

The hitch-fisher's guide



Having learned the technique in Russia, **UELI ZELLWEGER** believes that taking a salmon on a hitched fly represents the pinnacle of the sport

One of many beautiful bars of silver which the author caught in Russia, often on the hitched fly. This one was taken from the Fall Pool, East Litza.

I've been lucky enough to experience many fantastic trips across the world seeking fly-fishing adventures, but those I made to then Kola peninsula in Russia rank at the very top. I feel extremely privileged to have fished more than 15 different rivers up there. The ultimate was when I was lucky enough to enjoy fishing in the Atlantic Salmon Reserve – two million acres of untouched wilderness, with the four majestic rivers: the Kharlovka, Eastern Litza, Rynda and Zolotaya.

On yet another trip up there a remarkable thing happened. As usual, the twelve guests

for Kharlovka camp had arrived on Saturday in the late afternoon. The conditions for the Sunday morning looked great, and everybody headed off the next morning inspired and in good spirits. It wasn't to be. I blanked, and my partner lost a good fish shortly after connecting. We arrived back at the lodge only to hear similar stories; nobody had an explanation for that disaster, and the general mood in the camp was not good.

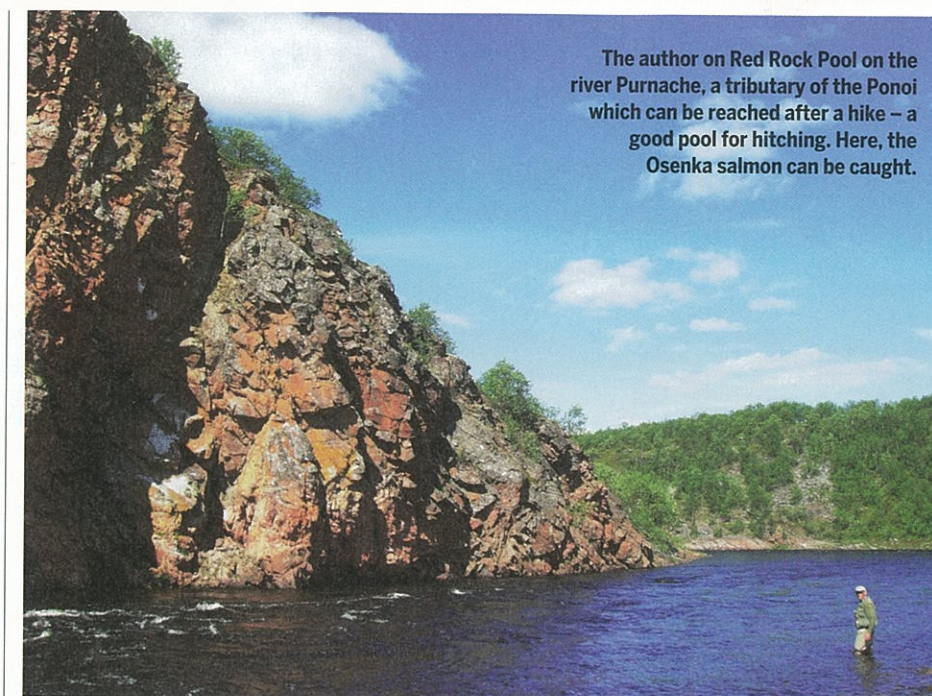
Then the last crew flew in, and their news went through the whole camp like lightning. One chap had banked eleven fish and had lost another three. The lucky man was

the Icelandic musician and singer, Pálmi Gunnarsson. I had met him previously on a trip, and I knew that his preferred way to fish was by hitching the fly. I grinned at him, and asked him "Did you do it again"? He just nodded slightly, smiled and disappeared in his cabin to take a shower.

"THEIR NEWS WENT THROUGH THE WHOLE CAMP LIKE LIGHTNING"

After a superb dinner, I pulled his sleeve and asked him: "Can you show me, please, how you do it?" No problem there; the next morning he explained me the basics, and showed me some of his tricks. It took him not more than three minutes, and he left two of his Sunray Shadow tube flies for me to try.

The same day I didn't try hitching Pálmi's flies, for I believed the pools and runs I was allocated weren't suitable for hitching. But the next day I started fishing on Eastern Litza's Fall Pool – no doubt one of the very top pools in the whole Kola Peninsula. It is fished by standing high up on the rocks and casting out



The author on Red Rock Pool on the river Purnache, a tributary of the Ponoï which can be reached after a hike – a good pool for hitching. Here, the Osenka salmon can be caught.

over a deep pool with the water almost looking pitch black. There I was, all on my own, fiddling around with hitching the fly. It just didn't work. Either the wind gushing through this canyon would topple over my line or leader, and the fly on the leader would be blown the wrong way at the last instance, or the foam bubbles stemming from the high falls would interrupt the correct drift of my fly.

Vee wake

I must have flogged this very pool at least 50 times from the very spot where I had started. Then it happened. The line went out square across the pool, the leader turned over correctly, I put in a small downstream mend and the Sunray Shadow started to hitch, drawing a beautiful 'vee' wake in the surface film. I was really pleased and thought: "now it's doing well". The thought was still there when it happened. A fish came up like a rocket, took the fly, and disappeared into the abyss quickly, but obviously safely hooked. My Hardy reel started its beautiful music and kept going for a while. For a good minute there was plenty zig-zagging deep down, but then the water exploded; three marvellous jumps followed. The fish was finally safely netted by my gillie – an astonishing looking, 100% pure silver hen of 25 pounds with three sea lice on it.

Of course, I was over the moon and can only say that ever since then, whenever I come across a pool which looks promising to hitch, I try it. The next year I also was lucky enough to fish Eastern Litza. That year the usually very good Tent Pool was not fishing well. It's the very pool where Chris Tarrant had caught his 45lb trophy. However, this year, nobody could explain why it wasn't producing. When I arrived at this pool early morning I had asked the guys who fished it the previous day. They, again, had blanked on this previously reliable pool.

I thought to myself that cannot be, and



A range of flies (and suitable hooks) for hitching.

started hitching. Cast number ten, and I was into a fish and I caught another one some 20 minutes later, again hitching.

Another very happy memory stems from fishing Tolstoi Pool on the Rynda. I had fished the pool with no reaction, but had noticed that 250 yards downstream three boulders were lying midstream and looked promising. I waded down over tricky ground towards them, and started hitching. As they fly neared the rocks, a very nice fish jumped over my fly. He did it again on my next cast. He didn't show up on my third cast, but on my cast number ➤



Perfect for hitching: the author's son fishes a pool on the Barle

four he jumped as before and grabbed the fly, diving down again. I knew instantly I was in trouble. There was no way I could wade further down, and to play this fish and land it all

on my own midstream of the Rynda's flow. It would be impossible. I signalled to my gillie to come in and help, but he signalled me back, indicating he couldn't do it, for he found it too

dangerous and risky. What to do? This was a beautiful fish, and I certainly was not ready to give up easily. Hence I eventually turned myself round, put my rod on my left shoulder and walked him slowly back up through this bouldery ground until I reached the bank. The gillie shook his head in disbelief at what he just had witnessed, tagged this immaculate 15-pounder, and released him without any other comment!

I have had further successful hitching over several years on the mighty river Pono. With its run of at least 35,000 salmon a year this river certainly is world-class. Most of the fish on the Pono in June are the so-called Osenka salmon. That means these fish have run up the previous autumn, had spent the whole winter under ice, yet were still fit and eager enough to come up for a hitched dry fly. And they would come up even for very small flies. I had fish after fish on 1/2-inch tubes, but only if those flies were hitching properly.

And I had fish on all sorts of fly patterns and colours on these tubes, which brings me to the thinking that whenever the fly is hitching correctly neither the size, nor the colour, nor the pattern of the fly is the crucial thing; no, it's the correct 'vee' wake which awakens and attracts even semi-dormant fish. And the takes can be anything from explosive, to grabbing firmly, to so subtle and gentle that you hardly see any commotion at the surface.

I have caught several fish on a special pool



Often fresh fish like this one are susceptible to the hitched fly, but stale fish will also react to it.

on the Rynda just 600 yards downstream of the camp. The takes on that pool were always very smooth and subtle; one or two I had thought I had seen no disturbance at the surface film whatsoever. How these fish grab the flies in this fashion is a mystery. Do they do it by sucking the hitched fly down?

Ways to hitch

Now there are two different ways of hitching. Either it can be done with conventional salmon flies by throwing a clove-hitch or two over the eye of the hook, or it can be done by using tubes. See the article (June issue) on fishing the Blue Charm hitched for the former method.

With tubes, one can also throw a hitch

around the head of the tube, but in my view the far better and easier way is to have the line going through a small hole in the tube, some 4 – 6 mm behind or below the conventional eye. Most important when fishing tube flies hitched is that you use an adequate floating line, a floating leader and an adequate hook, which can be anything from hook size 8 through to 16, so long as it is light enough not to drag the fly underwater. Once again, I stress that the crucial thing is the vee wake the fly produces when cruising across the surface film. It is this fly action which makes trigger the fish's aggression.

Art Lee in his book *Tying and Fishing the Riffing Hitch*, claims the technique to be "the ultimate technique for catching salmon and steelhead". However, he doesn't mention

hitching with tube flies which, in my belief, is easier and more successful.

There is also the fly Yellow Dolly – a short tube with a 'skirt' of clipped deer hair, a salmon dry fly created by Derek Knowles sometime in the 80s and most successful they were too. It was claimed, "This man was a visionary way before his time and many of his methods are still in use today."

Having read his book, *Salmon on the Dry Fly*, I had tied some of his Yellow Dollies for my own use and tried them out on different rivers with mediocre success.

Back to my experience on the banks of different rivers. I have fished hitched flies for steelhead in British Columbia. Again, hits and takes varied from subtle to an aggressive grab.

Hitching in UK?

Hitching works also very well on my own little gem of a river called the Barle within Exmoor National Park. The late Christopher Robinson, the founder and owner of Roxtons, the fieldsports agency, fished all his life on the Barle, and showed me several smallish pools where he said he'd caught numerous fish – and where I had surmised it was impossible – to catch by hitching. Sometimes I tried to fish a Bomber hitched. Especially in warm weather or during mid-summer and in full sunshine, and fish came up for that fly, often repeatedly.

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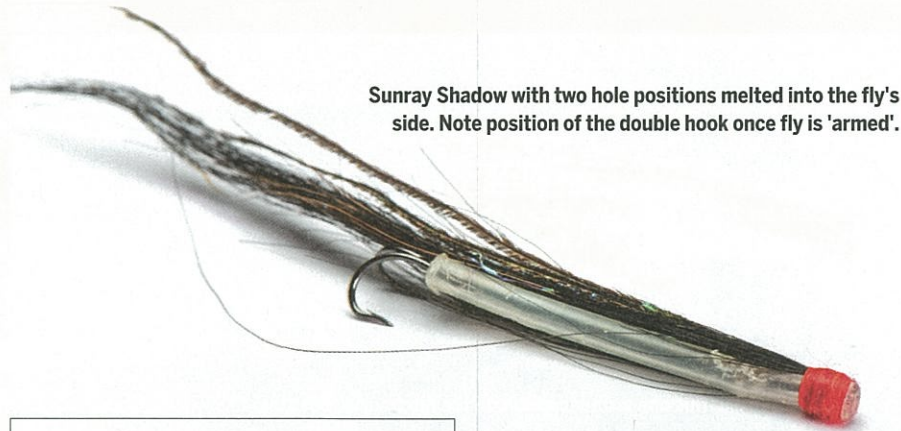


Bomber flies can also work hitched at the eye.

Bomber thrills

Once, I had a trophy fish on. It grabbed my Bomber, took all my line and then 80 metres of backing on top of that. I just had noticed there was a good lie way out in this huge pool. I had cast out and fed backing and let the Bomber drift down all the way so I could then cover this lie. So there I was, with this possible 30-pounder on the end of my line, and me standing high up on a rock with no way to climb down to get to the water's edge. The fish kept cruising up and down in the pool whilst I yelled for Nikola – my gillie. But Nikola was some 500 yards downstream, busy with my partner of the week, and the fish finally earned its freedom.

My partner that week was the most interesting person I ever met whilst fishing. It was the famous Japanese editor, Yasuji Sug-



Sunray Shadow with two hole positions melted into the fly's side. Note position of the double hook once fly is 'armed'.



Small hitching tube with leader and hook attached.

ai. Far older than me, and way into his seventies, this guy never failed to impress. Nikola would lead me to the remotest pools, where we had to creep up over boulders and through thickets, with no trail to guide us. There was never any doubt that Sugai would catch up with us, albeit 20 minutes later. I

even saw him wading where nobody else dared to wade.

Sugai has published a fantastic book, *Salmon Dance*, edited by Orri Vigfússon, who also wrote the foreword about salmon fishing, which he certainly had done across the globe. Sugai always carried with him one or two bigger cameras and assorted lenses, apart of all his fishing tackle and gear. He took phenomenal shots. I remember he took special photos when I had banked another cracking fish. He was there on the bank with the fish immediately, focussing especially on the eyes of this beauty. He showed me some of these shots. They were really special. I like to look at his photos from time to time. And whenever I do, it's not unusual that my own eyes grow damp when doing so.



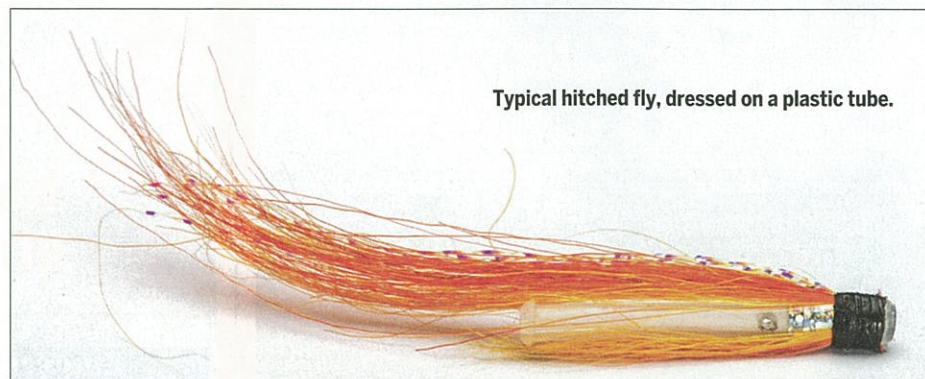
Yellow Dolly with leader attached through a hole in the side of the tube.



This Yellow Dolly hides a wide-gape single. When hitched through the hole in the side the small, deer-hair dressed fly ripples at the surface with enhanced movement.



Note the hole melted into the fly's side to allow the nylon to be threaded through, rather than conventionally at the front. The best position for the hole is generally one-fifth of the tube-length back from the front, and at an angle of 80° to the tube.



Typical hitched fly, dressed on a plastic tube.

The fly-fisher's guide to Hitching

To see a fish coming up and grabbing the fly is a treat itself. When fishing a fly traditionally you hardly ever see a take. Generally, hitching for salmon can be tried in any water conditions. Fresh salmon do tend to be more aggressive; but even stale fish will sometimes show interest.

It is an amazing sight to see salmon following or chasing hitched flies, sometimes even in turbulent waters.

A good floating line and a floating leader are crucial. Fluorocarbon certainly is out (it sinks), as also are wrong hooks (heavy hooks drag the fly down). For hitching correctly length of leader is important. When fishing single-handed rods aim for a rod-length leader, and for double-handers I always did well with about 8 – 10 foot leaders – tapered if possible.

The best hitching conditions for certain is on long glides with a smooth, mirror-flat surface, where one can easily see and follow the whole drift and swing of the hitched fly.

Drifting correctly means it is coming round and over the fish in a nice, tempting arc – the vee caused by the fly pushing at the surface should be fully symmetrical. In my experience, most takes occur when the fly is at the very bottom of this arc, or slightly before it gets there. Why there, I know not.

If the fly is not hitching correctly in such conditions, then lifting the rod sideways (into the bank) or lifting the tip towards the vertical can accelerate the swing of the fly, which often causes the fly to start hitching really well (by this, I mean it rises up slightly higher in the surface film and creates the ideal vee wake).

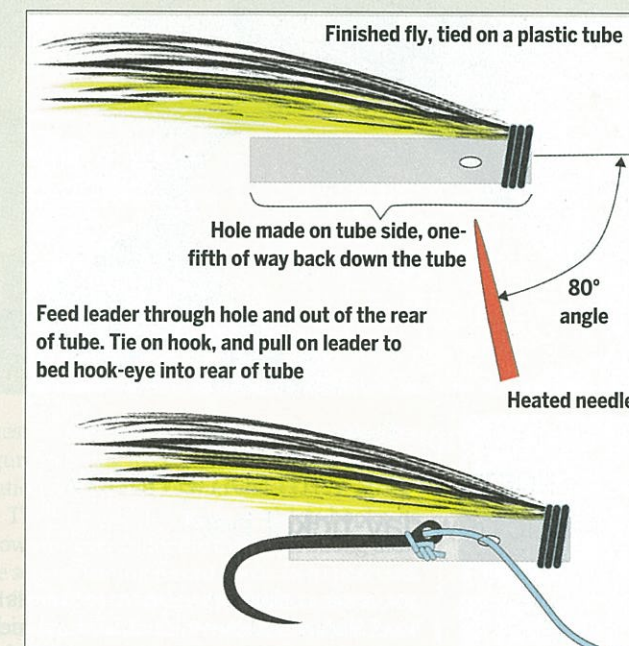
Casting angles

The angle of casting depends on the speed of the main current and where exactly the main current flows down the pool. In long pools with the main flow in the middle, one is best to cast square after which the main current bellies the line downstream and the fly starts to hitch and cross the flow by itself, riffling at the surface. Once the fly is 'out-hitched', or 'on the dangle' downstream there is still a good chance to raise a fish by stripping in slowly or then maybe a bit faster. Sometimes, even creating mini splashes when stripping in the fly can be attractive.

Pools with slower flows are best fished by casting out a more of a downstream angle. Again, the speed of the fly can be adjusted by moving the rod adequately sideways, or lifting up the tip; even putting in some tactful wiggling of the fly rod tip can provoke attractive movements of the fly.

Mending in any direction can help to get the right movement or drift of the fly line to get the fly hitching well.

Be careful when you cover water... sometimes fish are lying close in, especially on deep, gorge-type pools. Hence, starting with a short line and covering the near side of the pool first is a worthwhile tactic.



Making holes, making waves

A hole made in the side of the plastic tube can help it riffle with a much better action. This is achieved by using a heated needle to melt a hole in the side tube of the finished fly. As a general guide this hole should be made one-fifth of the tube-length back from the tube's front, and at an angle of 80 degrees to the tube, so the stiff monofilament nylon can be threaded through the hole, and down the tube easily, where it can be attached to the hook. Often the actual knot (usually a blood-knot) made on the hook-eye helps to snug the hook into the rear of the fly.

Dabbling

A final very happy memory: again, fishing in Russia, first thing in the morning.

I had a new leader and new fly on, and I knew it was a prime pool. Hence I approached carefully and put my fly out with my 15ft double-hander, more like dabbling to see if the fly would hitch or not. I was still standing way back from the edge of the pool, hence the fly was only some 4 or 5 feet out from the rocky bank.

Within seconds a good fish came up and missed it. I was a bit shocked, but immediately repeated the "dabbling" and sure enough it (or another fish, maybe?) came up, took, was safely hooked

and finally landed (in fact scooped out of this very deep pool).

My partner hadn't even started fishing yet.

Good hitching. Good luck.

Ueli Zellweger is Swiss. He started fly fishing 30 years ago and soon began travelling the world, which he intensified considerably upon retirement in 2004. His favourite destinations are Russia's Kola Peninsula, Scotland, the outer islands of the Seychelles, and Cuba. He lives on Exmoor, where he cares for the family owned beats on the Barle and Little Exe.