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WADERS—HOW TO SELECT AND CARE FOR THEM

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Did you receive a gift certificate for the Holidays and are now considering some new waders? I have been frequently asked what kind, type, etc., to get. My preference is for chest waders, as I only use my hip boots a few times per year. Where I fish, the water always seem to be an inch deeper than the hippers! Besides, chest waders allow me to cross almost any stream at most points, and I figure I am able to recover over 100 flies per year. That pays for the chest waders in one season.

The most important feature of any wader is its construction. Specifically, does it have nylon (or canvas) laminated to at least the outside? The plain rubber or vinyl waders may be cheap, but they only last until you encounter the first sharp object, branch or submerged log. Nylon-coated waders permit most sharp objects to be brushed aside without damage. The nylon types may cost twice as much as the plain types but will last 4–9 years.

There are two general styles of construction: stocking-foot and those with the boots attached to the wader. The light weight stocking-foot waders are terrific for long hikes and traveling, wearing in boats or cars, and to use on local streams without much brush, fences, or downed timber. Always use a special neoprene bootie between the wader and the wading shoe (if not provided as part of the wader) and use a gravel guard above the shoe top to prevent any sand from getting inside. Sand can wear the stocking feet out in a matter of days. Stocking foot waders are slightly more expensive, since you also need the wading shoes, gravel guards, and similar items. Those with the boots attached to the waders are generally cheaper, heavier and just as durable.

The other major material now in use is neoprene. It comes in several thicknesses and is always covered with nylon or other durable fabric. These are really great for those sensitive to cold or those chasing fish in the colder months. We are just far enough south that I do not think they would be useful for everyone fishing locally. After the warmer spring days arrive, a neoprene chest wader can become very hot after a 10-minute hike down the trail, even in the cool of a May or October morning. Breathable waders are also now on the market. These are the most commonly available wader but are little more expensive. I have not heard of any major or consistent problems with them. Most of us sweat a lot while fishing, so these do solve the problem of condensation inside the waders.

Chest waders are good for other reasons: greater heat retention. When falling into cold water, a pair of hip boots give almost no further protection from heat loss. Chest waders usually have a belt around their middle and a draw string around the top to prevent large volumes of water from entering and trap warm air and water inside.

Keep the belt as high as possible to reduce the amount of water coming into the waders **when**, not **IF**, you take a spill. Allow one extra boot size for extra socks. During colder periods (water temp. less than 45°), I wear quilted long underwear or sweat pants to trap more air and stay warmer in my light-weight waders. I have fished in 32° water with the air never above 28° for a whole day and not gotten cold with such protection.

If you plan on wading very rocky streams (e.g., , North Branch, Savage River?), you may need studded rubber soles, but the lug-type soles usually work well locally. Some do not care for them, but I find the LL Bean Stealth Wading Shoes to work just fine; I particularly like the lack of snow buildup in the winter and dripping water in my car. Felt boots are no longer allowed on any Maryland waters.

Store all rubber waders upside down in a cool, dark, and dry place. Carry a small patch kit with you at all times on the stream, including some paper towels to dry the surfaces around a leak. Once or twice each year, securely hang the waders somewhere and fill them partially with water. Mark all the tiny leaks with a wax crayon or china marker and apply patches. For tiny punctures and some cracks, as well as potential wear points, try Black Plastic Rubber (available in any drug or hardware store). This material must be first worked into the nylon followed with a second, thin coat. Lightly buff bare rubber areas with sandpaper. It does require at least 12 hours to dry (24 is best after the final coat), but is the cheapest, most durable and flexible patch material I've found for tiny punctures. There are silicone materials that are almost as good.

2012 Addendum: Over the past decade there have been major advances in waders, patching materials and foot wear. Although the above will help in getting started on the purchase of a new pair of waders, check with a local tackle store that has an extensive selection of waders and associated gear. Breathable waders are now the norm in our area. All boot soles are now rubber, some with studs. Get the best you can afford and you will not be disappointed. There are now UV-activated patching materials for small pin holes that work in seconds on the stream. Carry a tube with you at all times.