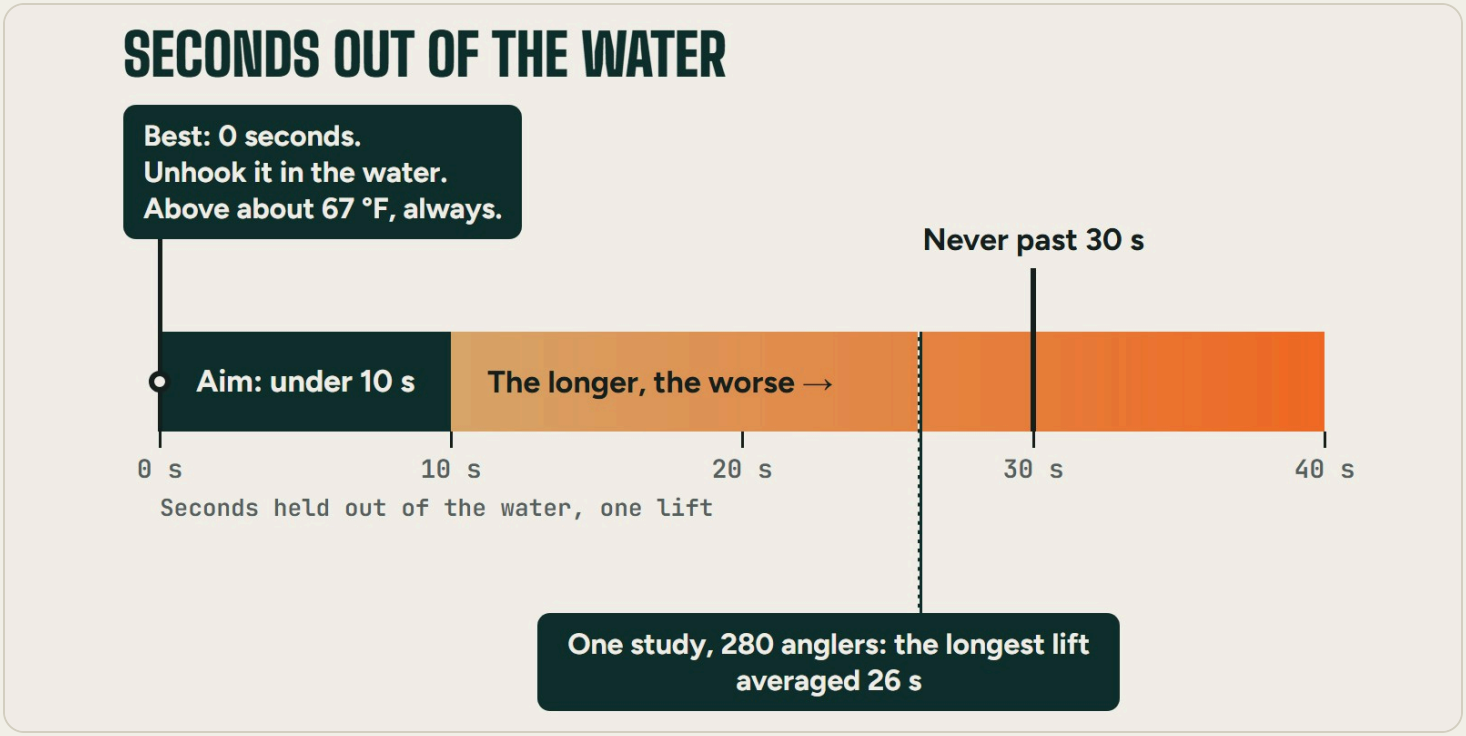
HOW DO I LAND AND RELEASE A TROUT SAFELY?

Bring the trout in quickly, keep it in the water while you take the hook out, and let it swim off on its own. If you lift it at all, aim for under 10 seconds in the air.



Seconds held out of the water in one lift. Aim and limit from the studies behind the guide; the 26 s average longest lift is from one study of 280 anglers on trout catch-and-release waters. Illustration: Fly Findr

STEP BY STEP

1. **Flatten the barb before you fish.** Barbless hooks cut injury and unhooking time in several studies.
2. **Check the water temperature.** Above about 67 °F, unhook every trout without lifting it from the water.
3. **Bring the fish in promptly.** Let a running fish take line off the reel, then bring it back. Fights over 2 minutes raised stress in one study of wild rainbow trout.
4. **Land it in the water.** With a rubber or knotless net, or your hand. Leave a netted trout in the net, under the surface.
5. **Unhook it without lifting it.** Back the hook out with forceps. Deep in the throat or gills? Cut the leader close to the hook.
6. **Keep air time under 10 seconds.** The longer, the worse; never past 30 seconds. In one study, 280 anglers averaged 29 seconds in total.
7. **Let it swim off on its own.** Hold it upright in the water, facing into a gentle current, until it swims out of your hand.

WHERE IS THE HOOK?

In the lip or jaw

Keep the trout in the water. Grip the hook bend with forceps and back it out the way it went in.

Deep in the throat or gills

Don't dig. Cut the leader close to the hook and release the trout in the water. In one study of bait-caught wild rainbow trout, cutting the line cut deaths by 58%.

What the studies don't settle. Whether a quick photo out of the water harms a trout, whether barbless hooks change how many die, and whether long fights kill. Short fights and short air time are safest either way. Big trout get the same care.