

SAFETY WHILE FLY FISHING

by Mike Abramowitz

Copyright © 2012

*Preface: The following article was originally published in the November/December 2013 issue of the **Mid Atlantic Fly Fishing Guide**. You can find more information about the Mid Atlantic Fly Fishing Guide on their [Facebook](#) page.*

Safety issues start even before you leave home. Leave a written note for family or friends stating where you are going and with whom, and when you plan to return.

Include a telephone number of your fishing companion. My family usually knows I will fish the evening hatch, so I will be home late but it doesn't hurt to state that again on the note.

Make a list of the gear you need for the trip and check it before leaving home. Arriving at the stream for the day and not having an essential piece of equipment changes a planned tranquil day to a potentially stressful one.

Many of us, including me, tend to carry too many items in our vests. When you carry less weight it is easier to hike along the stream. The further we travel from home, the more bulky the vest. Investigating the potential hatch, may let us carry fewer fly boxes thus having less weight to carry which will make the days hike easier, become less fatigued with less weight. Lighter loads makes the long walks over rocky areas safer. A good example is the walk along Gunpowder River from the Falls Road parking lot through the rocky canyon to the base of Prettyboy Dam.

Checking the weather ahead of time from a good weather web site such as NOAA.COM will alert you to the potential of rain, thunder storms and lightening. There is no such thing as inclement weather just inappropriate clothing. Lightning is the exception! Graphite rods make excellent lightning conductors, so get off the stream, get into your car and keep away from your rod if there is lightning about.

Comfortable rain gear with a hood will allow you fish in the rain, or protect you against hypothermia . It may turn out to be a warm day, but if you are fishing a tailwater stream the water may be in the 40 or 50 degree temperature range. Wading and standing in the cold water will cool you down. A comfortable pair of breathable running tights, or long underwear, in addition to your long pants, adds to the prevention of hypothermia. Hypothermia could have a slow insidious onset. I avoid wearing denim jeans. If they get wet from a wader leak, or spill, denims take a long time to dry. Modern microfiber or nylon mixture materials dry quicker. Wind and continuous breezes may also cool you down. When you left home it could have been warm, but at the stream the temperature

may be colder. The newer lightweight microfiber garments can add layers to keep you comfortable and are easy to pack in your fishing vest as the day warms up. As it gets colder, you will have warm garments to layer up again. Another item to pack in your vehicle is a bag with a change of clothing - socks, underwear, slacks, shirt and warm fleece jacket - for the times you receive a dunking in the water after having slipped, or stepped into a deep hole. I have had the most memorable falls in very shallow water on slippery rocks when I did not think a wading stick would be useful. A wading stick enables you to have three points of contact with the ground. It will find the deep hole before you step into the drop off. It will help prevent falls on the embankment along the stream and help you step up out the water on to the bank. It is also useful to tap on bushy area when retrieving a fly. There are collapsible metal wading sticks that fit into a pouch on your belt. A cheap easy wading stick is an old ski pole. Take off the handle, cut it to your preferred length then slip the handle back on the pole. Attach the pole to your wading belt with a 1/8 inch rope about three feet in length. A disadvantage of the metal wading stick is the tapping noise will scare fish. A rubber tip over the metal spike on the bottom may help. In deeper water, a wooden wading stick will float and is really easy to grab when you need to use it. A one inch square by four foot length of maple, spruce or oak coated with multiple layer of varnish or polyurethane is simple homemade wading stick. Drill a hole at end to attach the lanyard.

Remember to use a wading belt. If your waders have a cord around the top, cinch it tight.

Sunburn should be prevented. Apply the sunscreen lotion before you set out. Lyme disease is widespread. The use of long sleeves in brush areas will add additional protection and check for ticks at the end of the day.

In warm weather, many like to wade wearing boots, gravel guards and either shorts, or long light-weight pants. Sadly, an issue to keep in mind is bacterial contaminants in the water. Wearing waders is like having a bandaid to protect you. I know of examples of a few healthy immune competent fishermen who sustained small cuts or lacerations and then required long term antibiotic treatment. If you are taking any medication which affects your immune system, or have any immune competence issues obtain advice from your physician before wet wading.

Another safety item to take is eye protection. Sunglasses protect your eyes from the sun. Modern polarized lenses can be used in low light situations. One of my favorite pair of polarized glasses utilizes a "gray three A" lens. These must be specially ordered from an optician. Walking along the stream path, twigs and bushes could scratch your eye. Hazardous casts have caused eye injuries. You, or a companion could get a hook imbedded in a finger, or elsewhere. Wearing glasses and a hat are important in preventing head hookups. Make sure you have the tools to remove hooks - either pliers, or hemostats - and press down the barbs of your hooks.

Pack a water bottle, or two in your vest. This is the heaviest item in my vest. A lunch, or a few snacks will keep you nourished. A break during the day will help with the onset of fatigue no matter how fit you are. Just sitting quietly along the stream bank will bring to your attention to any rising fish, or a hatch you missed when you were casting in the stream.

Modern technology has provided us with many devices. Carrying a cell phone can be of help in emergencies provided the cell phone has reception. Make sure the phone is secure in waterproof case. Some "waterproof" cases are only water resistant. Ziplock bags add extra protection in addition to the waterproof case. Many newer motor vehicles utilize Bluetooth keys, or have electronic chips. These too should be protected from water damage. The valet key on many vehicles may be the old fashioned basic key. Take this key with you, while securely hiding the electronic key in your vehicle. This may prevent you from being stranded at the stream at end of the day.

If you plan to stay out until after dark, a small LED light will illuminate the path back to the parking lot avoiding treacherous falls.

There are devices called personal locator beacons that will summon help via satellite signals for hikers and those in remote areas. One such device is called ACR Aqualink. In my opinion this is the best of these devices currently on the market. The device must be registered with NOAA and Sarsat. There is no fee for registration. The Aqua link is water proof and floats in water. It is used in marine navigation, aviation and the military.

Securing your fly box with a zinger to your vest pocket is a tip Jim Greco taught me. If one drops an unsecured fly box in the water a hasty attempt to grab the wayward floating expensive fly laden fly but will guarantee a fall and a lost fly box.

Another personal safety issue is when encountering a poacher. We may have an interest in protecting fauna and flora, but we are neither an officer of the law, nor a warden. Just greet the individual, get going in another direction and report the situation. A friend and I encountered a poacher with a high powered rifle along the stream. He was hunting in a no hunting area on state land. Last year I was just doing some photography while shad fishing above Chain Bridge along the Potomac. A group of net casting fishermen thought I was photographing them from a distance. Often a tactical retreat is the best way to stay safe. In areas where hunting is permitted, be aware of hunting season, be it for duck, deer, or turkey. It may be best to avoid fishing that stream during hunting season. A safe thing to do is wear an orange vest and hat.

There are other safety issues. After a long day on the stream, drive home safely. If you are tired, have small nap in the truck, or allow your more awake friend to drive. Many believe the further you drive from home the bigger and more plentiful the fish. This may be true for some rivers and streams and may involve an overnight trip.

I prefer day trips as I want to spend more time on the water than watching the windshield of my vehicle. Paying attention to a few details will enable you to have safer fishing adventures.

Mike Abramowitz is an avid fly fisherman from Potomac, Maryland. He ties flies, occasionally builds fly rods and enjoys fishing from a kayak.