

Authorized Guide with the National Park Service for the Upper Current River and the National Forest Service for Mill Creek, Spring Creek, Little Piney and the Eleven Point River.

Smelly Fish

Do fish smell? Yes they do if you leave them in the sun for a couple of days. Seriously though... fish have a very keen olfactory system that allows them to interpret food, danger and other life preserving things. Salmon and Steelhead travel hundreds and sometimes thousands of miles to return to their home waters and their sense of smell helps them with their migration. Fish that live in deep water or feed predominately at night depend a great deal on their sense of smell. It has been stated that certain fish can detect odors in parts per billion. I learned a long time ago, from fly fishing expert Dave Whitlock, that masking human odors would significantly improve my streamer's ability to catch fish. Up until then I had never thought about it much. Since then I have attempted to cover up the human odors I have on my hands prior to fishing. I have done a lot of research about the sense of smell in fish and came to the same conclusion that 20 years ago Dave was 100% correct.

What odors do you have on your hands when you fish? Gasoline, nicotine, sunscreen, insect repellent, after shave, cologne. The odors you have on your hands are transferred to everything you touch including your fly. You can detect most of these odors because they are very strong. But a fish has a sense of smell that is 4,000 times stronger than humans. What can you do to "mask" those odors? Rub your hands in some of the moss or silt on the stream bottom. Not sure if it will work? Next time you go fishing, smell your hands before and after and I guarantee you will smell the difference.

What about applying insect repellent, how do you avoid your hands? I use the sleeve of my shirt and then rub it on my face, neck and the back of my hands (never on the palms). I never spray insect repellent on my hands and then rub it on my face and neck. It really doesn't take that much to repel the bugs, so you don't have to soak yourself down. Spray insect repellent on your hat and your shirt, but keep it off your palms and fingers.

Sunscreen can be applied to the back of your hands and then spread around your arms and face. Use a spray application. Keep those chemicals off your palms, flies, rods and lines.

Keeping chemicals off your fingers and palms will improve your fishing success and it will also help to prevent transferring those chemicals to your rod and reel finish. I don't know about you, but I take very good care of my gear and I don't want bug spray on my rods.

"A Bad Day Fishing is Still a Great Day"