

Hitching'Em

Topwater Tactics for Atlantic Salmon

BY NILS FOLMER JORGENSEN

One thing I love about fly fishing for Atlantic Salmon is that they will readily rise to the fly. In fact they will go all the way to the surface and smash it to smithereens.



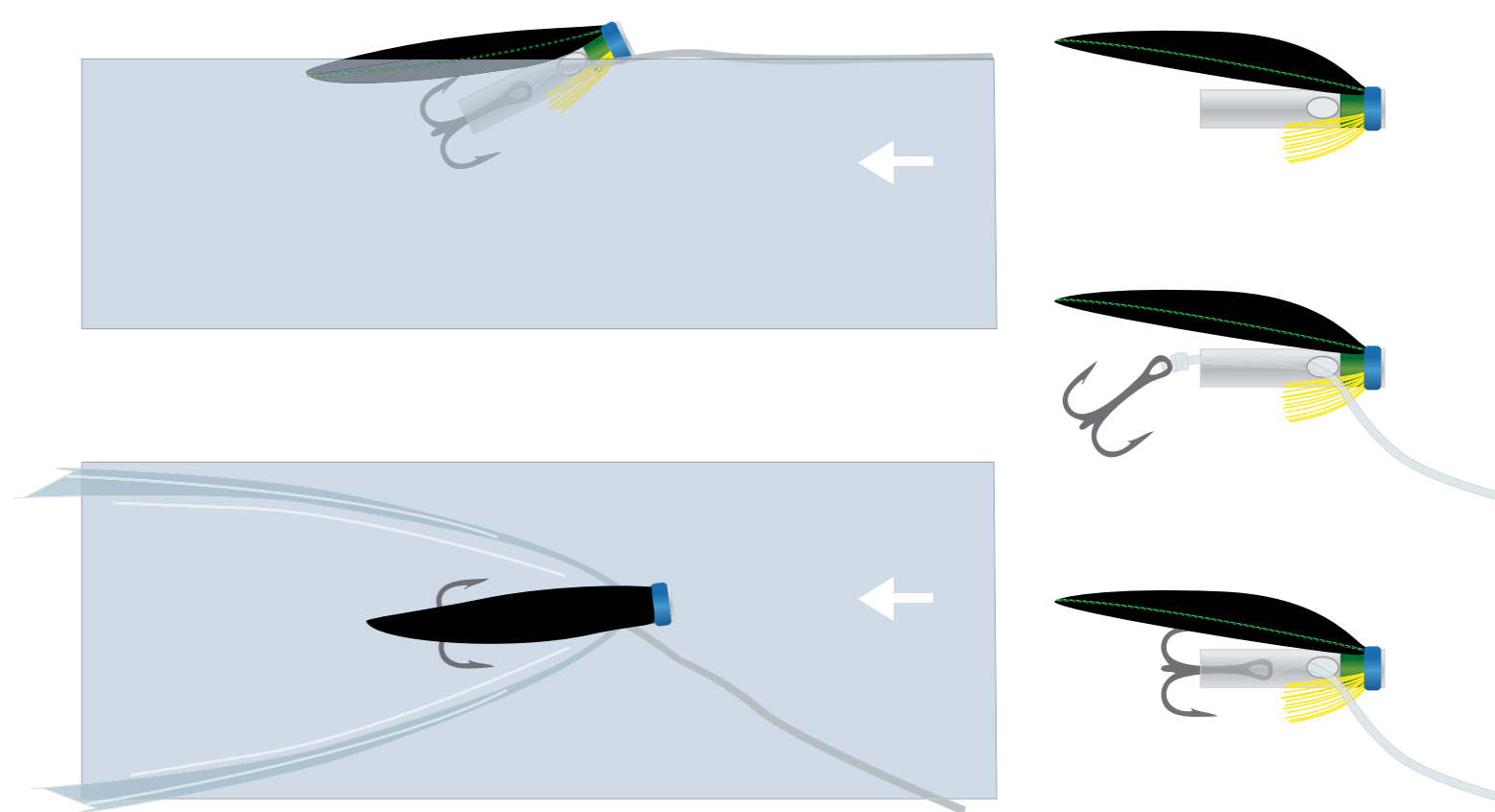
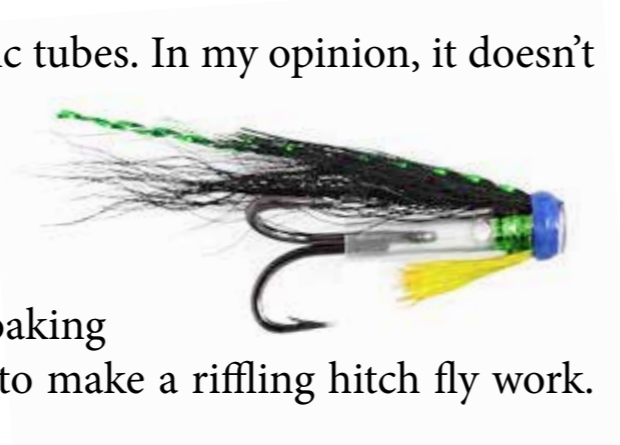
Just to make it clear, I'm not the kind of angler who says that one specific technique is the only way to catch a salmon - in this case a riffling hitch. Surely, it is an amazing sight to witness a salmon break the surface and inhale your fly, but for me it is mostly about how effective the technique is. I have experienced numerous situations where classic swing- or upstream techniques have failed, but a riffling hitch has made all the difference.

So what is the riffling hitch? It is not a dry fly! It is basically a small tube fly that skates on the surface leaving a "V" shaped wake behind it. It is fished on a traditional down stream swing but the line is attached through the side of the fly. This gives an oblique angle pull on the fly. The fly itself will be straight in the current and wanting to go straight against the current while the oblique angle from the line to the angler pulls it in towards him. The fly's head will pop the surface, skate and leave a riffling "V" shaped wake behind it - and this wake - I believe - is what provokes the salmon into striking.

The riffling hitch technique is based on a simple fly innovation. It started out with a knot tied on the side of a single hook fly to generate the oblique angle pull and upward directional force. Today most flies for this technique are made on small hitch tubes, which is also how I prefer to tie my hitch flies. They skate better on a small tube with a hole in the side or underneath, they are very easy to make, extremely light, and you can always replace the hook if damaged.

I make my hitch tube flies on small plastic tubes. In my opinion, it doesn't make sense to make fancy patterns.

The fly's job is to skate on the surface, and from the underwater perspective of the salmon, it will only appear as a silhouette. Therefore, a wing of a none-soaking material is normally more than enough to make a riffling hitch fly work.





With that said, I have had very good results using more colorful hitch tube flies like Haugur, Langá Fancy and my own pattern Erna. In all honesty, however, this could be coincidental.

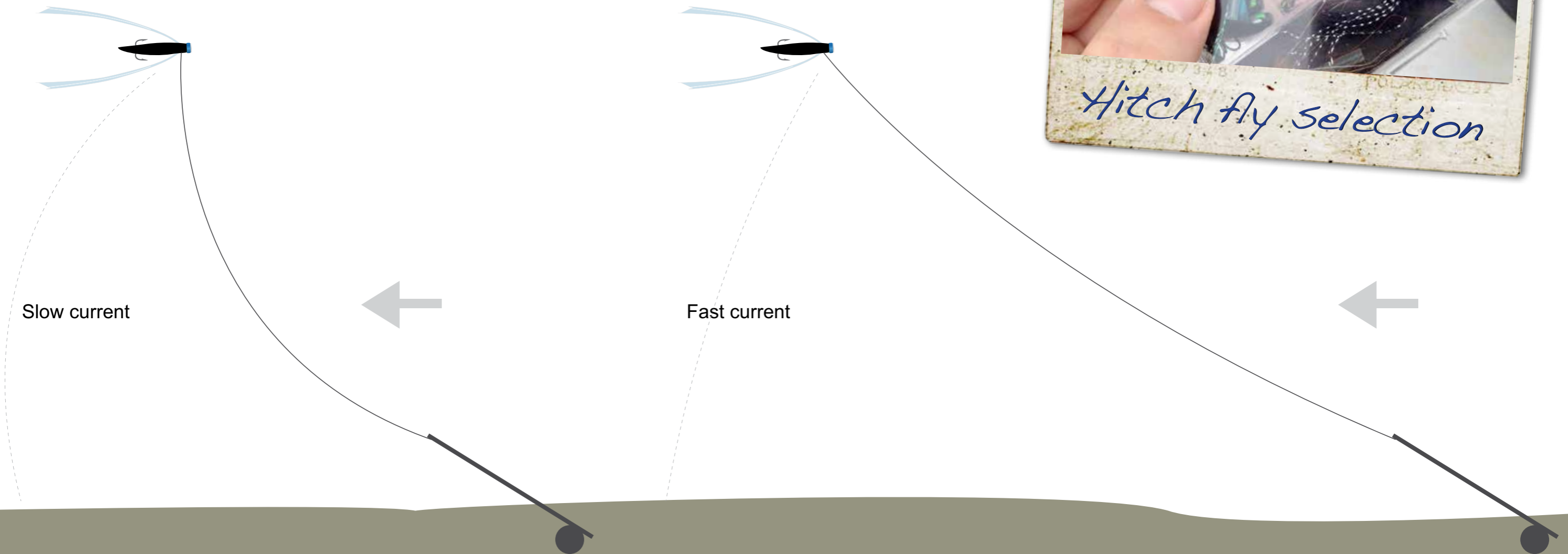
Top-water Strategies

Generally, it's very important that the cross-current pace of the fly is as steady and even as humanly possible. Too many back currents and protruding rocks will mess up your fly line and prevent it from producing the steady pace needed for the fly. With a riffling hitch, fly line-slack caused by tricky currents will either make it speed too much or sink. You can avoid some of the problems caused by tricky currents by carefully mending the line up- and downstream. You can also stabilize the pace of the fly by lifting the rod tip high in order to clear the line of obstacles close to you in the river. In general, however, river sections with steady currents are the best places to fish the riffling hitch, because here the drift is rather unproblematic.

Another key factor is the angle with which you cast your hitch fly. Generally the essence here is the following: In fast water you should aim more down stream, whereas in slow water, you should cast cross-stream. When fishing fast water, the fly will float easily and, here, the trick is usually to calm it down a bit. If you cast too open an angle cross-current, the fast current will put too much pressure on the fly line, which in the end will make the hitch fly skate too fast and the "V" effect will be lost.



There were certainly fish there as we lost something crazy like six or even eight fish in a row. They would come busting out of the fast water, grab the collie and return to their lie but each came off after about a minute. It was very frustrating. We returned to our first pool and caught a couple of fish there and soon found we had run out of time.



When fishing slower currents it is necessary to cast a narrower angle across the current in order to get the fly to “float”. If you cast far downstream, there won’t be enough pressure from the current to crab the line and guide it in towards the bank. However, if you cast more across the current the flow of the river will move the whole line and provide the fly with an oblique pull. In both cases, you can help the fly stay on the surface by giving it an occasional steady pull.





“DON'T DO SHORT, AGGRESSIVE PULLS. IN STEAD TRY TO KEEP THE TEMPO AND PACE OF THE FLY STEADY“

If the fly accelerates and decelerates all the time, the salmon won't seem to take it. The same goes for it, if it sinks and floats all the time. A steady and calm tempo during the entire drift is what tricks the salmon into striking.

So why fish on the surface? Well, in my opinion there are many benefits. First of all, the salmon can see your fly much easier, since it creates a disturbance against the light of the sky. And up on the surface, some details in a sinking fly that would otherwise spook off a salmon are no problem; the details simply aren't visible when holding a fly against the light. Another good thing is that you will never hit the bottom with the hook and damage a fly you spent a lot of time making. Finally, it is such an incredible sight to see a fish chase your fly and take it: It's a visual sport, which is way more intense than classic salmon fishing.

It is a big mystery why a fully-grown salmon will rise from even the deepest of water to hit a small “V”-shape on the surface. Many believe that it's an instinct from the salmon smolt time where they were feeding on insects on the surface - just like trout. A riffling hitch fluttering across the surface could possibly remind them of a caddis fly.

The Anatomy of a Hitch Fly

One thing is certain, when it comes to hitch flies. The size of the fly matters - and if you don't get an immediate reaction from a salmon you have seen or know is there, change to a bigger or smaller hitch before fishing too much on the fish. This is likely to just ruin your chances altogether.





I recommend making your own flies unless you know that your supplier knows what he is selling. There are a lot of cheap ready-made flies out there made by people who have no clue about how the fly is supposed to work. By making it yourself, you can make it work exactly like you want.

As I've already mentioned, hitch flies are rather simple, and as a result, they are fairly easy to tie. All you need is a tube and some wing material. Good wing materials can be found in the tails of young squirrels or Icelandic horsehair. Add a few strokes of Crystal Flash and that's it! You don't really need a throat or anything else.

Many hitch fly fishermen prefer to use an inner and outer tube set-up, but I just use a single tube. This makes things a lot easier. I then fill out the head end of the tube with glue to avoid water coming in and drowning it. Finally I warm up a needle and pin a small hole through the tube. This hole is for inserting the leader and it can be made on either the side of the tube or opposite the wing. Just remember that if you make the hole in the side, you have to change your fly set-up depending on which side of the river you are fishing from. The wing of the fly must always face upwards!







By making the hole opposite or underneath the wing, you don't have to change the set-up all the time. Which placement of the line hole is best, is pretty much a question of personal religion, I think. I use both solutions but would probably use the side holes, if I were forced to choose. The fly lines used are of course floating lines only. You can fish the riffling hitch both on single- and double-handed rod, but I prefer a 9-10' single-handed rod or a Scandinavian style switch rod. Be aware that most US switch rods are in fact classified as double handers and, as a result, an #8 rod is way too powerful for fishing small flies.

The hook can't be too heavy for the fly. On small tubes, I use size 14 trebles but on bigger tubes with more wing material, I use size 10-8.

If you choose to scale your fly-and-hook setup down, it is important that your gear follows. Use lighter leaders and lighter rods so you don't straighten the hook or break the leader. In Iceland, where I do most of my salmon fishing, I use either a 6-weight trout rod or a 7-weight fast-action rod for the bigger fish. On the big rivers – like Laxá i Aðaldal, I have had great success with fishing a 13 foot double hander.

Some say that you can't use long leaders, when fishing a hitch fly, but that is not my experience. I have fished a 15' leader without any problems. But on a small river with short casts, a short leader is easier to cast and control.



Why You Should Try a Riffling Hitch

It is fun to see how effective a riffling hitch can be. In most cases a newly arrived salmon will hit the fly right away, but it can also provoke fish that have been in the river for some time. I have tried fishing on salmon that have seen one classic wet fly after the other without taking.

And surprisingly often, they have ended up reacting immediately to a riffling hitch. I have experienced the same thing numerous times with fresh salmon. Personally, I haven't had great success with this technique in very cold water, but then I haven't really spent much time trying.



I have, however, heard of some doing it with varying degrees of success – and it only goes to prove how universally effective the technique is. The unwritten rule that you have to fish with heavy tubes in cold water is exaggerated – that much is for sure. Generally - when talking about cold-water salmon fishing, I have had much better results fishing with smaller flies on floating lines (sometimes with sink tips). So maybe I should give the hitch flies more chances in the cold.

One last thing that makes hitch fishing exciting is that the takes are so different. Sometimes the salmon will almost thrust themselves out of the water and sometimes they will follow the fly, bulge behind it and bite it softly several times. In either case it is important to let them take the fly properly before striking. When I have been guiding inexperienced anglers on the hitch, they often strike too fast. Give it time, let the salmon turn and then lift the rod in a calm stroke. Then you'll soon hook into your very first hitch salmon – and it won't be the last!

