

# A Primer for Waders

A SPECIAL REPORT by Captain John Kumiski ©2010

Tails, fish tails, reddish bronze tipped with a bluish tinge, protruded from the water's surface all around us. Although the fish were obviously feeding, they were in shallow water and were quite spooky. Every time we maneuvered the boat close enough for a cast, the tails would vanish, while further away, beyond casting range, tails continued to wave. Frustrating!

Fortunately, both Joe Mulson and I had with us the needed piece of equipment that would allow us to get close to our wary prey. No, it wasn't a spinning rod with a long cast spool. Joe and I were wearing chest high waders. We simply abandoned the boat and went after the reds on foot.

## Why Wade?

One of the most effective ways to approach game fish, as well as one of the most enjoyable of all the ways to fish, is by getting into the fish's element and wading. The angler has a low profile and keeps the disturbance of the water to a minimum, allowing him to sneak up on feeding fish without spooking them. Twice in the past month I have hooked shallow water reds with literally just the leader out of the fly rod's tiptop. The fish were so close, all I needed to do was dangle the fly in their faces. Exciting fishing!

For many species of fish which swim in our salty inshore areas, wading in many situations will actually be more effective than fishing from a boat. For example, in areas where redfish are heavily pursued by anglers in boats, they learn that boats are trouble. Getting into casting range from a boat can be tough. A wading angler who tries to be quiet can literally get right on top of the fish.

On many days in the winter and spring, strong winds make even the most skilled boat handler want to scream in frustration. Fly fishing in particular is difficult when the boat is moving too fast because of strong winds. Many times it's hard to strip the line fast enough. A wading angler can fish in almost any kind of breeze.

## What to Wear

In Florida during the summer months, shorts and some type of protective footwear are all that is needed for comfortable wading. I stepped on a flounder one time while wading barefoot, and although nothing happened as far as injury goes, the incident was all it took to convince me that some sort of shoe really was a good idea. Crabs, sea urchins, shells, broken bottles, and other hazards to the feet make barefoot wading a stupid thing to do.

The best footwear for wading are neoprene wading boots. These are similar to dive boots, but have a stiff plastic sole which give support and protection to the foot.

Orvis makes a good one. Since they're ankle high, they also keep sand and shells out, and resist the suction effect that soft bottomed areas sometimes dish out. Take it from me—losing your shoe in bottom ooze in thigh deep water is not fun.

In central and north Florida, waders make winter wading possible. For those for whom wading is only practiced occasionally, the boot foot type of nylon wader will suffice. For those for whom wading is a way of life, stocking foot neoprenes are the only way to go.

Stocking foot waders need wading boots. The area to be fished dictates the type of boot worn, and some anglers may need more than one type. Freshwater trout fishermen will be familiar with felt soled wading boots. These work well where slick, algae covered rocks cover the bottom. Some anglers wear chains or crampons when working around treacherous rocky areas. On soft muddy bottoms chains aren't needed and muck sticks to the sole of the felt boots and makes wading tough. In this type of area, the hard soled neoprene wading booties like those mentioned above work much better. You may need to purchase a second pair for use with the neoprene waders, a size or two larger than your shoe size.

### **Carry Your Stuff**

Waders also need to carry all their paraphernalia. In the winter wading vests are a terrific way to carry tackle and accessories. Many excellent makes are on the market. Make sure the one you buy has enough storage space for everything that you'll need.

Often in the summer vests are too hot to be comfortable. The only thing to do is carry less stuff. Some fishermen carry extra lures on their hat, others carry accessories in an over the shoulder type of bag. Simms, a well known manufacturer of angling accessories, makes some great products for wading fishermen. Look for their products at your favorite tackle store.

### **What to Bring?**

What accessories will you need? This depends on the type of fishing done. Anglers using conventional tackle need extra lures, pliers, and a glove for handling fish as an absolute minimum. Material for making shock leaders, a stringer (see below), water, food, smoking materials (for those who indulge) etc. get added to the essentials. You can end up carrying a lot of stuff.

Flyfishermen need more stuff. Although their lures are smaller, they need fly boxes, leader wheels, dry fly floatant, hook files, pliers, clippers, fish glove, and the usual miscellany as described above. Again, it can add up fast if care is not used. Be selective!

### **Finding fish**

Oftentimes waders can use a boat to find fish, then can anchor up, slip out, and start wading. Two (or more) wading anglers can work a long stretch of shoreline by "leapfrogging", that is, one angler hops out of the boat and starts wading. The other takes the boat downwind (or sun) several hundred yards, then anchors it. He starts wading.

When the first angler reaches the boat, he takes it a few hundred yards down from the second angler, anchors it, and so on. If four anglers do this, they can work new water all day long and never have to fish alone. If one is right-handed and the other's a lefty, it works even better.

If while wading down a flat the fish seem scarce, do what guides do and zigzag. Go in close to shore and then work farther out. The fish may be on the flat in slightly deeper or shallower water. By looking in different depths on the flat your chances of finding fish improve greatly.

Of necessity much of the angling time spent wading will consist of casting blindly. In general, lures or flies that make noise, especially surface baits like poppers, often work the best for two reasons. First of all, watching and working a popper that you can see is more interesting than retrieving a subsurface lure or streamer that cannot be seen. Secondly, the noise a popper makes attracts fish that might never see an underwater bait. They can hear the popper and come to investigate. And although this is somewhat of an intangible, surface strikes are so much more exciting than underwater ones.

Cast to any areas that you think might hold fish. Cast along oyster beds, rocks, stumps, pilings, drop-offs, the edges of grassy and sandy areas, or any other area or structure that might hide a fish. In addition to increasing the odds for a strike, your targeting specific locations before every cast will improve your casting skills and this will pay big dividends on future trips.

Always look for signs of fish while wading. If fish are seen, try to get into the best possible position from which to cast. Sometimes you have to take any shot you have, but other times the fish are moving slowly and you can get that head on presentation. Remember that the first cast is usually your best opportunity. Try to make it count.

### **Safety Concerns**

Lastly, use care and common sense when wading, especially in new areas. Make sure the bottom is firm enough to hold you before hopping out of a boat. On the Gulf side of the Keys, and in most places in Everglades National Park, the bottom is very soft and the muck is very deep. If you just jump out you may find yourself up to your waist in marl with no easy way to get out. Also, if you step off a drop while wearing waders you will discover to your dismay that waders were not designed for swimming in. In our southern waters, stingrays are a cause for caution. Do the "stingray shuffle", never lifting your feet from the bottom. Kicking the ray's wing will cause it to swim away. Pinning it to the bottom will lead to a pierced leg.

In waters with sharks or alligators (and where aren't they?), dragging a stringer with fish on it is a huge invitation to trouble. Most flyfishers don't kill many fish anyway, and this is another good reason not to. And finally, although wading can be done as a solo act, safety considerations dictate that you fish with a buddy. So find another fishing maniac and go chase those fish together!

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