placed. Certainly, there are exceptions to some of what I'm going to discuss here, but this is what works for me on a consistent basis.

### Tailers and Finners

Whether you're fishing for the spooky redfish and trout of the Mosquito Lagoon or other species in different regions, the first and most crucial step is to read the fish and understand its attitude. Fish present themselves in

a variety of ways on the flats, and while not always the case, they are most often encountered while tailing, finning, cruising, mudding or laid-up.

Tailing fish can be the most visually exciting but also some of the most challenging. These fish are hypersensitive to their surroundings, and you must be very quiet when approaching them. I first try to determine if the fish are stationary or moving. If stationary, I have my angler place the fly close enough to get the fish's attention yet not so close that it's invasive. A couple-foot radius is usually ideal.

Preferably, the fly should land as the fish tails down, rooting out a meal, as it's typically less aware of its surroundings and more intent on eating. In extremely thick vegetation, the fish's peripheral vision is often obstructed, which requires an angler to place the fly on a very small dinner plate. This can be difficult for less-than-accurate casters.

These types of presentations are usually a game of inches, and it's

important to remember that weather plays a key role too. A tailing fish in a 15-knot wind is less likely to feel your presence, which allows you to get closer and be a bit more aggressive.

Similar to tailers, finning fish can also be tough, as they're often encountered in dead-calm water. And unless the water is clear or the sun is high, it's sometimes hard to tell if there is only one fish or multiples just below the surface.

Finning fish usually are not feeding but just lying around near the surface. This doesn't mean they won't eat, however. I typically throw a fly that's going to ride on the surface or just below, instructing my clients to present it *softly* just in front of the fish, almost on its nose. The fish must not see the fly line or leader. If it blows out, I'll have my angler place the fly a little farther out next time.

We usually continue increasing the distance in front of the fish until we figure out what's going to work on that particular day. Regardless, landing the fly softly is the most important aspect of this presentation. Don't let the line slap or the fly hit too hard. I refer to this as "throwing rocks," and it will result in a fish sounding, never to be seen again.

### My Favorites: Cruisers

For numerous reasons, cruising fish are my favorites to target. For starters, a moving fish is easier for a client to see than one lying motionless on the bottom. Also, it's usually simple for an angler to distinguish the head from the tail. You'd be surprised at how many folks insist on being the first to feed a fish through its tail!

While a tailer is easier to spot from a distance, it's sometimes hard to tell where its head is. But fly placement is easy with a cruising fish. Stick to the two-and-two rule — two feet in front, two feet past.

I try to determine how fast the fish is moving and then place the fly two feet ahead of and two feet past its route. This distance generally prevents spooking and allows for some deviation in the fish's movement. If the fish spooks, lead him a little more the next time. Remember, you must always let the fish dictate how it wants to be fed.

When presenting in this manner, only the leader is exposed, and this is important. Because the fly is not plopping directly into its path, the fish usually won't deviate from its course. As you begin stripping, the least amount of strips is ideal; doing so reduces the chances of picking up grass or snagging the bottom. It's all about efficiency.

Of course, fish that are cruising away are quite tougher to feed. Unless you are an expert caster and can throw a hook cast — which most of us cannot — what works best for me is presenting the fly off to the side and a little past the fish. Then strip it very slowly, so as to not to attack the fish.

If this is done properly and the fish doesn't eat or take off, it will sometimes turn away, presenting you with a crossing shot. Take advantage of this.

Fish that are coming directly at you create a different scenario. I have my clients make as long a cast as possible directly in the fish's path and wait till it gets closer. Then I have them give a good, quick strip to mimic something coming off the bottom. This is followed by several long, slow pulls.

If there are multiple fish, I always let the first fish pass and then start working the fly, presenting it to as many as

possible. If you turn or spook the first fish, the rest usually follow suit.

### Laid-Up and Mudding Fish

When talking about laid-up fish, I'm referring to those that are sitting motionless on the bottom. These fish are very difficult to see prior to making a cast. In fact, we usually encounter them as they swim off after we've spooked them.

The one good thing about spooking fish off the bottom is that at least you know you're working the right area. At some point, they'll likely feed, making themselves noticeable ahead of time.

But sometimes we can find fish lying frozen over a sandy hole or muddy bottom and have ample time to present a fly. In this situation, I want the fly to land softly, presented in front of and a little long of the fish. If using a crab or shrimp pattern, let it sink to the bottom, and strip slowly. See what the fish does, and adjust accordingly until you provoke a reaction.

If targeting an ambush feeder, such as a laid-up snook or seatrout, I prefer a baitfish pattern and like to keep it moving through the area in which the fish is lying.

Finally, mudding fish are basically tailers rooting along the bottom in deeper water. Their presence is usually very obvious, as they create plumes of mud or spots on a flat. Mudding fish are often not that spooky since they're so focused on eating.

Sometimes you can spot the fish within or around the mud, while other times you cannot. Either way, I figure out which way they are working, cast the fly on an intercepting course and begin stripping with short, quick strips. A fly's weight plays an important role in your success. Mudding fish in deeper water can be moving fast, and you need a fly that sinks quickly to get in front of them.

These are some of the techniques that consistently work for me. While variables such as weather are always a factor, the challenge of figuring out what fish are doing and attempting to fool them with feathers and fur is what makes this sport so much fun. 🦋