

The Art of Fly Fishing



Fly fishing is to deep sea fishing what ballet is to head-banging. It requires patience, planning, choreography, and a whole lot of technical knowledge. Giselle Whiteaker takes the bait.





“Have you ever fly fished before?” asks Angus optimistically, his shoulders slumping ever so slightly when I answer with an apology. Angus Campbell is not as his name suggests. He hails from South Africa, and today at The Old Swan and Minster Mill in the Cotswolds, he is teaching me the art of fly fishing. An art I am not convinced I am capable of grasping.

If I can master the basics, this is the perfect place for a spot of fly fishing. Courtesy of its history as a mill, the Old Swan and Minster Mill sits right on the River Windrush – the water course in fact winding through the heart of the property. The Minster Mill’s mile-long stretch of river is host to large numbers of fish, including trout, grayling, perch, chub, roach and dace. Whether or not I can lure those fish onto my line remains to be seen.

Angus leads me to an open patch of lawn where he can instruct me on the fine art of casting. We run through a quick equipment briefing before he

hands me a moderate-length rod with a thin strip of white line attached. “Fly fishing,” he says “... is a sport requiring skill, patience and angling knowledge.” I possess none of these characteristics, but nod enthusiastically.

With a deft flick of the wrist, Angus sends his line whistling effortlessly through the air in a perfect arc, touching down gently on the grass around fifty feet away, like a butterfly landing on a blossom. I assume the casting position, somewhat reminiscent of a golfing stance; toes pointed towards my goal and flick my wrist. The line whips quickly out, snaps back, and lands around ten feet away. “Perhaps a little less force?” suggests Angus.

Each time I cast Angus offers tips as to how I can improve, and it is not long before I am achieving both distance and form. My heavier line may not quite float through the air like a dandelion seed, but Angus is nodding and smiling with each turn, encouraging my efforts.

“You’ve got it,” he says before long. “Let’s go fish.” He leads me back to his car and shrugs into a camouflage vest with an enormous number of pockets crammed full of unidentifiable fishing-related items. Exchanging my training rod for one almost twice my height, Angus picks up a hand net and strides along the side of the river, clearly keen to get started.

As we walk, Angus scanning the river for suitable spots, he explains the science behind the sport. This is about more than throwing a hook, line and sinker into the water and hoping something bites. Fly fishing is a thinking man’s sport. Dedicated fly fishermen know which fish are in the water; which insects they like to eat, and what those insects look like at each stage of their development. This determines which fly has the highest chance of success.

The fly itself is also a finely-tuned work of art. At first glance it looks like a hook with an Indian headdress, but it is oh so much more. The fly impersonates an



insect at a particular life stage, and this will determine its shape, weight, and colour. Flies are categorised as either imitative or attractive. Imitative flies mimic food items, while attractive flies do what's on the box, attempting to capture fishy interest through other tactics. There is something intrinsically beautiful about the small box full of multi-coloured, intricately-knotted treasures.

"Flies can be fished floating on the surface, partially submerged, or below the surface," explains Angus. A dry fly can represent an insect landing on the surface of the water; or emerging from the water, like a dragonfly or mayfly. Sub-surface flies resemble a variety of aquatic insect larvae or nymphs, and wet flies mimic minnows or leeches.

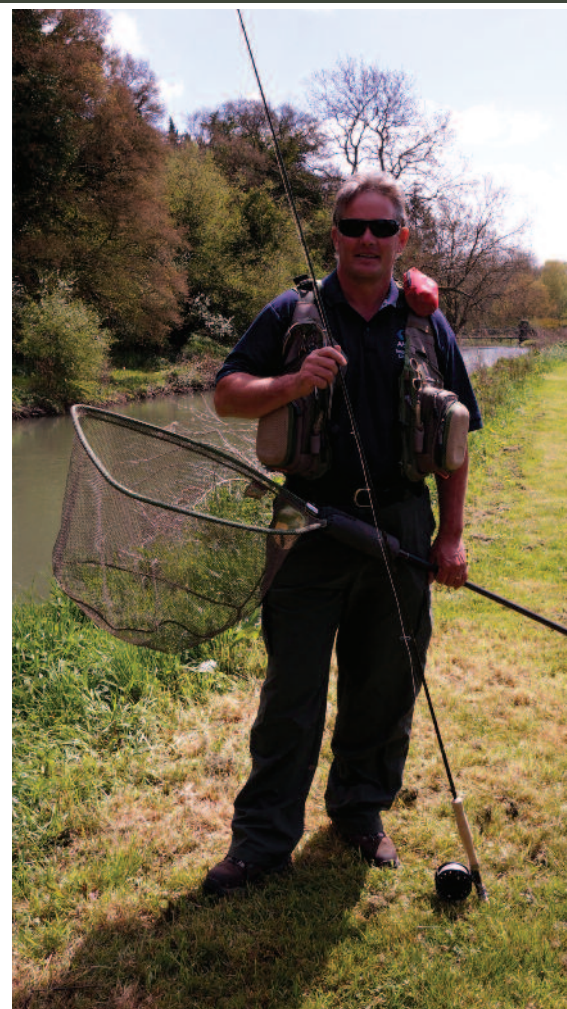
Angus selects a dry fly with a puff of fuzzy black hair and ties it onto my line. He leads me to the river bank and instructs me to wear my sunglasses. Given the lack of sun in the British skies, I had wondered why they were on the

essential list. Understanding dawns as I twitch the rod nervously, the fly jiggling on the end, its sharp hook glinting in the sun. Angus stands clear as I concentrate and hold my breath, flicking my wrist and sending the line out. It may not break records for smooth elegance, but the fly plops onto the top of the water and before I can express my disappointment Angus flashes his pearly whites at me. "Now, you're fishing," he exclaims.

Throughout the day Angus offers pointers on how I can improve my technique. I learn how to dry a sodden fly by flicking it through the air in a semi-cast, before letting it complete the arc. I also learn a lot about the theory of fly fishing. I start trying to aim when I cast, instead of crossing my fingers and hoping for the best. The basic idea is to start on one side of the river, slowly moving across the face of the water with each cast, to cover every inch. While our prey is likely to be hugging the banks, there is a chance of it moving into the faster flowing centre and control is an important technique to master.

It is early in the season, so catching anything is a long shot. My noisy multiple casts have not helped, so we move further upstream. The boggy ground and the slight breeze swirling in the air add to the challenge. The slow pace of cast, and re-cast lull us into a sense of peace, the silence broken only by the occasional whizz of a line, or squelch of the mud underfoot as we adjust our positions.

While we fail to catch anything, by late afternoon I am casting proficiently. Nearly every cast lands more or less where I intend, apart from the one that I send hurtling into mid-air with so much force that it snags on the bushes on the other side of the river. Angus snaps the line in two matter-of-factly, not in the least perturbed, before selecting a new fly for me. He later admits that he's impressed that he is only one fly down. He also points out that I have tied only one knot in the line,



a rookie error from twisting and tangling the line in flight.

My right forearm is starting to feel the strain when we call it a day. While I leave empty-handed, preparing stories of the one that got away, there is a sense of tranquility I take with me. Like the fish hiding under the water, I too may be lured back to the line in the coming months. For now, I'm off to The Old Swan for dinner. I hope they have trout on the menu.

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