Enthusiastic Let’s Go Fishing instructors helped me experience the magic of fly-fishing

by Deborah Lee Luskin
Fishing is a literary sport. People have been writing about it since 1496, when The Treatise of Fishing with an Angle by Dame Juliana Berner was published in Britain, followed by Izaak Walton’s The Compleat Angler in 1653. There’s a similarity between fishing and casting about for the right words.

It was the contemplative nature of fishing, the observational skills required, and the need for imagination that prompted me to give fly-fishing a try. But most fishermen acquire rod and skills as boys; how could a middle-aged woman with no previous experience possibly hope to learn?

Luckily, help was at hand. A few quick keystrokes, and I had signed up for a free Let’s Go Fishing fly-fishing workshop in northern New Hampshire.

Learning the Lines

On a day in early June, I left home at four in the morning to arrive at Coleman State Park for an 8:30 start. It was a rain or shine event, and this particular morning was dark, damp and cold. Happily, instruction began in a large room with a welcome fire.

Kyle Glencross greeted us. He coordinates the Let’s Go Fishing program for the N.H. Fish and Game Department, training the volunteers who deliver programs to families, scouts, school kids and educators. About half the folks in my class were couples who wanted to fish together; the others were a mix of family groups and loners, like me. Some were practiced spin-casters looking to pick up a new skill; most of us were absolute beginners.

We started with an introduction to the equipment essentials of rod, reel and line. Sounds simple enough, but it’s complicated. Line alone varies by type and weight. Just as my brain threatened to become tangled in details of level-line, weight-forward line, double-tapered line, floating-line and sinking-line, instructor Jim Riccardi reassured us that all a beginner needs is an inexpensive kit ready to cast – just like the ones he handed out for us to use.

Before we gave the rods a try, August “Red” Merker imparted some safety tips about how to avoid sinking in our waders and how to navigate in swiftly moving water with a wading stick. He also recommended wearing an inflatable PFD (portable flotation device) – just in case.

By mid-morning, it was time to give casting a try. We layered up and headed out into the raw, damp day to watch Kris Riccardi elegantly demonstrate the four steps of the cast. Students then spread out across the lawn and practiced, while our instructors circulated. Collectively, our eight instructors boasted more than a century of teaching experience. With just 28 participants, we had a better teacher-student ratio than most elite colleges. The personalized coaching paid off: everyone achieved some degree of dry-land success.

Think Like a Fish

Back around the fire, we talked about hypothermia and other issues of water safety, then moved on to fish, food and flies. Jim Prendible provided specimens for us to examine. He explained flight characteristics, wing types and body shape of the stonefly, mayfly, mosquito, midge, crane fly, black fly and three types of caddisfly. It’s the caddisfly that’s most important for fishing in New Hampshire.

After learning about real flies, we began to understand artificial ones. These splendid creations more closely resemble high-fashion earrings than insects found in nature. But that’s the catch: flies are tied to mimic the way fish see the bait: from below and through water. Fishing means learning to think like a fish.

Finally, we thumbed through the water-stained field guides used for identifying insects at water’s edge. Just when it seemed as if we’d need to earn PhDs in aquatic entomology, Jim told us about Fish and Game’s Fishing Report at fishnh.com, which offers tips on what’s hatching and where trout have been stocked.

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Fun with Knots

You really can be a beginner and have success – if you can tie knots. After lunch, we were given three different colored pieces of monofilament. Jesse Tichko taught us knot-tying basics in a game of Simon Says. Step by step, she and Red demonstrated four basic knots on climbing rope, and we followed with our monofilament, learning a surgeon’s loop, a loop-to-loop connection, a surgeon’s knot, and the improved clinch knot. These are the knots used to attach the leader to the tippet to the hook.

It was during this exercise that someone called out, “Don’t let perfect be the enemy of fun!” I liked learning all this new information. I liked tying knots. I was having fun!

Full sun and high wind greeted us for our second session of dry land casting, this time to learn how to handle the line with our off hand. It’s hard to cast into the wind, but it was lovely to be outside and put some of our new knowledge to work.

Back indoors, Bob Backiel was a walking tackle shop. Outfitted in his fishing vest, he gave us a tool-by-tool tour of what he carries and how it’s stowed. He tucks spare leaders, tippets and flies into different pockets, and attaches tools by retractable lanyards, so if he drops his scissors or pliers or wading staff, it doesn’t end up in the drink. Between fishing equipment (including a nifty net that hangs by a magnet from the vest’s collar), safety gear (compass and map, matches, first aid) and comfort items (sunscreen, bug dope and lunch), there’s a lot to bring.

Bob Babula, a retired Conservation Officer, explained fishing rules. Another instructor, Walter Ryan, elaborated on fish identification, which is all about close observation of color, spots, stripes, mouth shape and placement of fins. It’s also helpful to become familiar with fish habitats: to learn which fish thrive in cold or warm water, and which fish prefer moving streams, or seek out quiet shallows and weeds. Identification matters, because there are limits to the size and number of fish that can be legally caught and kept.

Little Diamond

In Sunday morning’s sunshine, we donned waders (provided) and assembled at the edge of Little Diamond Pond for our third lesson in casting. This time, we were each given a fly, which we
tied on with the improved clinch knot. We then spread along the shoreline and waded into the lake.

I immediately caught a branch and lost my fly in the woods. Just as quickly, Walt appeared with another fly and showed me how to keep my line out of the trees with a roll cast. I gave it a try.

I didn’t snag any more branches, but I wasn’t catching any fish. Meanwhile, up and down the shore, I heard cries of, “Fish! Fish! I caught a fish!”

I only had a few nibbles, so when Jim Prendible stopped by, he gave me a bigger fly and some pointers on how to make it look irresistibly delicious— to a fish. I kept casting. Whenever I found myself getting impatient, I looked up: A bald eagle. A pair of loons. Fish rising just beyond my hook.

Jessie waded in and suggested I drop my line further out. I did. My rod bent! The line quivered! Silver flashed! I reeled in a seven-inch brookie! Just as quickly, it spit out the hook and swam away.

Now I have a story to tell. (See, I told you fishing is a literary sport!) Storytelling, like fishing, demands close observation, patient casting, and skillful navigation of the liminal space between reality and imagination. That brook trout I caught? The one that got away? It cast a spell. Fishing is magic, and I’m hooked.


Let’s Go Fishing!

I’m one of thousands of people who have learned to be a safe, ethical and successful angler through New Hampshire’s Let’s Go Fishing program, and I’m grateful to the volunteer instructors who make the program work. They teach everything from basic skills to spin casting and ice-fishing.

Jim Riccardi, the lead teacher for the class I attended, has been a volunteer since the 1990s and helped expand the program to include fly-fishing and fly-tying. Jim even caught a wife, who also volunteers. Kris Riccardi says, “Watching someone fall in love with the sport I love and knowing I helped is one of my very favorite things.”

Instructor Jessie Tichko echoes this sentiment. “I will never get tired of the look on my students’ faces when they finally hook and land a fish.”

I was one of those students, and I will never forget Jim or Kris or Jessie, who have passed on their skills and enthusiasm to me.

These volunteers are passionate anglers whose students arrive from all walks of life and leave with a shared skill that enables them to have a closer connection with nature. This wonderful program is made possible by federal Sport Fish and Wildlife Restoration dollars, funded by an excise tax on fishing equipment and motorboat fuel.

“We’re always on the lookout for new volunteers; you don’t have to be an expert angler to teach people how to fish,” says Let’s Go Fishing Coordinator Kyle Glenncross. Learn more at www.fishnh.com/fishing/lets-go-fishing.html.

~D.L.L.
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