



Barbless Hooks: De-barbing, Sharpening and Using Them

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A large number of anglers, particularly those who fish with flies, prefer to use barbless hooks. These hooks offer several advantages for the angler. They have a smaller cross section, making them penetrate better. This feature makes it easier to hook fish with the barbless or de-barbed hook. They are easier to remove from either the fish or the clothing or anatomy of the angler because they have no barb to catch on the way out. When catch-and-release is being practiced, this allows for faster, less traumatic handling of the fish. Since the hook tends to leave only a small hole or a slightly elongated hole in soft tissue, there is less tearing around it, less tissue damage to the fish, and a higher probability of survival if the fish is landed in a similar time to that taken using barbed hooks. Using barbless hooks may cost an angler a fish once in a while, but good technique can keep those losses to a minimum. If a tight line is maintained, the hooks hold well and result in relatively few lost fish.

Some manufacturers compromise between barbed and barbless hooks by offering hooks with mini-barbs, very low, short barbs. At least two styles of hooks are available currently without barbs. One is a simple, straight hook without a barb. Another features a small hump in the shank between the bend and the point. These are not available in all styles and sizes, however. Anglers who wish to use barbless hooks for fishing, or those who are required to do so by local regulations, must know how to de-barb their hooks without damaging the hook.

Regardless of how it is done, the process is easiest before the hook becomes part of a fly. Larger hooks can be de-barbed by filing the barb away carefully. Leaving a small, smooth hump where the base of barb was adds some security to the hook-up, but it is not necessary. While the hook is in hand and the file is available, this is a good time to sharpen the hook as well. Some anglers attempt to de-barb their hooks by cutting the barb away with a pair of wire cutters. This puts tremendous strain on the area from which the barb was cut. On small hooks that can further weaken what is already the weakest part of the hook, resulting in breaking points from the hook. Multiple missed strikes might be a clue that the hook is broken, but this process of counting coup on striking fish is taking the concept of catch-and-release a bit too far for most of us. A better alternative is to crush the barb down with a pair of pliers.

How the barb-flattening process is carried out is very important to the angler and the durability of the hook. The easiest way would seem to be holding the hook by the shank, inserting the barb cross-wise in the jaws

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of the pliers, and crushing it down into the cut from which it originated. Unfortunately, this obvious approach can be extremely damaging to hooks, particularly those that are tempered to be quite hard. The crushing process works the steel, often producing tiny cracks or breaks. If the point does not break off in the pliers, it will be likely to do so just when the trophy of a lifetime is on the other end of the line. The proper way to flatten the barb is to place the point of the hook in the jaws of the pliers tip first. This supports the metal as it is deformed and is less likely to cause breakage.

When the hook is being handled to de-barb it is also a good time to sharpen it. Several sharpening styles are in common use. Some anglers like to use a hone or hard carborundum stone and work around the point of the hook, bringing a sharper, needle-like point to it. Some like to file a diamond-shaped point with four sharply angled edges. Others prefer to use a somewhat triangular approach - flat on the bottom and pointed toward the top of the shank. The needle point is the most delicate of the three, easily damaged or rolled by contact with stones or hard mouth parts. The others are like cutting needles. They are designed to cut through tissue to embed themselves. These points are more durable and tougher than the needle point. They are also quicker and easier to touch up in the field.

Most anglers find a fine-cut file useful in sharpening large hooks. The file allows more material to be removed more quickly than does a stone. Smaller hooks and the final sharpening on larger ones should be finished with a fine, hard whetstone. Tapered stones, called slips, or specially designed stones for fish hooks work best with smaller hooks. Regardless of the approach used, the point should try to catch on a finger nail when the hook is dragged across it.

Sharpening hooks, like sharpening knives or broadhead blades, takes practice. But sharpness is one of the critical factors in solid hook ups on fish. The popularity of laser sharpened or chemically sharpened hooks in spite of their prices is testimony to the value experienced anglers place on sharpness in the hooks they use. Spend a little time learning how to sharpen your hooks, and the time will be rewarded in increased success.

The decision on whether or not to use barbless hooks is your own, a personal ethical decision that grows from experience and immediate objectives. It is not a one-size-fits-all decision or one that makes the angler ethically superior or inferior to those that elect the other course of action. The decision is unlikely to be the same for all species, all techniques, all waters and all personal objectives. We do feel that it should be included in the list of options for every angler, particularly in catch-and-release situations.