

Leaders for Lilliput Water ‘Whisper Rods’

Ed Herbst



A good small stream rule of thumb is that the leader should roughly match the rod's length minus six inches to a foot or so. Practically, this means having more line out and working than the leader.

William C. Black *Creek Craft – The Art of Flyfishing Smaller Streams* 1988

I tied on my standard length of fresh 5x tippet, in other words as long as my arm, which I can tell from years of holding the end of the spool under my chin and extending my arm full stretch with the spool under my chin with the spool unwinding in my other hand. That's how I measure my standard tippets. That works out at about thirty inches. Ed uses a ruler marked in millimeters. There's a fundamental difference in our approach here - I go by feel, he goes by formula – but so far the trout don't seem to have noticed the difference.

Tom Sutcliffe *Hunting Trout* 2002

Mono leaders

For me, small stream fly fishing was about enjoyment, enjoyment without frustration, enjoyment in comfort, the total experience not measured or determined in the number of trout caught, but how they were caught.

I gave up hunting in my teens after wounding an animal but I never forgot the tension and excitement of air rifle hunting, the need to get close, the need for stealth in stalking, the need for accuracy. I wanted to replicate and recall those memories in my fly fishing while making it as gentle and delicate as possible – the .410 approach rather than the 12 bore.

For me that meant short leaders that I could control.

Bob Miller lives for the Trico hatch and fishes size 22 – 24 flies on 7 x tippets on light line rods.

In his 1997 book on Trico fishing he discusses leader length and I feel his views on leaders are just as applicable to someone fishing a size 14 Royal Wulff on a stream near Cape Town or in the rhododendron-closeted brook trout streams that Chris Barclay fishes with his short fiberglass rods in the Blue Ridge Mountains:

In my early days of fishing dries, everything I read or heard about dry fly leaders claimed that they had to be long; up to fourteen feet or more in length. Thank God I didn't believe that. It didn't take me long to realize that to cast a long leader well requires holding a lot of fly line in the air along with the leader. While over the years my involvement in small fly fishing has increased, the length of my leaders has decreased to the point that I don't fish any leader over nine and one half feet in length, regardless of the circumstances. My reason is that I just don't cast a longer leader very well. Since Trico fishing is primarily made up of short casts, a long leader can be a hindrance.

The long and the short of leaders is that they be kept fine. The length should be whatever you cast best.

It was Charles Ritz, famous hotelier and fanatical fly fisher who created the baseline which determined current thinking on the design of conventional tapered leaders – sixty percent butt, twenty percent transition section and twenty percent tippet. The sixty percent of the longer butt section should have a gradual taper involving three sections of nylon in declining diameter, the short, fast-tapering transition section would be three pieces of six inch nylon leading to the tippet.

When Chezgh-nymphing master Jiri Klima visited our streams in Cape Town I watched him build a leader with three sections of mono, each the length between his outstretched hands.

I didn't time the construction process but I'd say that two minutes was about right – to save time he bit off the lengths of nylon.

A small stream leader tied to Art Lee's formula would take much longer and require more finger dexterity than I possess. Here's one of the 15 leader formulae – ranging from six feet to 4 x to 20 feet to 7 x – in his book *Fishing Dry Flies for Trout on Rivers and Streams* (Atheneum, 1982):

6 feet – 4x

Diameter – inches	Length – inches
.020"	13"
017"	10"
015"	8"
013"	7"
011"	5"

010"	4"
009"	3"
008"	2"
007"	20"

For me, knotting two and three inches of mono together would be both difficult and boring.

I also have a problem with the butt diameter of this formula.

When I started fly fishing 40 years ago, I read a chapter 'The fallacy of the stiff leader' in Richard Walker's 1982 book *Dick Walker's Trout Fishing*.

Walker averred, correctly, that the difference in flexibility between the fly line and a stiff mono leader resulted in an open loop presentation to the detriment of accuracy – here's the critical sentence in which he compares mono to its more flexible predecessor, silk worm gut:

The reason stiff nylon or other plastic don't cast well is that they won't bend into so tight a loop.

That being the case, a heavy-butt, or should I say, large-diameter butt leader, becomes a liability when you try to cast tight loops because it is simply much stiffer than the more flexible fly line and does not smoothly continue the energy transfer as the loop unfolds when it reaches the junction between fly line and leader.

This is particularly important when roll casting which, in my small stream approach, forms the bedrock of the small stream ethos.

George Harvey in the USA was the first to move away from the heavy butt principle going from the .022 of an inch butts that were conventional thirty years ago to 013 of an inch.

Both Harvey and his contemporary, Joe Humphrey provided valuable insights into what they called 'brush fishing' – the approach to tiny streams completely hemmed in by trees and shrubs.

Here's Humphreys' 1989 brush fishing leader formula keeping in mind that this was for a 6-weight rod and it therefore starts at .017":

11 inches of 017

9 inches of .015

9 inches of .013

10 inches of .011 (0X)

9 inches of .009 (2X)

9 inches of .008 (3x)

14 inches of .007 (4x)

That's a six foot leader tapering to 4x to fish a size 12 Humpy.

Gary Borger then radically simplified leader design by pointing out that the progressive tapering of the leader using shorter and shorter lengths of mono of decreasing diameter as illustrated by the Art Lee example quoted above, was not necessary:

Many fly fishers believe that to build a tapered leader each new segment that's added must be no more than 0.002 smaller than the last segment or the leader will "hinge," i.e. collapse back on itself and not turn over. This is absolutely NOT true In fact, the cross-sectional area of the leader can be reduced by 60 percent and the leader will not hinge.

Here's Borger's nine-foot leader tapering to 4x:

4 feet of .013

1 foot of .010

4 feet of 4x

Borger cautions that when connecting sections of mono of widely-differing diameters one should use his '5/7 blood knot', five turns of the thicker mono and seven of the thinner.

In 2013 Pascal Cognard visited South Africa. He is one of only three people to have won three individual gold medals in the annual FIPS-Mouche world fly fishing championship.

Two articles on the leaders used by the French team can be found in the Tackle folder on the website of the CPS and this is the formula for the 'short regressive' taper which found particular favour with competitive fly anglers who fish the trout streams near Cape Town – a 12-foot leader tapering to 6x.

24 inches of .016

20 inches of .014

15 inches of .012

12 inches of .011

10 inches of .010

8 inches of 3x

6 inches of 5x

Five foot of 6x

Just a caveat on that five-foot 6x tippet – Ed Shenk was a Letort regular along with people like Vincent Marinaro, Charles Fox and Ernest Schweibert, but he loved short, single-piece rods and fishing headwater streams. Two of the chapters in his 1989 book *Fly Rod Trouting* are headed 'Short Fly Rods and 'Jewel of the Headwaters'.

His take on leaders and, in particular, tippets for small streams is succinct:

I usually fish with 10 to 12 foot leaders on more open water, such as the Letort or Falling Spring. My mountain leaders are scaled down versions designed to turn over properly at close range. These are seldom longer than 9 feet. Butt sections are seldom more than .017 inches and I top out at 4x or 5x, usually the latter. These shorter leaders seem to turn over

better if the tippet is no longer than 20 inches, even though tippets of 24 inches are used more often

Extruded leaders

In *Trout from Small Streams* – the best book on the subject – Dave Hughes gives leader design short thrift:

Now I buy 7½-foot leaders as the base for all my small stream fishing...

Tom Sutcliffe agrees in principle. In his wonderful 2002 book, *Hunting Trout* he has this to say in a chapter headed *Dry Fly Leaders for Freestone Streams*:

I use a 9-foot, 4x continuous taper nylon leader with twelve inches cut off the butt to reduce the diameter slightly from the average of say 0.021 inches, down to around 0.017 inches. This gives a butt of around sixty percent of the line-tip diameter. Attach a tippet of 3 to 6 feet of 4,5, or 6x nylon, depending on conditions.

Tim Rolston, Cape Town's leading guide, advocates a similar approach in an article headlined 'Take me to your leader' on his Fishing Gene Blog:

My simplified approach is to use as a base a purchased tapered knotless leader. I use a nine foot leader with a tippet diameter of approximately 2x more than I want to finish up with. Equally I normally put the leader into boiling water for a few minutes and stretch it, this seems to add a level of springiness which better protects the light tippet when fishing, yet another French innovation.

To that is added a compound tippet of two three foot sections of copolymer tippet material, these days most often Stroft which I like very much.

So the base leader is then a 4x tapered leader, 3ft of 5X and 3ft of 6X. On calm days and flat water I may add an additional 3ft of 7 or even 8X to that. That means that most of the time the leader is between 15 and 18 feet long.

Tim can fish an 18-foot leader because he is a casting instructor who has written a book on the subject – I would struggle to control one half that length, particularly if it was windy. My approach is to get as close as possible, fishing from a kneeling position if that is feasible.

If I was still able to fish, I'd buy a nine foot leader tapering to 3x.

I'd cut two foot off the butt, tie a Perfection Loop in that section and loop that through the loop at the end of my silk fly line.

To the 3x tip, I'd attach a foot of 4 x Rio Two-Tone Indicator Tippet – which has alternate sections of fluo pink and yellow - and finish that with a Perfection Loop Knot.

That would give me the option of a loop-to-loop connection to another section of 4x tippet material or 5/6x if I was fishing a small fly.

When fishing a small sunken terrestrial, I would slip the loops apart, insert a small tuft of glo-bug yarn which has been pre-treated with a floatant like Loon Fly Dip. If I changed back to a dry fly I would simply remove the yarn.

Leader length for small streams depends entirely on the stream circumstances - Joe Humphreys used a six foot leader for brush fishing and Chris Barclay, who fishes his beautiful fiberglass rods in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, usually fishes a rod-length leader of around seven feet.

Google Earth and the advent of outstanding short, light-line fiberglass blanks which are relatively inexpensive combined to produce 'Bluelining' – opening new fields of exploration for those who love small stream fly fishing.

Scientific Anglers and Rio were quick to realise the commercial potential of bluelining and to market products catering for the increased interest in small stream fly fishing.

Scientific Anglers produced the Amplitude Smooth Creek Trout fly line with a taper designed to roll cast well at short range. To go with it they produced a six foot extruded leader, the Amplitude Smooth Creek Trout with tippet diameters from 3x to 6x.

Rio's small stream line is the 'Creek'.

Furled leaders

Darrel Martin did us all a favour in 1999 with his chapter on furled leaders in *Micropatterns: Tying and Fishing the Small Fly*.

In 2001, with the assistance of FOSAF, he visited South Africa with Taff Price and demonstrated how to make furled leaders.

Three-foot furled leaders in dark colours for light-line fly rods are now freely available on the market.

Their benefit for small stream anglers is significant, most particularly in the context of their turnover at short range and their soft descent.

Here's a quote from *Micropatterns*:

I took the first furled leader I made into the backyard for a dry cast. I hoped it would extend with a slow, soft cast. My cast pushed the leader out thirty feet. The line landed, but the leader, paralyzed in midcast, hung four feet off the ground. I did not understand. I laid the rod down and walked to the leader. The leader, tippetless, was held in mid-cast by a single strand of spider's web strung across the yard. Evidently, a tender web caught and held the delicate, drifting leader. Surely this was a soft descent. The furled leader makes a difference. A supple thread leader can pitch the pattern softly into the trout's strike zone.

If the small stream angler combines the soft descent of a furled leader with a big, wind-resistant Variant as recommended by Al McClane - or the South African equivalent, the Tony Biggs RAB - the results can be surprising.

The great benefit of such flies is that their soft descent ensures gentle presentation and, if you see them land, they are easy to follow in the drift thereafter.

Stephen Boshoff remembers using a one weight rod and a RAB on a furled leader when he and Peter Brigg fished the tiny Didima stream in the Drakensberg Mountain range in Natal.

He said three 8-10 inch browns simultaneously leapt out of the water and tried to intercept it in mid-air.

The French leader

Jean-Pierre Guillemaud (Piam) became legendary in the 1970s and 80s for his ability to catch big trout in wide, clear and slow-flowing rivers like the Loue and the Ain in the Jura Mountains of eastern France.

He did this with a 25-foot leader tapering to 8x which consisted of eight lengths of mono which became progressively longer as the diameter decreased.

This states the obvious – the longer the leader, the less chance of the trout detecting you visually or being alerted to the alighting fly.

I would struggle to fish a leader of that length with the short rods which I enjoy fishing.

My approach is to wade thigh-deep pocket water concentrating on the bubble line and focusing on a soft descent which means aiming not at the water but above where I think the trout will be holding. The soft descent is achieved either with big hackled Variants or through the aerodynamic effect of the yarn strike indicator which, when used in conjunction with a small and lightly-weighted (1 mm countersunk brass bead) sunken beetle or ant, achieves an automatic tuck cast.

Greased leaders and tippets

The vocal opposition to the greased tippet bemuses me – the greatest inhibitor of dry fly success is drag and the moment any section of the tippet sinks below the surface it is pulled by current causing the dry fly to drag.

Among the members of the Cape Piscatorial Society I am probably alone in advocating greasing the entire leader including the tippet, an approach favoured by Tom Rosenbauer of Orvis and Peter Hayes, author of *Fishing Outside the Box – Emerging Heresies*.

M C Coetzer, the country's most experienced competitive fly angler, is adamant that the rear section of the leader must be greased to enhance lift-off into the back cast, but that the tippet must sink.

Siding with him is the city's most experienced guide, Tim Rolston, and he wrote a cogent article on the subject – 'Should Tippets Float' for his Paracaddis website.

I focused on specific sections of stream – thigh-deep pocket water – and to me the most compelling segment of this debate relates to the first rule of fly fishing – do not let the fish become aware of your presence. That, in part, means not drowning your dry fly on lift-off into the back cast via your sunken tippet and then having that dry fly expel the water so accumulated in a fine, incandescent mist as the back cast ends. A mist which, backlit under our bright African sun, creates a kaleidoscope of colours.

Drone footage of the extent to which the stream surface is disturbed during lift-off has reinforced my view.

Furthermore, a floating fly moving at odds with the current during a dead drift guarantees failure and, in the braided currents found in the knee-deep pocket water which I chose to fish, any part of the tippet which is below the surface instantly causes drag.

I was therefore cheered when Peter Hayes published his fascinating book, *Fly Fishing Outside the Box – Emerging Heresies* in 2013.

He said that the waterproof autofocus cameras which had just become available enabled him to see the leader and the tippet as trout see them

The idea of doing this was not new and he cites the experience of G E M Skues who used an underwater observation chamber constructed by the naturalist Dr Francis Ward. (A photograph can be seen in Paul Schullery's, *The Rise: Streamside Observations on Trout, Flies, and Fly Fishing*).

In a footnote, Peter Hayes says:

This business of sinking the tippet with which I so disagree has been handed down for decades, but actually only for a few of them. Skues, writing in The Way of a Trout with a Fly in 1921 (p 41) referring to what he had learned from looking up through the sunken window of Dr Francis Ward's experimental pond, said that when thrown on the surface dry, the gut was not noticeable from underneath except in the window, and not very noticeable then. Sunken gut he says 'became obvious', and goes on to say that 'the insistence of the dry fly angler on ... absolute dryness of gut and fly seems ... to be thoroughly justified.' So not only did Skues see the same as my camera, but he is clear that keeping your tippet floating was de rigueur up to the 1920s at least. Who was it that led us astray?

What is interesting in the historical chronology on the floating tippet, is that two prominent writers, first Al McClane and then Tom Rosenbauer agree with Hayes.

Al McClane: *The Practical Fly Fisherman*, (Prentice Hall, 1975) Pages 80 – 81

Whether a leader sinks or floats can be a worrisome question to the neophyte. While it is extremely important that the leader be rubbed perfectly straight, I doubt if it matters whether it sinks unless you are fishing a wet fly or nymph which requires that it go under. Traditionalists will raise a bloodshot eye at the idea that a floating leader is just as effective as one sunk below the surface, but I am convinced that trout see it one way or the other, and any attempt to hide it underwater is wasted effort. Trout will even hit the knots in a leader when they're busy gorging on midges. To convince myself, I spent time in a wet suit with scuba gear studying the subject from the trout's point of view; I only came to the conclusion that a sunken leader is more visible with its double image reflecting against the surface when it's an inch or so under the water than a floating leader, which frankly I had more difficulty finding.

Leader shadow on the bottom is of no consequence because from the trout's position, facing the current, his view of the river is horizontal and upward. To a fisherman standing in the water and looking down on the full length of it, the shadow may be alarming, but a trout has no such advantage. The important thing is that the leader makes it possible for an artificial fly to arrive on the stream like a natural insect. And to achieve that depends on how smoothly you present your casts.

Tom Rosenbauer: *The Orvis Guide to Prospecting for Trout* (Lyons Press, 2008) Pages 159 - 160

I originally started greasing my leader with silicone dry-fly paste because I had trouble following my fly in a pocket water stream that never seemed to see the sun. I found I could trace the fly better by looking for the shine of the leader on the water, and it didn't bother the trout at all. Using a greasy leader in other streams because I was too lazy to change leaders or rub mud onto the fly to remove the silicone, I started noticing that drag wasn't as much of a problem - I was getting longer floats. Switching back to a non-treated leader, I could see what was happening: The floating leader was far less affected by currents because it was riding half above the water instead of fully immersed in it. Would you fish a dry fly with a sinking line?

I still like to keep my leader sinking in smooth water, and often use fluorocarbon tippet, especially for the last five feet, because a leader's shadow can disturb a nervous trout. But in riffled water, and in the smooth windows in pocket water where the trout don't see much of your leader, it pays to keep the whole thing floating.

My decision to follow the dictum of Skues, McClane, Rosenbauer and Hayes was primarily and fundamentally based on the water I chose to fish, the water I enjoyed fishing.

Knee-deep pocket water where the braided currents would tug at the sunken portions of tippet causing drag.

I didn't de-grease the tippet when fishing my little sunken beetles and ants because trout in water that deep are always on the watch for surface food and the 1.5 mm countersunk brass bead on the beetle or the weight of the copper wire in the ant would take them just below the meniscus anyway. I couldn't see them in the water but I could see the small yarn indicator the size of a match head and, forward of that, the brightly coloured mono held at the surface by the ever-reliable Mucilin paste.

Hi-vis leaders

In the late 1970s an article on nymphing by Dave Whitlock in *Fly Fisherman* significantly improved my fly-fishing success and enjoyment. He advocated sliding a small piece of brightly coloured fly line onto the leader as a strike indicator. At the time Stren had yellow mono on the market and I combined the two ideas. Since then, competitive angling has given us leader material in a combination of bright colours by companies such as Rio, Scientific Anglers and Hanak which, when greased with Mucilin, help guide the eye of the small stream angler towards the fly. Hi-vis leader material can be combined with Loon Bio Strike mouldable putty on a tippet knot. Another option would be to use black Skafars Neon Wax where the yellow and pink sections of Rio Two Tone tippet material merge.

Boiled leaders

Boiling leaders made of Maxima mono is universal practice among competition fly anglers for a very good reason – it increases the elasticity of the leader giving it a greater shock-absorbing capability on the strike which, in turn, facilitates the use of finer tippets.

A decade ago, MC Coetzer and other members of the South African national team used Google Translate to parse online French articles where they found references to this.

MC asked a friend to experiment.

“When he phoned me back, he said he was literally shaking with excitement”, MC recalls.

To create this stretch, MC advises boiling the Maxima leader in wide coils for two minutes.

Stephen Boshoff advises boiling Maxima leaders in tea which gives them a beautiful brownish tinge, a possible advantage in the peat-stained streams near Cape Town which are a pale amber in colour. Al McClane experimented with leaders of different colours and came to the conclusion that it was debate of no significance – but Stephen’s ritual appeals to me.

The tippet is not boiled.

Elasticity

Darrel Martin says a furled leader may stretch 15% of its total length. If you combine this with the elasticity of boiled Maxima mono, you build in significant shock absorption. For short casts with short rods on small streams you could start with a three-foot furled leader and loop that to three foot of 4 x boiled Maxima for a basic length of six foot. Add a tippet ring to the 4x and add your sections of 5 and 6 x after that.

Tippet rings

One of the significant advantages that competitive fly angling has brought us is the tippet ring which floats as part of a greased leader. A 2mm tippet ring at 4x significantly simplifies changes at the end of the leader.

Line to leader join

When Pascal Cognard visited South Africa in 2013, local fly anglers gained useful insights and two articles, one by Tom Sutcliffe on his website and another article in the Tackle folder of the CPS website by Ian Cox, give useful insights into his leader construction methods and the extent to which he streamlines the line-to-leader join.

Conclusion

The approach of South African small stream anglers is eclectic.

Tom Sutcliffe, like Dave Hughes and Tim Rolston modifies a commercial, knotless leader.

Peter Brigg and I like short, furled leaders designed for light-line rods but use the Sutcliffe/Hughes/Rolston approach if they are not available.

South Africa’s most experienced competitive fly angler, MC Coetzer uses a boiled Maxima leader based on the Pascal Cognard short regressive taper and greases the rear section of the leader.

You can find his 2006 article ‘*Advanced Leader Systems*’ in this folder

In the end, small stream leader choice comes down to whatever works for you in maximising enjoyment and minimising frustration but a maxim which cannot be challenged is that for small stream stalking, a six-foot leader offers more control and ensures more accuracy than a 16-foot one.