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Beyond the Cast: Unveiling Personal Insights Through Fly Fishing

written by Conrad Pfalzgraf

Whether you're a seasoned angler or a curious beginner, fly fishing offers more than the pursuit of fish. This sport blends skill, tranquility, and a deep appreciation for the natural world. It challenges your physical abilities while demanding mental resilience. This meditative practice immerses you in a realm of silence—free from distractions and screens—allowing for a profound connection with nature. The fish don't care about your identity or achievements; instead, they teach humility, discipline, and patience. As Henry David Thoreau eloquently said, *"Many men go fishing all of their lives without knowing that it is not fish they are after."* This mindful pursuit transforms every fishing trip into an escape, where the true challenge lies not just in the catch but within yourself.



Conrad fly fishing the upper reaches of the Wenatchee River outside of Leavenworth, WA.

Fly fishing is a distinctive angling technique that employs artificial ‘flies’ to entice fish. Unlike some traditional fishing that relies on bait, fly fishing focuses on casting lightweight lures designed to imitate the natural prey of fish. This method emphasizes not only skillful casting and precise presentation but also the ability to replicate the movements of the fly in order to place it effectively in environments where fish are likely to be found. A thorough understanding of

aquatic ecosystems enhances this practice, allowing anglers to connect with their surroundings and increase their chances of landing a fish. Enthusiasts appreciate not only the thrill of the catch but also the tranquility and beauty of their surroundings, making fly fishing a distinct blend of sport and serenity. On the water, you are as much a part of the ecosystem as it is a part of you.



Mouth of the Mousam River sandflats at sunrise, Kennebunk, Maine.

Historical Evolution

Picture yourself on the tranquil banks of a river, a coastal flat, or a picturesque inland lake at dawn. As you prepare to cast your line, you may not yet realize that your cast connects you to a tradition stretching back two millennia. Fly fishing traces its roots back to ancient Rome, where innovative Macedonian fishermen crafted artificial flies to lure their catch.

Centuries later, Dame Juliana Berners' 15th-century *A Treatise of Fishing with an Angle* laid the groundwork for modern fly fishing. While the use of artificial flies in fishing can be traced to ancient cultures, it was during this period that anglers began to fully appreciate their effectiveness.

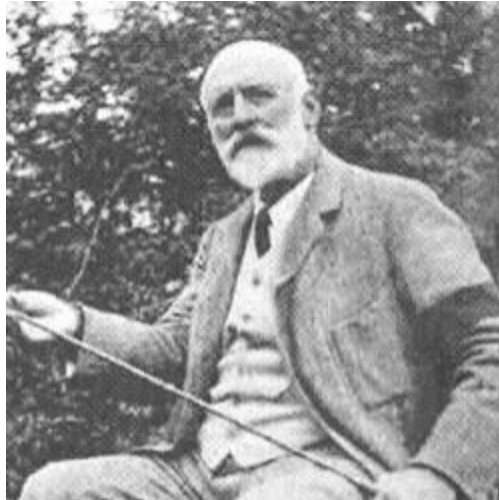
DAME JULIANA BERNERS

A TREATISE OF FISHING WITH AN ANGLE



Cover of Dame Juliana Berners' book *A Treatise of Fishing with an Angle* (photo taken from [Amazon book cover](#)).

A significant transformation occurred when Frederick Halford popularized dry fly fishing in the 19th century. This innovative technique uses delicate, lightweight flies designed to float on the water's surface, closely mimicking the behavior of real insects.



Frederick Halford with his fly rod, preparing to cast his dry flies.

The 19th century marked a key era of innovation, characterized by advances in synthetic materials and rod designs that revolutionized the art of fly fishing, which shaped the sport as we know it today.

The Art and Science of Fly Fishing

Fly fishing is a beautiful fusion of art and science, demanding not only creativity but also keen analytical skills. Anglers must predict where fish are likely to gather, meticulously observing their surroundings and adapting their strategies accordingly. Each cast becomes a living experiment—a theory tested in the flowing waters—where both successes and failures serve as valuable lessons for future outings. Much like a painter varies their brush strokes, no two casts are the same, each reflecting the angler's unique style and intuition.

Figures like Lefty Kreh transformed the art of fly casting, crafting accessible techniques that empowered thousands, similar to how Andy Warhol redefined American pop art with innovation and accessibility. The artistry of fly fishing further extends to fly tying, where each meticulously crafted fly is designed to

mimic the natural food sources of targeted fish. This intricate practice invites anglers to unleash their creativity, experimenting with colors, textures, and materials—using feathers, hairs, and threads with precision. Every fly is tied with intention, considering both the fish's preferences and the ever-changing environmental conditions, making the angling experience not just a sport, but a heartfelt expression of artistry in nature.



Rainbow trout and Conrad's flies, family fly fishing trip, Cle Elum, Washington.

In freshwater streams, rivers, and lakes, anglers often imitate insects or minnows, which requires precision and a deep understanding of the aquatic ecosystem. In saltwater environments, techniques shift to mimicking crabs, shrimp, and small baitfish to target prized species in the Gulf, including crevalle jack, Florida pompano, red drum, tripletail, and speckled trout. Anglers can sight fish for these species by watching for blowups on bait or observing tailing behavior. While much of the fishing for these species involves casting blindly and replicating the natural movement of the bait type the flies were modeled after, it also demands a keen awareness of the surrounding area and what lies beneath the water's surface.



Conrad's drone photo of a school of crevalle jack, Gulf Shores, Alabama.

Anglers keenly seek out sandbars, grass beds, and various structures, always on the lookout for signs of activity, such as fish tailing or chasing bait. The adage 'think like a fish' resonates throughout the fishing community, but truly grasping this mindset requires the dedication of countless hours spent on the water.

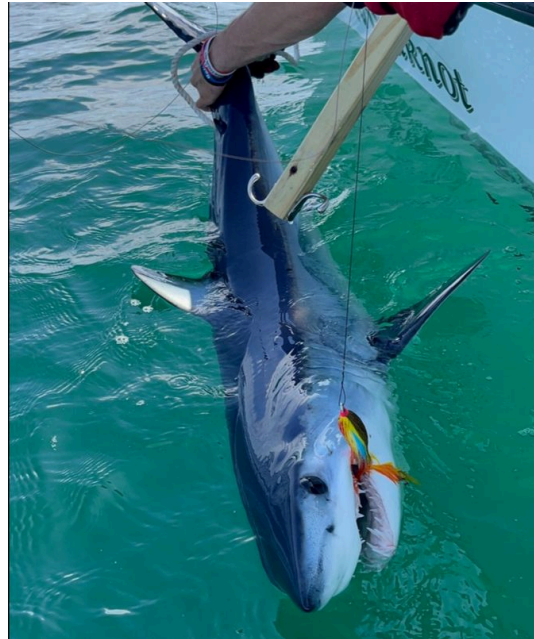
Thrill Factor

"We go through life with a diminishing portfolio of enthusiasms. We strive to find moments that deliver an immense jolt of electricity, experiences that transcend the ordinary and evoke a profound sense of aliveness."

- Jim Harrison

Beyond tranquility, fly fishing can also be an adrenaline rush. In the film "[Tarpon](#)," Jim Harrison eloquently expressed that "we go through life with a diminishing portfolio of enthusiasms. We strive to find moments that deliver an

immense jolt of electricity, experiences that transcend the ordinary and evoke a profound sense of aliveness.” In this context, fly fishing for sharks emerges as a perfect embodiment of that electrifying experience. Here, the stakes rise as anglers adopt a more dynamic approach, shifting from precise tactics to loud, erratic styles that mimic the frantic motions of injured baitfish, requiring skill and knowledge of predator-prey interactions.



Shark flies and mako shark courtesy of George Norris, Gulf of Maine

This exhilarating pursuit encapsulates fly fishing at its most thrilling. Engaging with powerful predators fosters a deeper respect for the ocean's ecosystems and creates a unique blend of excitement and mindfulness.

Conservation and Community

No matter the setting, fly fishing is deeply intertwined with efforts to conserve aquatic and marine environments. Fly fishing allows many anglers to actively advocate for the preservation of essential ecosystems—such as rivers, streams, and coastal habitats—while championing the protection of diverse fish populations.



Conrad and a red drum, Grand Bay, Mississippi. Photo courtesy of Danielle McAree.

Internationally, organizations such as the [Bonefish and Tarpon Trust](#), [Trout Unlimited](#), and the [Atlantic Salmon Federation](#) play pivotal roles in these initiatives, working tirelessly to ensure sustainable practices and promote awareness of the importance of conserving these precious natural resources for future generations.



Drone shot of the Mississippi Bayou by Conrad Pfalzgraf.

Closer to home, the Mississippi Gulf Coast boasts overlooked yet vibrant fisheries teeming with life and diversity. If you're on the Gulf and interested in picking up this art form, there are numerous areas and resources available to explore. To see what's near you, you can view one of our past [Extension publications](#), the [Fly Fishers International Gulf Coast Council website](#) for certified clubs, or [Captain Experiences](#) for guiding services.

Other clubs, charters, and guiding services that can help you get started include, but are not limited to:

[Gulf Coast Fly Fishers Club](#)
[Magnolia Fly Fishers](#)
[Mississippi Gulf Coast Big Game Fishing Club](#)
[Mississippi Gulf Fishing Banks Inc.](#)
[Alabama Coastal Fisherman's Association](#)
[Bon Secour Butchers](#)
[Eastern Shore Fly Fishers](#)
[Mobile Bay Kayak Fishing Association](#)
[Mobile Big Game Fishing Club](#)
[Flyway Charters](#)
[Richard Schmidt Fly Fishing](#)

[Sunny Side Up Fishing](#)

Alternatively, consider visiting Hops and Growlers, a local brewery in downtown Ocean Springs owned by an enthusiastic fly fisherman, where you can enjoy good beer while engaging in thoughtful conversations about local fishing tips. Whether you're a beer lover or a fishing enthusiast interested in the art of fly fishing, this inviting establishment offers a unique experience for all.

Memories Beyond the Catch

Ask any angler, and they'll tell you the experience extends far beyond the catch. While photos may capture the attention of those back on land, it's the wildlife encountered, the laughter shared, and the memories created that enrich our journeys. Many of my favorite fishing memories are not solely tied to the fish caught but to the time spent with my best friends, mother, father, sister, and grandfather. As I grow older, I realize that while you may release the fish, the memories are yours to treasure forever, even as some of those individuals you shared those memories with drift away with the tide of life. No one can ever take those moments from you; they remain a lasting testament to the connections forged during your time on the water.



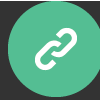


Conrad's dad in awe as a nurse shark swims right up while fly fishing in the Turks and Caicos Islands.

If you're ready to embrace the next challenge—not just in your physical skills but also in your mental dexterity—then fly fishing may be the perfect pursuit for you. Continue to seek out experiences that push your boundaries, for it is during challenging moments and frustrations that you discover the most about yourself. This captivating endeavor is steeped in a rich history that countless anglers have navigated before you. By engaging in fly fishing, you become part of a timeless tradition, forging connections with nature and with the myriad adventurers who have cast their lines in pursuit of something greater. Embrace the journey, and let each experience shape you into a better angler and a more resilient individual.



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