

# Polaroiding FAQs

Greg French answers the inevitable question:  
“How did you spot that fish?”

Before I try to answer, you must have a basic understanding of how polarising glasses work. Ordinary light is comprised of innumerable waves, each undulating in an unpredictable plane, but in 1808 the French physicist Etienne Louis Malus discovered that light reflected off water—glare—is mostly reflected in the horizontal plane, and it was he who coined the term polarisation.

The Scottish physicist William Nicol invented a polarising device, the Nicol prism in 1829, but the real breakthrough came in 1932 when Edwin Land produced a material he named Polaroid, in which crystals containing quinine sulphate and iodine were lined up in parallel axes and embedded in nitrocellulose.

Polarising sunglasses incorporate Polaroid so that the axes are in vertical alignment, and consequently they eliminate most glare. They made it to Australia by the late 1930s, but were not taken up by anglers until after World War II, except for one or two pioneers such as Malcolm Gillies and John Brookes. David Scholes wrote about polarising glasses in *Fly-fisher in Tasmania* (1961) and more extensively in *The Way of an Angler* (1963), by which time he claimed that some anglers had already developed ‘polaroiding’ into an art form.

## ARE SOME GLASSES BETTER THAN OTHERS?

Price is no indication whatsoever of quality. Nor brand.



Luckily, there’s a foolproof way to tell how well sunnies will perform before you buy them. Take two pairs of the same type from the rack. Put one pair on your face and look out of the shop onto the street. Now close one eye, and hold one lens of the second pair of glasses a centimetre or so in front of the other. At the point when the second lens has been rotated

exactly 90° relative to the one on your face, you should be able to see nothing but perfect blackness. If you see a patchwork of dark spots, the lenses are not worth buying. If you’re able to see anything at all on the street, the glasses are not good enough.

Unluckily, there is no easy way to check how well your glasses deal with UV radiation, so you’ll have to have faith in the manufacturer’s claims. Overexposure to sunlight is a major cause of eye disease, so your lenses should filter 100 per cent of UVA and UVB light.

I use one pair of light-brown lenses for all applications. Some freshwater anglers like to carry a second pair of light-amber glasses, which are slightly less effective at polarisation but don’t make things too dark at dawn and dusk. I don’t like wrap-around frames because curved lenses create too much distortion in the critical peripheral zone. However, it pays to have side-shields to minimise light reflecting from the inside of the lens. Surprisingly enough, Glarefoil glasses, which can be bought from SunSmart (Cancer Council Australia) shops for around \$40–50, polarise more effectively than most (but not all) expensive brand-name alternatives. Test them yourself. The shortcomings are that they’re easy to scratch and the thin plastic tends to distort over time.

OFTEN YOU’LL FIND YOURSELF LOOKING FOR  
SUBTLE SIGNS LIKE SHADOWS, BLACK TAIL TIPS, WHITES OF MOUTHS,  
TINY RISES, DISTURBANCES IN WAVES AND ANOMALIES ON THE LAKE BOTTOM.

# Polaroiding FAQs . . . continued

**WHAT TIME OF YEAR IS BEST?**  
There's no doubt that polaroiding is easiest and best in summer when the sun is high in the sky.

In late autumn, in the high country at least, cooler conditions temper the activity of most mini-beasts, and events like mayfly hatches and beetle falls often descend into mediocrity. Suddenly the trout have to search harder for their food—they notice things from a long way off. It's harder to see fish, but fairly easy to catch them when you do.

Where winter fishing is permitted, as at Lake Jindabyne, you'll find that even though the sun is low on the horizon, polaroids are still vital for spotting fish in the shallows.

Even in the Tasmanian spring, when trout tail or charge after baitfish and frogs in a showy manner, polaroiding helps you find fish that you would otherwise overlook.

## WHAT SORT OF DAY?

Visibility is best under sunny, cloudless skies. Thin high-strata cloud—so fine and wispy you hardly notice it—can almost completely shut things down. On the other hand, days that are uniformly grey often provide surprisingly good polaroiding.

Wind, too, can make a big difference. A millpond surface over the whole lake makes visibility as close as possible to perfect, but the trout can be quite spooky. A slight riffle strikes a good balance. A mid-strength scatty breeze is

terrible, but a big wind which produces steady waves can be superb—you can see through the face of the wave with extraordinary clarity and the fish become almost unspookable.

In any case, wearing polaroids always permits better sight fishing than going without, and I use them from sun-up until sundown.

## WHAT ABOUT FLIES AND LEADERS?

I generally start off using a single highly-visible dry fly such as a white-post parachute emerger. Nymphing fish usually rise freely to inspect a dry, and I only change patterns if I'm sure the thing I'm offering is being consistently ignored.

I use a 7–9 foot leader when fishing from the banks because many of the fish I see are close in and it's difficult to cast a long leader when you're only using a metre or two of actual fly line. When fishing in open water, though, I'll happily use a 12–14 foot leader, especially if things are calm and the trout spooky.

As for tippet, 6 lb Maxima is usually good enough, and I never go below 5 lb—I put the fine-tippet mentality in the same class of wives' tales as 'match the hatch'.

## WHAT'S THE BEST ANGLE?

In the southern hemisphere direct sunlight comes from the north, and most of the stuff that is reflected off lakes bounces away towards the



BE BOLD! WALK FAST, SCAN LOTS OF WATER, SEEK THE BEST VANTAGES. SOON YOU'LL BE SEEING LOTS MORE TROUT...

south. If you're looking north, the bulk of the reflected light hits you square in the face, so it's usually better to fish with the sun over your shoulder. Nonetheless, lake surfaces are rarely perfectly flat, and the sun is rarely at a perfect angle to the water. Sometimes you'll find the best visibility when you face south-east or south-west. And sometimes high-level cloud can diffuse the light so much that any direction is pretty much as good (or bad) as any other.

Glare does not always arrive at your eyes in a perfectly horizontal plane. This is primarily because the angle at which sunlight is most effectively polarised is 53°, and the sun is often below the required height, especially early in the morning and late in the afternoon (for longer periods during the short days from mid-autumn to

mid-spring). Consequently, you need to tilt your head left or right towards the sun to make sure you find the optimum angle for visibility.

Ideally you want to walk in the direction of best visibility, but there'll be other considerations. For example, it might be that the moorland bounding the southern shore offers more scope than the scrubby cliff bounding the northern shore, or that the wind is concentrating food on the 'wrong' bank.

You'll notice that good polaroiders constantly move their heads left and right, up and down. Scanning is critically important because you notice movement with your peripheral vision, and when you stare you're giving precedence to your central vision. Also, by scanning you subconsciously capture multiple pictures of the substrate, and overlay them. Your brain is capa-

ble of registering anomalies between the various scans with astounding accuracy, so with practice you automatically find yourself homing in on the shape that was inches to the left seconds ago. Such subtle movements cannot be detected by staring.

## HOW IMPORTANT IS NATURAL ABILITY?

Being colour blind I may have some natural advantages over other polaroiders because I am used to distinguishing objects by differences in shading. As for peripheral vision, my optometrist once said I had the biggest pupils he'd ever seen! But the real key to success is passion. Let me offer you an abridged version of a story I heard on the radio a few years ago...

A journalist was walking down the street of a large American city when

the tribal Indian accompanying him said, "Listen to that—it's such a comfort to hear a cricket." He then stopped and gently scooped the insect from the earth at the base of a potted tree. The journalist was astounded that the Indian could hear such a tiny sound amid the mechanical bustle of the city, and praised his native-keen hearing. The Indian, though, insisted that his hearing was ordinary. To prove his point he dropped a small coin onto the pavement, and dozens of passers-by immediately turned their heads.

The point is that anyone is capable of noticing things they value, provided they're familiar with them. They can scarcely avoid it. The secret is to gain familiarity.

I've noticed that many overcautious anglers see relatively few fish, so once they've spotted one they can't bring



It pays to cover plenty of ground when looking for trout along Western Lakes edges.

# Polaroiding **FAQs** ... continued

themselves to move on, even if the trout has swum away and is unlikely to return. The problem is a circular one. If you fish cautiously you won't see many fish, and if you don't see many fish you're more likely to be cautious.

Be bold! Walk fast, scan lots of water, seek the best vantages. Soon you'll be seeing lots more trout, and instead of feeling frustrated when you spook one or two, you will be excited—confident that you're in the right area at last.

## **ARE FISH EASIER TO SPOT FROM THE BANK?**

Many lakes, especially deeper ones, are best suited to fishing from the banks. Banks give you the advantage of height, making the position of the sun less critical than when you're lower to the water. Sometimes, though, visibility may be better if you wade offshore as far as possible and polaroid back into the bank. In any case, it helps to develop an ability to quickly inspect difficult-to-see patches of substrate, like the stuff hidden in the shadows of rocks and shrubbery.

As much as anything, good polaroiding involves an ability to work out the best trade-off between optimum visibility and convenience.

## **WHICH BANK?**

When it's windy, the obvious thing to do is move to a sheltered shore where the band of calm water will offer an unobscured view into the water and casting will be relatively easy. This is a fairly good tactic, especially if the lake is relatively small, like those in Tasmania's Western Lakes, because you invariably get to orbit the entire shoreline anyway while going to and from the chosen bank, so you get to notice other hotspots en route. Not only that, but you can easily go elsewhere if things don't live up to expectations.

When fishing a big lake, you often have to commit to fishing a single bank or bay for the entire session. At these venues it is vital to learn to recognise when the sheltered shore is unlikely to be the best option. At places like Tasmania's Great Lake, critical knowledge about prime feeding grounds and predominant trout foods is readily available in guidebooks and magazine articles. In more obscure waters, especially those in

New Zealand, detailed information is often more difficult to find, and you'll have to make educated guesses. Universal hotspots include lips, weedbeds, currents, windlanes and froth lines. Other times, even a hint of local information will be useful. For example, if you know that it's a mouse year, simply moving to a shore with overhanging beech forest may be all you need to turn a mediocre outing into a very special one.

## **IS IT WORTH CASTING BLIND?**

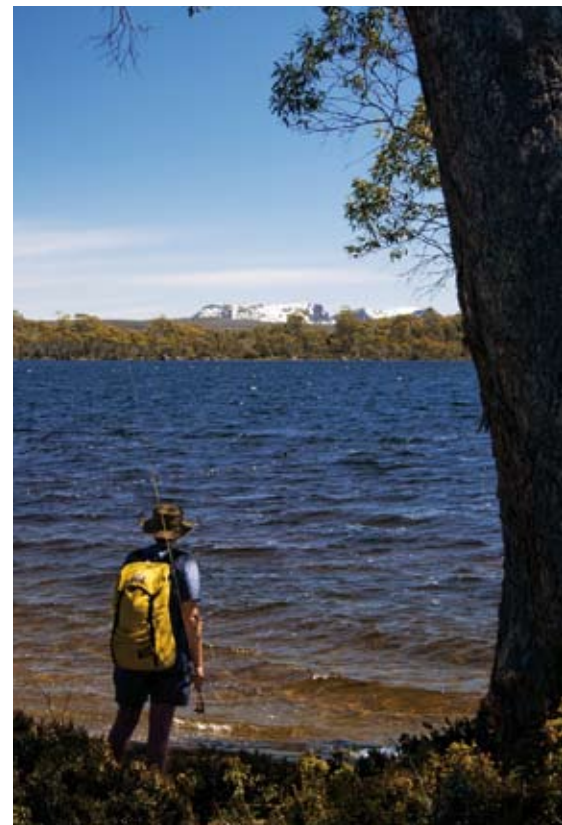
When I'm making my way along scrubby or rugged banks, I rarely bother prospecting—it's pretty much all I can do to look at the water and walk at the same time. Often, too, I can see everything within a cast of where I stand, so blind fishing is useless. If, however, the bank is relatively open and there's an enticing lip just offshore, I can't resist sitting a dry fly out there. However, I never let the fly distract me from the main business of polaroiding. I've learned to cast rhythmically so I don't have to think about what I'm doing. I let the fly rest for ten seconds on the water, lift it with a skip and dibble, lay it out again.

Even though I essentially ignore the fly while I look for trout, years of dedicated polaroiding has developed my peripheral vision to the point where I still manage to notice most fish as soon as they take.

## **WHAT ABOUT WADING?**

When you're on a low bank looking across expansive shallows, it can be tempting to think that you can see every fish, even those in the ripples beyond casting distance. You can't. You have to get out in amongst things. Remember to position yourself to take best advantage of light and wind, then start wading slowly and methodically. On good days you'll see fish plainly, but often you'll find yourself looking for subtle signs like shadows, black tail tips, whites of mouths, tiny rises, disturbances in waves and anomalies on the lake bottom.

Because you're often wading downwind and fish generally cruise upwind, a trout spotted 20 metres away can be as close as a rod's length before you quite know what's happening. I always have about six metres of line on the water, and try to keep it in



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front and a little to the side. In this way, I can pick the fly off the water and present it to a fish in an instant.

You'll find that you'll need to constantly lift the line to stop it from trailing, so you may as well cast at any likely anomaly. A surprising number of rocks and 'things' end up being fish, and with experience your subconscious begins to remember—to dictate—what's likely, what's possible and what's best to ignore.

People often ask how I saw a particular fish, and I often struggle to answer because the clues are often too subtle to define. Yet with practice you can learn to see fish too. Don't be intimidated, be inspired. **FI**