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Expert advice on the secrets of fly-leaders

Outdoors / By Paul Bruun 1 hr ago



Flip Pallot

COURTESY PHOTO

Fly leaders are like cowboy hats: Everybody has one, along with a secret formula on how to construct them.

The dedicated few from the Dark Ages of fly-fishing once hand-tied their own leaders. The introduction of drawn (knotless tapered) monofilament leaders simplified the process. Nowadays a single store-bought trout leader runs between \$4 and \$5. So unless you are knot-challenged, tying your own makes sense and allows saving for another cold craft beer.

What's not to like about dumping those precise step-down butt section measurements and itty-mono-piece multi-knot formulas? Ahead are thoughtful and nontraditional leader suggestions from experts who know a thing or two about fly-fishing for a variety of species.

The youngest practitioner of simplified leaders is Victor, Idaho's global fly-fisherman, Jeff Currier, (see JeffCurrier.com). Jeff gives new meaning to Hank Snow's tune "I've Been Everywhere, Man." Jeff was the first Yank in history to medal in world fly-fishing competition and, despite his modest musculature, happily hurls Boilermaker Poppers on a 12-weight all day at sharks and barracudas without collapsing in a pool of sweat.

Closer to home, watching Jeff endlessly sling his 3-streamer rig at Idaho's South Fork trio of brown, cutthroat and rainbow trout targets is impressive, both physically and technically.

For this last trick Jeff fires up a Winston Boron 6-weight and a 10- to 13-foot strand of OX Scientific Anglers fluorocarbon on an intermediate line. This bulky looking (non-aerodynamic?) rig with dropper patterns draped at least 3 feet apart is super effective and modestly simple to prepare. The level blob of OX leader turns over consistently and beautifully every time.

Philip "Flip" Pallot is principally a saltwater fly-fishing guide-turned poster boy since his "Walker's Cay Chronicle" vaulted to the mountaintop of Sunday TV. Recently he's been inducted into the IGFA Hall of Fame and continues filming, writing and presenting programs while promoting Yeti, Hells Bay Boats, TFO Tackle, Cortland Lines, Costa and Fish Hippie, among others (FlipPallot.com).

During a June Black Fly Outfitters seminar in Vaughn Cochran's fashionable Jacksonville, Florida, emporium, Flip literally "rolled out" a stealth leader concept that he's been fine-tuning. Since my longtime South Florida associate is widely recognized for his endless saltwater fly fishing expertise, first up is a leader plan for an 8-weight. Suitable downsizing for lighter weight rods follows.

Flip recently provided the following notes:

"This leader concept works regardless of rod/line weight. The concept: Transfer as much energy as possible, as far as possible, from the front taper of the fly line to and through the leader to the fly.

"The leader butt section should be a tiny bit heavier/stiffer than the front taper of the fly line. Butt section length can be 10 feet long or 80 to 85 percent of the total leader. One graduated step down in material size gets you to the platform for connecting a class tippet."

Example: An 8-weight fly line would have a 10-foot butt section of soft 50-pound Cortland leader mono. The graduation zone features an 18- to 24-inch portion of 30-pound mono and is connected to at least a 15-inch (minimum) class tippet section of 20, 15, 12, 10-pound etc. mono to qualify

as a proper IGFA fly leader. If conditions merit, a 12-inch maximum (shorter is OK) bite tippet (guard) knotted to the class tippet protects from toothy faces.

“This leader will turn over better in all conditions than the old 9-footer formulas. It has allowed me to fish much more aggressively to sea trout, bonefish, permit and such. They don’t see or feel the fly line nearly as much and the leaders transfer energy much better and always turn over ... if you wait out your backcast!”

Flip included a timely postscript, although its content may pain the knot-challenged angler: “Do not use loop-to-loop connections with this system as it loses the energy transfer. Use a nail knot or other snell to connect butt section to fly line!”

On a lighter rod note, Flip encourages an 8- to 9-foot section of 20-pound mono leader for our trout-size lines (3- and 4-weight) and then a graduation down with 8- to 10-pound mono to our familiar 3X and smaller freshwater tippet.

One of the most difficult-to-fool fish in calm shallow salt and brackish waters is a giant Mosquito Lagoon sea trout. For these nervous spotted characters Flip reports using 15-foot leaders on 5-weight rods and fuzzy, soft-landing Seaducers “so they can’t feel me in their neighborhoods.”

I’ve smiled and suffered though sampling lots of friends’ convoluted fly leader formulas that were far more work to tie than any benefits they provided. Such behavior will continue, but saltwater bonefishermen learned years ago that 10 feet of straight 10- to 12-pound mono works fine for dropping small flies in front of the Grey Ghosts of the flats.

Captain Rick Ruoff of Islamorada began his remarkable Florida Keys guiding career after graduating from the University of Miami in the early 1970s. Beginning in 1971 (right about when we first met) Rick’s first “fly rod only” client for a long while was Miami Beach angler Harold Light.

“I think Harold used a Heddon glass rod and Scientific Anglers 9-weight floating line (aka GAF). He carried a tackle box that had nothing but his homemade medium-size cork and balsa poppers, several spools of 10-pound Ande monofilament and a stack of green cards with the old ‘No-Knot Eyelets’ that we stuffed into his fly line tip to connect straight Ande leader.”

Rick proudly paraded Mr. Light down the Bud ’N Mary’s Dock to his waiting Willy Robert’s Skiff, to show the old hands that “College Boy” also had a real fly fisherman.

Because his angler refused to let Rick assemble a properly tapered fly leader in favor of 9 feet of 10-pound mono ahead of the popper, their fishing opportunities were limited.

“We concentrated on sea trout, redfish, and when a good snook would snatch the popper, we had to be really careful,” Rick said.

Sharp gill plates and a snook’s raspy mouth make mincemeat of a 30-pound Ande shock tippet. Light’s 10-pound didn’t have much of a chance.

“Harold caught a lot of fish and cast pretty darn well with his system. He would never use a tapered leader with a shock tippet or throw a streamer so we couldn’t tackle tarpon and bonefish,” Rick said this week on the phone from his summer Montana digs. He concluded: “I knew the right way and Harold showed me the real way to fly-fish.”

This isn’t a demand to toss Orvis, Rio, SA, Cortland, Dai Riki and Umpqua leaders. But after hearing positive results from those who’ve been getting great fly turnovers with the long single-butt Pallot leaders and Ruoff’s 10-pound bonefish/redfish scheme, I know some will benefit. My wet-fly and streamer leaders regularly mimic Currier’s level OX fluorocarbon example, although my bottom sections slim to 2-3X with smaller flies.

Final rigging note: Include a 15-inch section of 15-pound or at least 20-pound material in any “big fly” leader suitable for trophy fish. Wrestling pesky, snagged deep structure with a 30-pound or heavier leader invites a broken fly line, lost rod tip or broken rod.

I’ve done all that, too!

Paul Bruun writes every other week on his adventures and misadventures in the great outdoors. Contact him via columnists@jhnewsandguide.com.



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