

Fly fishing is all about the bugs and an accurate cast

By Kathryn Reed

The morning of my lesson there is a Tweet from Tahoe Fly Fishing: "Rainbow, Brown, Brook or Cutthroat." At least I know these are all kinds of trout. The problem is I think one fish looks like the next. Will it matter?

The day after my lesson the Tweet is: "Dry fly time on the West Carson and the Truckee."

Are they testing me? Should I respond? Can I explain what that sentence means to someone who doesn't fly fish?



Martin Iyoyo shows off the brown trout before releasing it into the East Walker River near Bridgeport. It was hooked on a size 18 green caddis pupa. Photo/Brendan Burnside

Better get Brendan Burnside to do the talking. The guide for Tahoe Fly Fishing put me through the South Lake Tahoe outfitter's introductory course this week.

I don't fish, but I have fished – just never with a fly. Going with dad meant putting the worm on the hook, waiting for hours and wondering why people did this hour after hour.

Something about the beauty of fly fishing has captivated me for years; always wanting to know more about this sport. Watching people cast can be mesmerizing – it looks like art, a dance of sorts. That arc of the line. Fish jumping through the air. The idyllic scenery.

Or maybe it's like Burnside said, the movie "A River Runs Through It" is still getting people interested in fly fishing. Or maybe Brad Pitt has something to do with the allure. I'm not sure how long I've wanted to cast a line – maybe 20 years.

It's been 20 years since that Robert Redford film came out. And just this week I cast my first line.



Plenty of bugs to choose from at Tahoe Fly Fishing. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Cast No. 1, was, um, not so great. My natural instinct was to want to stand sideways to the target as though I were throwing a ball or even serving a tennis ball.

Burnside squared me toward the target. Very awkward feeling. But he's the boss, and considering this 36-year-old has been at this since he was a teenager, I decided I should listen.

He tells me guys tend to want to muscle the line to the fish, while women learn the finesse of the sport fairly quickly. Just a little pressure with that statement. In some ways it's like golf where technique is more critical than the bicep bulge. It's also about patience in order to be precise.

A loose grip is needed on the pole. I grab it like it's a Western grip on a tennis racket.

Soon the end of the line is where the fish would be if there were fish.

See, in this introductory course it's about getting the rookie to see if she likes the whole idea of the sport before going out to one of the multitude of watering holes in the area.

Then there's the whole education part – from equipment to attire to flies.



Guide Brendan Burnside explains how to cast.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

The latter is what can make or break a fly fishing experience.

“These fish are incredibly fast and smart,” Burnside explains. “If they know it’s not a real bug, they spit it out fast.”

Bugs – that’s what the pros call them. That’s because they look like the bugs the fish would eat in the wild. The size, color and shape are critical in that they mimic as close to possible real bugs.

“They all imitate something that lives in the Sierra. The bugs follow the color of the seasons,” Burnside says as he points to the oodles of “bugs” for fishermen to buy. “We are using green now because it’s still spring.”

Stonefly, caddis, mayfly and midges are the four basic groups.

Burnside brings out a tray that has fermenting bugs to show how the fake bugs resemble what nature creates.

The entomology of fly fishing is what needs to be learned. It won’t matter how good someone casts if what’s on at the other end isn’t something the fish would eat.

“It’s part of the challenge and game we play with trout,” Burnside said.

Dry flies are the adult stage of the bug. They are mayfly, caddis, attractor, hoppers and stonefly. All are used on the surface.



Like most sporting goods stores, Tahoe Fly Fishing has something for all ability levels.

Photo/Kathryn Reed

Hoppers – that’s short for grasshopper. They are a huge food source for trout.

“On the East Carson we see blue hoppers,” Burnside said.

The reason the fly needs to get so close to the fish is that trout are known for being lazy. They tread water, so to speak, waiting for the current to bring them food. They see something they like and they go for it. They know what bugs they want – that’s why what’s on the end of the line needs to look like a bug the fish are used to eating and what they want that day or hour.

All trips through Tahoe Fly Fishing are catch and release. Barbs are crimped at the end.

Burnside calls the fish his “business partners” – decimating the fishing holes would put guide service companies out of business.

But one thing that isn’t being done that could be, according to Tahoe Fly Fishing owner Victor Babbitt, is promoting the variety of fishing in Lake Tahoe – not just fly.

“Sixty million Americans fish. It’s the No. 1 recreation activity in the nation,” Babbitt told *Lake Tahoe News*. “You can hardly find it on the LTVA website.”

Until he started blogging on the visitors’ authority’s website, it was hard to find fly fishing, Babbitt said.

“We have a big, huge lake with fish. Why aren’t we targeting fishermen? It flabbergasts me,” Babbitt said.

While the tourism gurus may not recognize the value of fishing in Tahoe and area lakes and rivers, Babbitt is getting the word out. With a mild winter and spring, his business is doing well. When the water subsides in August, it could be a

different story.

But as Burnside told this rookie angler, he would always pick September and October as the best times to fish in the Sierra because the water temp is the most consistent.

It's back to learning.

Knowing how fish react to water temperatures, light, food sources – it's what's needed before the first line is cast for the day.