

A person in a grey jacket and green waders stands in a shallow stream, holding a fishing rod. The stream flows over rocks, and the surrounding forest is filled with trees displaying vibrant autumn foliage in shades of yellow, orange, and green. The scene is captured from a slightly elevated perspective, looking down the length of the stream.

Wading Women

**Explore...Emerge
Through Fly Fishing**

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Table of Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Safety Considerations](#)

[Exploring](#)

[Education, Guides, Equipment](#)

[Putting it All Together](#)

[Etiquette](#)

[Numbers](#)

[Home Waters](#)

[Pausing to Enjoy](#)

[Photography](#)

[Keep Going Back](#)

[Resources](#)

[Closing Thoughts](#)



Introduction

*“Nature reminds me that I need to connect with the wild,
untamed part of myself that dances on stars,
rides on the backs of wild dolphins,
flies on warm trade winds and sings with delight
at sunrises.”*

Simone Lipscomb, Sharks on My Fin Tips

Fly fishing changed my life. That’s probably all that needs to be written in the introduction to this guide; however, to offer clarity, almost the entirety of my fly fishing experience has been by myself, other than a couple of guides I’ve worked with a few times every year and very occasional friends I trust to do their own thing and let me do my thing—immerse myself in the realm of water and flow. This guide is for anyone wanting a *very* basic introduction to fly fishing, but it’s especially created for women. I write from a solo perspective, but everything written here applies to fly fishers, whether in a group or fishing solo.

Wading while fly fishing isn’t for everyone. And solo fly fishing especially isn’t for everyone. There are issues that must be addressed, whether in a group or going alone, such as safety, physical fitness, and basic fly fishing know-how. The places I fish are physically challenging at times. Not just the actual wading, but the terrain leading to and surrounding the creeks and streams can be steep, slippery, isolated, and heavily vegetated. It’s not anything like fishing from a drift boat, except for the fly rod and flies. I’m not a youngster, being in my early 60’s, but I am healthy and of average fitness so a person doesn’t have to be an athlete to do this.

An angler can successfully grow into a capable, solo fly fisher in the back country or in places that are more populated with other humans. A satisfying experience should always be based on individual interpretation of what denotes a fun place to fish. We should never be in competition with what anyone else does. This is all about what makes your heart sing.

This guide is not intended to persuade anyone to explore remote areas by themselves. It is intended to support those who wish to do so with basic ideas of safety, gear, and stories from my experiences. It should not be viewed as a comprehensive safety manual. By the way of a disclaimer, this kind of hiking and wading, solo or with friends, can be dangerous and can lead to physical or mental stress, injury or even death. This isn’t to scare anyone, but to be mindful in an extreme and rare occurrence what can happen.

When I was a scuba instructor, the agency I trained with never wanted instructors to use the word death or say people can die doing scuba. This is quite strange given the fact that if you are breathing compressed air and hold your breath coming up from a depth of less than 15 feet while surfacing, you can actually die. I’m not saying solo fly fishing is as dangerous as that; but, I am saying there are inherent risks and I want people to be aware.

The stories I share are based in the mountains of Western North Carolina and Eastern Tennessee. The terrain and water systems are different here than other areas in the United States and the world. Common sense reminds us to learn the area we wish to explore before heading out in the woods. I have met so many ‘hikers’ that stop me and ask where the parking lot is located. They’re back in the woods three miles and have no idea where they are because they just started walking without a plan.

It is a good idea to hire a guide, especially if new to an area, to learn about the rivers and terrain and other issues that might make a fabulous day not quite so fabulous. Some information translates to any location, while other information does not. Be smart. Rivers vary in temperament, flow, terrain, and fish-ability by geographic regions and weather conditions. Even the rivers where I live are different every day. Use weather and river flow apps often and always check them before leaving for the river and especially before losing cell service.

Having communicated the necessary disclaimer, I can return to the first statement: Fly fishing has changed my life—specifically, solo fly fishing. I’ve learned to trust myself at a very deep level and engage the love of exploration that is central to my personality. I crave solitude in Nature but equally yearn for connection. Fly fishing opens the door to dancing with trout, fulfilling my desire to connect with a profound part of Nature. When I tie a fly and use it to get the attention of a wild trout, I’m happy. When fish actually engage with it, even

better. And if I'm lucky enough to have a few seconds feeling the strength of a wild, mountain trout, before I release it, I'm pretty much in heaven.

But there are other elements of Nature, besides trout, such as otters, wildflowers, bears, and butterflies that expand my love of fly fishing. It's not just the trout that keep me hiking and wading throughout the year, it's everything I feel, see, and hear, while out in the woods, that brings a wholeness of experience. Solo fly fishing helps me quieten my mind and be fully present. The deep connection with Nature I desire comes from this inner stillness. I feel more at peace and in harmony with life after a few hours wading and casting.

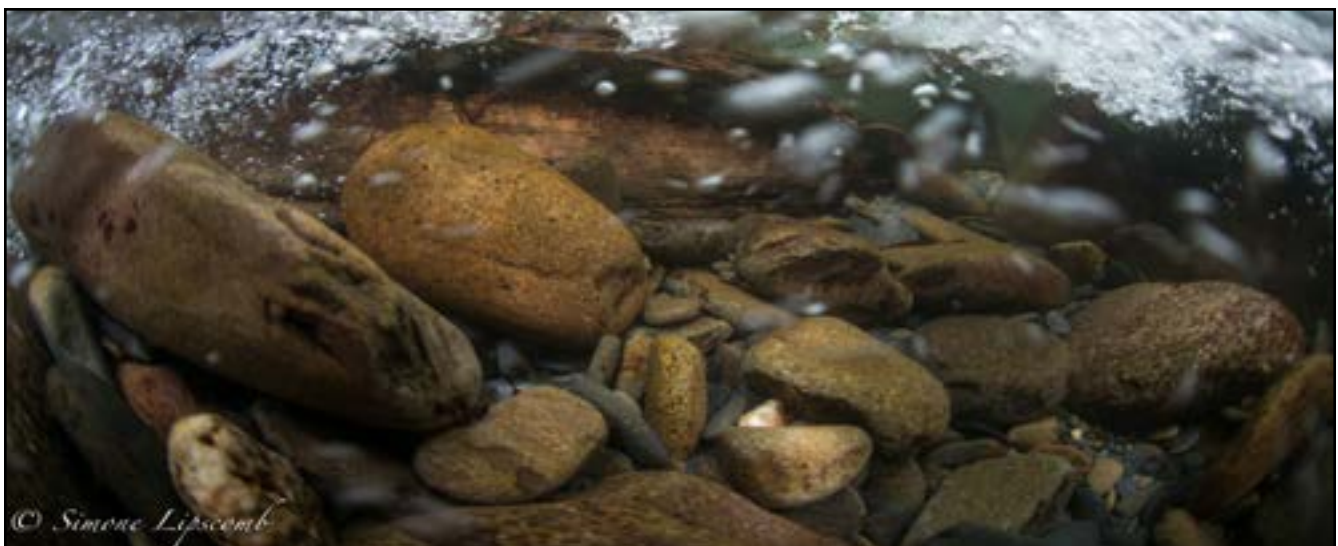
It can be intimidating for women to fly fish, much less venture into the wilds alone, but if we are prepared and practice safety, it can be very empowering. We can explore and find inner strengths we never knew existed and learn how to apply what we learn fly fishing in everyday life. We can emerge and engage with life in a new way.

One last disclaimer I offer: I am not an expert fly fisher with decades of experience. I do, however, have many decades of experience as an outdoorswoman including hiking, cycling, kayaking, paddle boarding, scuba diving, and cave diving. I worked as a scuba instructor for many years. I started fishing with a cane pole as a toddler and used spin tackle growing up on the Gulf Coast. Being outdoors is very natural experience for me and water is my true home.

When I began fly fishing, I found there were not many resources to help me solo fly fish. So as a trained educator, I organized my learning in ways that made sense to me and sought support from videos, guides, outfitters, and books. But none of these resources taught me how to fly fish alone, in the woods. I had to figure that out myself.

Because solo fly fishing has helped me so much, I wanted to share what I learned...and continue to learn...so that other women who want to go it alone have a basic resource to get started. It is intended to support women as they learn and progress as fly fishers in any configuration—whether fishing solo, with a friend or a group. Let this guide be a starting point in your endeavors to build courage, self-reliance, connect deeper with Nature, and of course, fly fish. Explore resources to build knowledge and then apply what's learned to what you do. Eventually, confidence will grow and home waters will expand.

This guide is intended to be a very basic introduction to help women enter fly fishing with a bit of knowledge and encourage them to learn more on their own through resources such as books, videos, guides, and their home outfitter shop. Ultimately, the fly fisher will be fueled with passion to learn more and gain as much knowledge as possible as she progresses. And then, all of that fresh knowledge can be applied as she casts and learns to use pieces of feathers and fur to catch fish.



Safety Considerations

*“Wading is an adventure for me.
The pressure of running water against my legs
gives me great pleasure, a feeling of being a part of the stream itself.
It somehow makes me feel more closely related to the creatures within it, the fish
I seek to catch. But if there is any speed to the flow, as soon as the water rises above my crotch the experience is
heightened by a hint of danger, the unknown, and unexpected. My feet want to come off the bottom.”
Joan Salvato Wulff*

Water/Wading Safety

First rule: if a person cannot swim and is wading, a PFD (personal flotation device) is a must. There is no discussion about this, no arguments to be made.

The force of moving water is incredibly powerful. A foot of moving water can float a small car. When wading even small streams it's important to understand a few simple safety practices. Even creeks with clear water can be hazardous due to flash floods, slippery rocks, foot entrapment, and strainers.

In the mountains, where I fish, flash floods are a threat to anyone in a stream or river. It can rain in upper elevations and be clear at lower elevations. The water will eventually make its way downstream. Sometimes water levels can rise rapidly and create serious danger. When wading or fishing along the bank of even small creeks, it's important to pay attention.

A friend of mine is a fly fishing guide and told of an experience where he was with a client in a local river that averages two feet in depth. The guide looked upstream and saw a two foot wall of water moving rapidly toward them. He had seconds to react and pull his client to safety. A visit to USGS water data graphs give evidence of how rapidly water can rise. As an exercise, go to the website <http://waterdata.usgs.gov> and look up a local river. Check the history to explore how rain events change the river flow. Specifically, look for CFS data (cubic feet per second).

Strainers are considered to be especially dangerous in flowing water. A strainer is simply an object in the water, such as a tree, that is stationary and allows water to pass around, under, or through it, but would trap a person. Many small creeks I wade that are two feet or less in average depth, have stacks of dead trees in some areas that are more than ten feet high. Flash floods create these hazards. The stacks look imposing, but when the creek is low-flow, they aren't even in the water. A single tree, laying in shallow, moving water, can drown someone if they fall and are swept into it and become trapped. Situational awareness is very important even when wading creeks that are one or two feet in depth. Always look for strainers as you move up the creek or river.

When wading, I have discovered it generally safer to face upstream. If my foot gets entrapped, I want the force of the water to help me free it. If I'm facing downstream and get a foot entrapment, the force of the water will actually make it more difficult to free my foot. Also, wading diagonally against the flow is easier than pushing straight into it. For me, a wading staff is a necessity to provide a third balance point. It is an added piece of safety equipment that is easy to use and because it is attached to the hip, floats until it is needed to move to the next spot. I would not wade without one. It is also an excellent tool to test depth and feel for holes. I've spoken with women who won't use one because they think it's a sign of weakness, yet they admit they fall a lot. I'm not sure how to respond to this logic.

As a yoga practitioner and instructor, I regularly practice balance postures and stepping with an empty foot to build my strength for wading. Practice this by standing with weight balanced equally on both feet. Then, transfer all the weight to one leg/foot and pick up the other foot. Move the lifted foot to a position diagonally forward and keep the foot empty, meaning don't transfer weight to it. Place the foot and still keep it empty. Then gradually transfer the weight. Continue slowly walking this way and paying attention to the idea of grounding or rooting through the bottoms of the feet. This builds strength in the legs and helps develop muscle memory for wading.

When wading, go slow. Watch for holes, feel for them as well before transferring weight to the stepping foot. Use care when wading with larger rocks. Sometimes current can create a hollow area under a large rock that isn't visible. If you step into one of these holes it can be a serious trap for not only your foot, but your entire leg. Foot entrapment can be very dangerous. If a person gets a foot trapped in higher water, the force of moving water can make it difficult to release the foot. This is another instance where a wading staff can help avoid a dangerous situation.

Additional wading safety considerations include never crossing your feet and don't transfer weight until you know your leading foot is stable. Never move one foot unless the other one is securely placed. If you feel unstable, stop and re-group. Stand sideways to the current so you have a thin silhouette facing the current. Very clear water is possibly deeper than it looks. Large, flat surface rocks are slippery! Remember that current above knee level is magnified in difficulty. Always scout out a way across a creek or river prior to committing. Think ahead and find an exit route. Avoid randomly wading without scouting your route.

Gravel and sand are generally ideal bottoms to stand on, while large rocks and rock shelves are the most dangerous due to smooth and slippery surfaces. A shoulder width stance is the most stable, so consider keeping a wider stance while standing in moving water.

Finally, when fishing in icy rivers, use caution as ice shelves can appear solid but may be thin. Stepping or falling through ice creates a serious risk of hypothermia or entrapment. But hypothermia can occur at any time of year. Cold, mountain streams, even in summer months, can be very chilling if a person becomes submerged and has a long walk back to the car.

Waders and gear will be covered in a later chapter, but as an added reminder: Always wear a wading belt—cinched—with waders. This will hopefully keep most water out in the event of a fall. Waders that become full of water from a fall and accidental swim, are a drowning hazard. They can act as a sea anchor and drive you wherever the force of the water is moving. If a person with waders floats with head upstream, feet downstream (the defensive swimming position) their waders continue to fill with water. Instead, roll over to your belly and aggressively swim downstream and across to shore (Ralph Cutter, January 2014 article on wader safety in Fly Fisherman magazine). Crawl out on the bank and before standing, turn over to your back and lift one leg at a time to dump water.

A wading belt should have a quick release buckle that allows a fly fisher to release it easily if it becomes entangled. This, too, can create a drowning hazard if a person falls and is swept into branches. Last year a woman kayaking in a local river died when her boat capsized. She exited the craft, but her PFD strap got caught on a limb of a strainer and she couldn't free herself.

Cutter also cites the USGS safety formula for wading. That formula is: multiply the depth in feet times the number of feet a stick drifts in a second. If it's greater than 8, stay out of the water. For example, the water depth is two feet and a stick you toss in moves 4 feet in one second, that equals 8. That's the USGS formula. For me, that number would be much lower. I would never wade in water moving that fast. It is never worth endangering my life to fly fish. Always base wading on your comfort level. Don't be tempted to go beyond your ability to wade safely.

I have an app on my phone that has all river gauges on it. I have my favorites bookmarked. Before I plan an outing, I check the CFS levels and over time note, in my fly fishing journal, what my cut-off is for each stream. I can adjust my plans and take my photography gear instead of fly fishing gear when the water is flowing too fast for me. Every one has to determine her own ability to wade and stay safe.

Weather

We've already touched on flash floods that come from heavy rains in short periods of time. These rapidly rising water events are especially concerning in mountainous areas. Along with rain, temperature changes can occur that increase the risk of hypothermia.

It is also possible, especially when wearing waders, to become over-heated. Nobody wants to carry a heavy pack with extra clothes or storage to carry layers that become too hot. This is why having dependable weather apps and looking at daily forecasts are important, but using apps without cell service isn't possible. So check the forecast before leaving your home. Wear clothing that is wicking in cold or hot weather. Cotton is not

a good choice in cold weather as it doesn't dry fast and holds moisture next to the skin causing rapid cooling and possible hypothermia. During the winter months, I'll carry an additional small pack if I'm doing longer hikes while fishing with a dry base layer and storage for stowing layers I don't need.

I love wet wading in warmer months as I become overheated hiking up steep trails in waders. Wet wading in colder months isn't wise due to hypothermia risk. Experience will teach us our personal thresholds for hot and cold tolerance. This is all dependent on environment, location, terrain, and current weather.

One late, spring afternoon I arrived at the creek, excited to have a couple hours of fishing. In my rush to go play in the water, I forgot my wading pants. I was wearing capri tights and had thick, wool socks that I usually wear under my wading pants neoprene feet. It was a warm day so I decided to wade and stay close to the car because I knew the boots would be too big without the neoprene feet of the waders and I didn't want blisters. They were too big and the water was 60 degrees. Cold, but not horrible. But, after two hours, my feet were numb. I was glad to have a couple hours fishing and glad that the car was so close.

Lightning is another hazard that poses a serious risk while outdoors. If a lightning storm comes while fishing, get out of the water and away from it. Head to safety. Stay away from tall trees and open spaces. Crouch down and become small if lightning is close. Have as little contact with the ground as possible. Get off of elevated areas. Remember the quote, "When thunder roars, go indoors." An added caution: With the sound of rushing water in creeks and rivers, it's difficult to hear other sounds, including distant thunder. Also, remember to put your lightning rod down.

In the mountains where I fish, there are many trees. In the past couple of years we have had wind storms with increased ferocity that have caused a lot of tree damage. Casting in high wind isn't easy and if it's so intense that casting isn't possible, it might be time to head back to the vehicle. Being caught in a storm with high winds or just an intensely windy day is dangerous if tree limbs are falling. Maybe stay home and tie flies on high-wind days rather than risk injury from falling limbs or trees. There will be times when fishing in wind is necessary and some areas have consistent high winds. That's a different scenario than being under large trees with falling limbs due to weather systems moving through. Be situationally aware.

Topography

Some of the best creeks for trout habitat are in mountainous regions. Elevations can be gentle or intense. It's best to be prepared for hiking if exploring further than roadside is desired. Being physically fit to hike in with gear is important. A fly fishing rod isn't that heavy, but waders (if wearing) can make hiking much harder and there will be some sort of pack, hopefully small. A fly fisher will want to carry water, or a water filtration device, and food in addition to flies and basic gear. It adds up to create weight that can make hiking more difficult. Walk the trail before fishing the creek beside the trail. Learn the terrain before wearing and carrying gear up the same path. This provides time to study the creek or river without carrying a long rod that will attempt to tangle on every branch it passes.

Ask yourself questions about the terrain while hiking: Is there a gorge? Where are entry and exit points? Are rapids or waterfalls there that make wading impossible or too dangerous? Scouting a creek before wading is smart. Become friends with it before moving to a more intimate relationship with it. Let it share its navigational secrets with you before you make the commitment to wade in.

During winter months, when vegetation is lighter, I take my iPhone and use the Gaia app on hikes along creeks, studying the water and the surrounding banks and hazards. I create notes on safe entries and exits. I take photos of strainers or rapids that might create wading issues, remembering that higher water levels can change everything. An area a person knows intimately can totally change due to one large rain event.

Communication

One reason I hike miles up a creek is to get away from people and distractions like phones, email, and social media. Most of the places I fly fish have no cell service, which is awesome for those wanting to disconnect; however, this can be a serious problem if assistance is needed.

I carry a Garmin InReach Mini satellite communication device. It allows for deployment of an SOS signal as well as texting to friends and family if help is needed but it's not an emergency. Note of caution: Mountainous terrain and heavy tree cover can impede transmission of a satellite signal. I practice using the device monthly and have found that if I remain still and have even a small amount of open sky, a signal will send; however, a satellite signal is not like a text. It might take 5 minutes or longer for a satellite message to send. It is not instantaneous, even if used in a completely open sky.

The latest version of iPhone has a new update that includes a satellite emergency signal. If a person attempts 911 with no cell signal, the phone automatically gives the option to call for help via satellite signal. Read up on this before attempting to use it. With any emergency signaling device, know how to use it prior to needing it.

Probably the most important communication a person can make is to tell someone where they are going and when they will be back. Give instructions on what to do if contact isn't made within the allotted time. Do this before getting out of cell phone coverage.

Critters

Insect allergies can be a serious medical emergency. Anyone that has an allergy to insects should carry a prescribed epipen even if fishing within sight of a vehicle. I carry benadryl in my first aid kit in case I have an unexpected reaction. This at least helps reduce swelling until I can make my way to emergency care, if needed.

Snakes love water and warm rocks. That doesn't mean they are laying in wait for an unsuspecting wading woman. Just pay attention as you wade and especially watch where hands are placed while climbing up or down banks. Avoid dark holes in rocky areas and heavily rooted areas for hand placements. A wading staff comes in handy when scrambling through areas to help with balance so hands are not needed for grasping. We want to avoid upsetting the naps of our snake friends and leave them to their important role in their ecosystems.

Larger critters are amazing to see, but since we're in their home, we need to use caution. I was wading a mile or so up a trail one day and caught a beautiful brook trout. After releasing it, I continued wading and was feeling rather elated and maybe even distracted. I came to an exit point and decided to cross the creek. As I neared the far bank, I came upon a large bear paw print on a rock, still dripping from a very recent visit. I never saw the bear but it would have seen me as I loudly whooped as the brook trout bent my fly rod into dancing action. This is one reason I always make a little noise when in bear habitat. I'd much rather them hear me and move on than scare one into a defensive reaction.

Make a bit of noise...sing, recite poetry, whistle occasionally. Just let the bears know someone is moving through the area. There's one stretch of creek that I wade past and never stop at, even though the water is exquisite. I'm almost certain a bear den is above that area in the side of the bank under a massive tree. I can see where a large animal keeps the soil smoothed over at the base of the den. I'd rather not whoop and disturb a bear that might not be ready for spring-time visitors. I quietly wade past and whisper lullabies as I move upstream.

Where I fish, elk are present. Most of the year they ignore people. During the autumn rut, the bulls—with their massive antlers—are less tolerant of humans and have been known to chase fly fishers that get too close. As well, if there are battling bull elk, just fish somewhere else. Don't take the risk of becoming collateral damage in their games.

There are other animals that will be encountered, including otters, mink, beaver, skunk, and anything else that resides in the woods or water. I've had several encounters with otters including a mother that brought two babies within a few feet of me as I stood very still in a large pool. It was incredible to witness them so close. And for fly fishers that hate otters, blaming them for over-indulging in trout—otters and trout have coexisted much longer than the sport of fly fishing has existed. They are a native species here, rainbow trout and brown trout are not native species in this area. Please stop the hate and enjoy their beauty.

Know the animals you are likely to encounter. Learn how to behave in their presence by researching expert's advice. Black bears are supposedly less aggressive than brown bears, but any mother bear is going to rage if she thinks a cub is in danger. Don't get between a mother and baby and never, ever feed any wild animal.

First Aid

It's very easy to carry basic first aid supplies, even with a small waist pack. Everyone should carry a few individually packed alcohol prep pads, a few band-aids, benadryl, individual packs of antibiotic ointment, ibuprofen, aspirin, a few butterfly closures, a small amount of duct tape, a couple large sterile pads, and if severe allergies are known, an epipen obtained with a prescription. A zip lock freezer bag works great for storage. A more advanced kit might be used for travel. For local trips, a small kit should work fine.

Regarding hooks: If using barbless hooks, removal shouldn't require any special procedures. If you can't remove the hook with your fingers, use your hemostats after wiping with an alcohol prep pad. If fishing alone and your face or neck becomes hooked, remain calm, *especially* if you use barbless hooks. All kidding aside, use an alcohol pad to wipe your hands and the area around the hook. The hook, in theory, should be easy to remove. Sterile eye dressings shouldn't be needed if eye protection is always worn. (Even in rain or low light, wear eye protection). If you do hook your face, at least take a photo so you can share later with friends.

Even if fishing alone, you might meet someone else that is injured on the trail. Having a small kit can be very helpful. And remember to always ask before touching someone. Ask for permission to assist. Take a first aid and CPR class. There are many options for classes, from basic first aid to wilderness first aid. Hopefully you'll never have to use it, but having a bit of first aid training can help give confidence when fishing alone or with a friend.

It's beyond the scope of this guide to teach first aid, so please, at the very least, carry a small kit and be prepared. Not long ago I was walking, in my waders and boots, two miles up a trail. I felt a mild discomfort at my heel and thought it was probably just a little straw in my sock. It continued to get worse but I didn't want to stop and remove my pack and wading pants and boot and sock. Finally, after fishing a couple hours, I couldn't tolerate it any more. When I removed my bloody sock I discovered an inch long scrape on my heel. I had forgotten my first aid kit when I switched packs so had nothing to clean or cover my foot with and had two miles to walk out. I felt in my sock and found a very tiny rock chip embedded in the thick sock. Once I removed it, everything felt better. But I had to put the bloody sock back on my foot and walk back to my car. It wasn't nearly as painful and I'm lucky I didn't get an infection. It taught me to always carry my little first aid kit.

Rescue

Knowing how to treat minor injuries is important in the woods. So is knowing how to stay safe if rescue is needed. Self-rescue might be the only option if a person is alone. As mentioned above, an accidental swim in waders in deep water, requires a person to know how to turn over and swim downstream, diagonally, to the bank. If fishing with a friend, how would you help them in a situation such as this? Jumping in would create a second person in need of rescue. This guide provides basic information that directs readers to learn and study more comprehensive instructional manuals and take courses to gain expertise. In the meantime, your friend is floating down a deep hole with water-filled waders. What do you do? Coach them by calmly yelling to turn over on their belly and swim downstream diagonally. Be at the bank to help them out and grab their gear, if possible. It might be surprising to know that some of us will try to save our \$900 fly rod first and forget, for a moment, our own safety.

I was wading with a guide once and placed my wading staff before crossing a higher flow, deeper water crossing in a creek. What I didn't know was the rock I placed my staff on was slanted so as I applied pressure to the wading staff, it began to slide. I began to slowly go down. I yelled at the guide, "Save my rod." We were laughing because it wasn't that deep and it wasn't really dangerous, but the first thought I had was to keep my rod safe. It is a consideration, not that it's a brilliant consideration. The rod was rescued, I was wet nearly up to my waist because we were wet wading. But it was a hot day anyway.

The main point to be made in this basic guide is to never put yourself in danger to rescue another person unless you are trained and have the right equipment to do so. I took a basic swift water rescue course several years ago and it provided me with information that translated very well to wading safety. I reflect often on what I learned in that course as I wade the creeks and rivers with a fly rod. It's beyond the scope of this guide to give

instruction on rescue techniques. But do think about how you will keep yourself safe and how you might give assistance to someone in need, while staying safe yourself.

Hydration and Food

A final consideration in basic safety is water and food. How much a person needs is based on how far they are hiking and wading. If I'm staying close to my vehicle and planning on an hour or two, I won't take any food and will carry a small water bottle. If I'm planning to hike in to fish, I carry a good water filtration device as well as snacks or lunch.

I use a *Grayl* water filter bottle. It's not super-lightweight, but it's lighter than carrying water bottles on a long hike. Plus, if it's an extra-warm day, I have an endless supply of water to filter and drink. With any filtration device, read the instructions and follow them carefully to avoid drinking contaminated water.

Dark chocolate squares, almonds, and string cheese are my favorite snacks. There are definitely times when extra fuel is needed. Depending on how long I plan to be out, extra food might be added including a sandwich. It's important not to underestimate fuel needs, especially when hiking strenuous terrain.

Personal Safety

The most unpleasant part of compiling a guide for women wanting to fly fish is that of personal safety from other humans. I'm rarely concerned about wildlife but keep my guard up for humans that might wish me harm.

First, I don't venture into the woods without some sort of personal protection. But before we dive into that subject, let's get real with situational awareness—know what's going on around you. This isn't so easy when standing in rushing water that's loud enough to mask the sound of distant thunder. Hearing plays an important role in safety; however, a simple complete, 360 degree scan of the area often is easy to do and a vital part of situational awareness.

While focusing on a task such as tying on new tippet, a new fly, or anything that takes attention, it's easy to forget to be aware. That happened to a friend of mine. She was fishing by herself and was changing a fly. A man was in her space before she had time to react. He wasn't threatening her, but was simply passing by. It scared her to realize how quickly a person can encounter another human when attention is elsewhere.

Part of my routine, even when I'm immersed in the total delight of fly fishing, is to stop and look around—a complete scan—on a regular basis. Many of the places I fish are not in view of a trail and even if they are, the trails are not overly busy so I'm responsible for my own safety when I venture into the places I go. In order to feel safe, I do a regular scan to stay aware of my environment. I'm looking for people, animals, and even flash floods if I'm fishing in rainy weather.

It is not my intention to scare anyone, but to increase awareness so that an individual, alone, has confidence and trust that she can care for herself and protect herself if the unthinkable happens.

Kelly Sayre writes, "By staying present and curious about our environment, we notice when something or someone's behavior is 'off.'" She goes on to say by using your senses to notice what you hear, see, smell and touch, you're paying attention to what makes you feel safe and what doesn't. Setting boundaries are an important part of self-protection.

For example, if you pass someone on a trail and glance back (I always do) and notice they turned around and started following you, this is a red flag. I would stop and let the person know I see them and whatever personal protection device I have, I would be sure it was easily within reach. I would ask myself, *Do I feel safe right now?* And that's a question we can ask ourselves regularly, rather than stay in fear and think of terrible things that could happen.

Use this question often: Do I feel safe right now?

A person that is aware and prepared, does not look like a victim.

What pieces of equipment might be helpful? First and easiest to carry is a *Fox 40* safety whistle. I name this brand specifically because they are very loud and will work when wet. Three blasts on this device is an SOS

signal. It works not only for personal safety, but also if you are injured and need to attract attention for assistance or rescue. Don't be afraid to practice using it, while at home, just to see how loud it is. And keep it handy. I keep mine on the outside of my hip pack, easily within reach. I consider it necessary equipment.

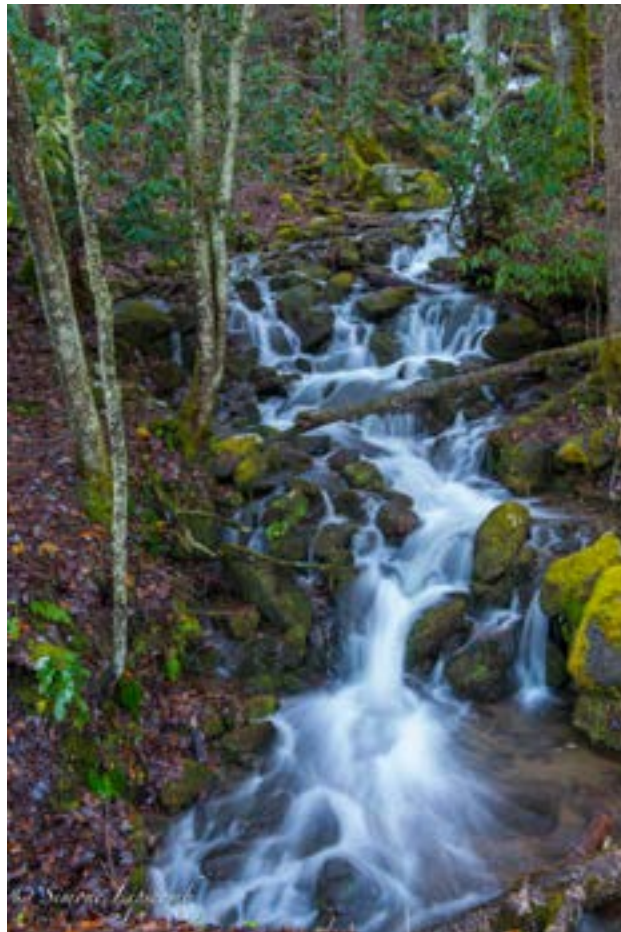
The next step up is pepper spray. I don't carry bear spray, but I'm around black bears. In areas with brown bears, I suspect bear spray is a very smart part of a kit. I have a great pistol-grip pepper spray gadget with two sprays available. It's small, shaped like a small pistol, and easy to use. This would be a minimum personal protection device when I'm alone in the woods.

I hesitate to mention a concealed weapon, but because I'm being transparent, I will. I don't own an assault rifle or see the need for anyone to own one, but I do have a pistol and a concealed carry permit. I carry a pistol when fly fishing alone and I practice using it at the range. It's always within each reach. If I ever feel threatened or uneasy, I listen to those intuitive feelings, and unzip my pack, just in case I need it.

Several years ago a serial killer murdered a couple in an area where I used to regularly hike. The year after that, I refused to go into the woods and spent an entire summer angry that I felt scared. Rather than deny myself the pleasure of solitude in the woods, I took a concealed carry class and learned how to shoot. This, in itself, was incredibly powerful. Learning to safely handle a gun requires a great deal of trust in yourself. When I became comfortable carrying the pistol, I started hiking again and haven't stopped since. I have a concealed carry permit and keep the permit with me, along with my fishing license and driver's license every time I fish alone.

I'm not advocating the ownership or use of a pistol, but I am not against individuals having the right to legally and safely carry one for personal protection. I know many women fly fishers that 'carry' when fishing. It's not unusual. And it's not necessary. But some kind of personal protection device is necessary. Sadly, that's just a fact. At least it is for me to feel safe. If I'm with someone else, I'll carry pepper spray instead of the pistol. And while guiding in a national park, it's illegal to carry a concealed weapon, although if a person is not guiding, it is legal with the proper concealed carry permit.

If this section on safety considerations hasn't scared you away from fly fishing, I invite you to continue your journey. Next, we will look at ideas around exploring.



Exploring

“It has taken all my life for the changes to develop with equipment and attitude that now make fly fishing a natural extension of a woman’s love of the outdoors.”
Joan Salvato Wulff

Before packing fly rod and gear three miles up a mountain trail, it’s important to consider safety issues already discussed; however, it’s important to consider emotional well-being. If a person is overwhelmed, they are not likely to participate in a new activity. One of the ways I was able to expand my explorations was to start with a small area and gradually expand as my confidence grew in the actual components of fishing: tying knots, choosing a fly, wading, casting, landing fish, releasing fish.

My first fly fishing experience was with a guide at a local creek that is generally easy to wade. It has a campground nearby so during the warmer months, people are nearby. I started going there by myself and returned many times, wading a bit further each time as I learned to wade, cast, land fish, and successfully release them. The first time I explored a new creek was a big deal for me. To feel comfortable, I had to begin with a familiar area, learn it, and then apply what I learned to other areas.

While situational awareness is about knowing the outer environment by using our senses to help keep us safe, knowing our inner environment will help keep our emotional and mental selves safe. Just as we ask if the situation feels safe for us physically, we ask that same question about our emotional and mental states.

When I facilitated ropes courses, we taught participants about the growth zone. When a person tries a new activity, we want to push them past their comfort zone, but not into their panic zone. In the panic zone, a person has tunnel vision and can, in extreme cases, freeze. A high ropes course was a wonderful place for individuals to explore their growth zone. As a facilitator, it was my job to keep them safe in their equipment and belay system, but also to keep them in the growth zone rather than allow them to progress to the panic zone. We can do that for ourselves when we learn new things.

Another tip I’ll pass along comes from being a scuba instructor. When students learn too many new things at once, we call that task-loading. We wouldn’t want a new diver to take up underwater photography when they are still learning how to dive. Adding a camera to their gear could overload them mentally and emotionally. While fly fishing isn’t diving, it does involve wading and as we’ve already discussed, wading can be hazardous. Check in and make sure you are not task-loading...or task over-loading.

Fish the same, lazy stretch of creek while learning to wade. And yes, there is an art to wading. Get to know one section of creek or river as you are getting used to new gear, then gradually expand. The whole point is to have fun, so if a person gets overwhelmed with gear or wading or being alone in the woods, the likelihood of that activity becoming a passionate, happy, long-term pastime, is low—be it fly fishing, hiking, paddle boarding, scuba, or cycling.

Ask: What do I need to feel safe? If you need to go with a friend, then do that. If you don’t know other women that fly fish, join an online community such as *United Women on the Fly*. There are regional groups that have local meet-ups. Maybe bear spray is a bottom line for feeling safe. For me, if I’m fishing solo in a remote location, I take my satellite communicator, a small pistol (along with my concealed carry permit), and a safety whistle. Strangely, a local fishing guide warned me about an area of state water and fishing alone along a highway. I think his exact words were, *Be really careful out there alone. It’s not a safe place*. I wouldn’t have thought it was unsafe. Now, I don’t fish there alone because I trust this person’s advice.

While getting to know terrain is important for fun and safe exploring, getting to know an area is just as important. Ask local shops, find folks that fish various areas, and ask them about the vibe of the area. And perhaps most importantly, trust your own gut feeling. There’s an area near me that feels creepy to me. I’ve been there several times and finally stopped going because the vibe of the area is so ‘not right.’ It is an area known for drug use by the locals and while that may be only at night, when the rest of us are hiking and fishing, the energy lingers making it very unsettling to me, so I no longer fish there.

When asking locals about areas to fish, don't expect them to 'spot burn' or give away special fishing areas. Make it clear that you don't want them to 'spot burn.' Let them know you are wanting to inquire about safety and general fishing success. It will definitely create a bond of trust if you are not asking them the details of special fishing hot spots.

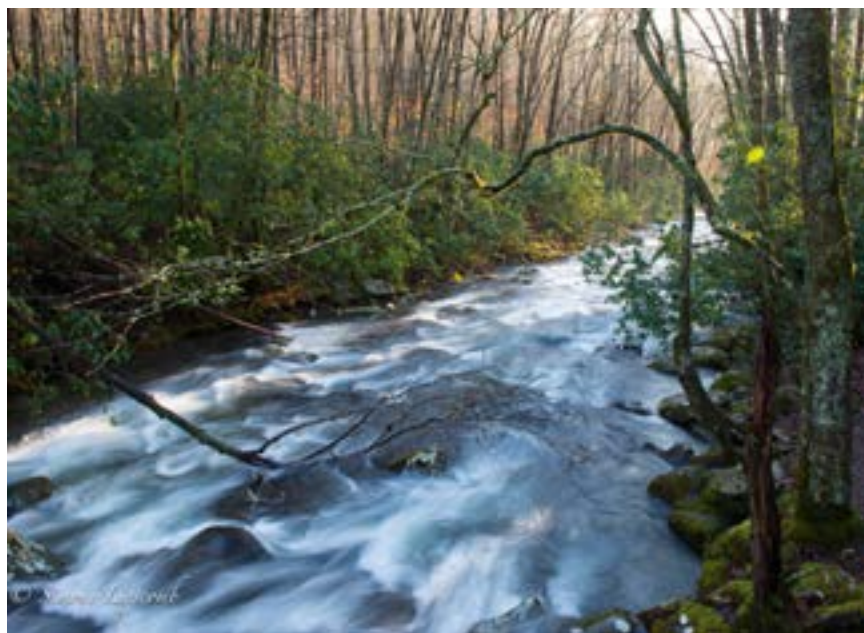
I mentioned navigational apps in the safety section. I truly enjoy the *Gaia* app and certainly there are other good ones. While these can be great, it's vital to know where you are and how to get back to your vehicle if the phone is lost or loses power. I mentioned scouting a creek in the safety section. When I do this during winter, when the vegetation is less, I mark on my Gaia app where good egress points are so that when I'm wading, I can access the app and see how close I am to the points of exit. I've done this several times with great success. Even though the trail follows the creek, there are places where the trail wanders away...far away...and if I'm bushwhacking, I'd rather it be a short distance than a quarter mile through rhododendron hells.

Exploration of the outer world requires exploration of the inner world; at least that's my theory. I have grown so much learning to hike, dive, cave dive, paddle board, and fly fish. For me, it's not about how far I hike or wade or penetrate an underwater cave—it's the quality of the experience. Some people might think this is ridiculously silly. After all, it's just fly fishing. But I'm not sharing this to create more fly fishers. I'm sharing this to give women that wish to empower themselves, through fly fishing, the basic tools to learn more and to create a wonderful path to fulfilling their goals.

One last issue for the exploration section is how to use the bathroom outdoors. Some women have never peed in the woods so here's a bit on how a local national park requires us to handle this. It will happen. There will come a point where nature will 'call.'

National park regulations state that human waste (poop) must be disposed of at least 100 feet from any campsite, shelter, water source, or trail and must be buried in a hole at least 6 inches deep. Toilet paper and sanitary items need to be packed out as well as any food scraps. I carry a flattened small roll of toilet tissue in a zip lock bag. If you need the tissue, you can use the bag to carry it out after using it. For peeing, a simple drip and dry works fine; however, toilet tissue is fine if you pack it out. Never leave toilet tissue behind. That's just uncool.

Be aware of poisonous plants when dropping your waders and/or pants to pee. Learn what poison ivy looks like when leafed out and in winter, when the little leafless sticks are still capable of producing an irritating rash. And if you are dropping drawers, look around. You might be off the trail fishing, but the trail might offer a great view of your bare rear end.



Education, Gear, Guides

*"I came away with several important pieces of information.
I suddenly realized I had only been exposed to the tip
of the iceberg in learning about fly fishing.
It was made obvious to me that fly fishing would be
a lifelong learning experience."
Susan Thrasher*

Before fly fishing for the first time, I spent hours watching videos on YouTube and reading books about casting, trout, and general fly fishing beginner tips. Two resources were especially helpful: [Mad River Outfitters](#) with Brian Flechsig and the [Orvis Learning Center](#). I also purchased Joan Wulff's fly casting DVD and her books.

But prior to actually casting, I had to purchase equipment. Since I was brand new to the sport, I also had to educate myself on what I needed. One of the first things I did, when entering into the fly fishing world, was to visit every shop around my home waters. My experiences varied from feeling totally welcomed to being completely ignored by one fly shop with four men that glared at me as if I was some toxic cloud entering their sacred realm of testosterone. There is also a shop nearby that has some nice guys working in it, but some real asses as well. The only way I figured this out was to visit them all and choose wisely where to invest my money.

Recently, a fly shop opened that has a female co-owner who is creating a special level of support for women, with a dedicated room and equipment for women. This is a real innovation in our area and I'm happy to know the owners of [Maggie Valley Fly Shop](#).

The shop I call my 'home base' is one that friends mentioned to me. I can say without hesitation, these guys have treated me with complete respect, have mentored me, and showed incredible support in my fly fishing journey. I consider their shop employees part of my fly fishing family. That level of support continues to be worth the long drive across the Gap to their shop in Townsend, Tennessee. [Little River Outfitters \(LRO\)](#) has the best customer service of any place...of any sport...that I have ever experienced. They ship free and have an amazing fly tying department that is bigger than any I have ever visited.

LRO staff helped me pick out my first rod and reel, an *Orvis Clearwater* setup. I practiced casting in my yard a bit, but made the decision to wait until a guide could give personal instruction so less bad habits would be learned. Meanwhile, I interviewed guides as I received recommendations from outfitters with whom I was developing a trusted relationship. It was important that a woman-friendly attitude was felt as there are still men who act ignorant and dismissive toward women that fly fish.

Choosing a shop that didn't make me feel stupid, when I went in and said, *I know nothing and want to buy gear*, was important. Being honest with them, surrendering my ego, letting them know I was open to learning, created a good start to our ongoing relationship. And Dave A. started with the basics and spent time helping me learn about new words like tippet and the size of tippet which is actually backwards...3 is bigger than 6. No way! I felt safe in LRO. I could be vulnerable in my not knowing. Everyone needs a fly shop like that.

Spending our money and deciding where to spend it, is part of the empowerment process. If any shop employee makes a woman feel less than...for any reason...walk out the door. Women are valuable customers. Our money is as good as anyone's. We can invest in ourselves by spending money in shops that invest their time and energy in helping us develop into our personal vision of how we want to fly fish. (Read this paragraph again...and again...and write it out and place on a prominent place in your home).

Another resource I'll mention here are instructional video creators. For instance, Brian from [Mad River Outfitters](#) has been awesome when I email him questions. He has been so supportive and friendly, even being in a location I'll probably never visit. And, I do purchase from their online store on occasion, as a thank-you. There are so many content creators. Reach out and ask questions. Be open to learning from the many resources that are available.

I'd like to go deeper into the gear, but highly suggest researching and trying on gear in person. And for goodness sake, never ever go to a fly fishing shop and try on gear, test their rods, and then buy online. You want to develop a real relationship with your outfitters. Invest in them and they will invest in you...if they are wise.

Basic gear, besides a rod, reel, and fly line include leaders, tippet, flies, nippers, thermometer, small first aid kit, hemostats, net, some sort of pack or vest, waders, boots, hat, sun-protective shirts, rain jacket, neoprene socks for wet wading. This is a small list. It can get expensive, but it doesn't have to be costly. Anything labeled for fly fishing is always more expensive. Get creative and try different packs, perhaps not intended for fly fishing, or a hiking pole instead of a wading staff. But with gear intentionally created for fly fishing, there could be a safety element, as with a wading staff; however, I have heard of very well-known fly fishers that use a hiking pole rather than purchasing a more-pricey wading staff.

I started with a step-up from the basic *Orvis* set-up. The *Clearwater* is a decent rod and reel that comes as a kit with fly line already installed. It's not expensive and from my experience, is a great way to enter the sport. Your chosen fly shop can help with tippet sizes, leaders, and small tools like nippers and forceps. You'll also want some retractors to help keep your tools in place, but handy if needed.

Miss Mayfly waders and wading pants are made with the female body in mind. They are well-made and priced moderately, so are not a huge expense. Waders, however, are not needed if a person fly fishes in warmer months. Wading boots and neoprene socks and fast-drying outdoor pants will work just fine. I love wet wading when the air is warm and the water is above 60 degrees.

I have large feet with a wide instep and narrow heel. I wear men's sizes of hiking and wading boots and many companies don't offer women's sizes anyway. Generally, size up to create room for neoprene socks for wet wading and/or neoprene built-in feet for wading pants or full waders. There's controversy over felt-soled boots. Felt has the reputation of being a carrier of invasive species, bacteria, parasites, and organisms from one body of water to the next. They are not allowed in some areas. Also, when hiking, leaves can get caked on them. Because I hike a lot while fly fishing, I chose rubber soled boots. They also have the capacity to receive metal studs in the sole for better traction, but I've never used studs. There are different weights of boots, different closure styles, different materials used in their construction. I think boots are an important foundation of equipment, especially if hiking and wading several miles in a day.

A piece of gear that has driven me absolutely nuts, in finding the exact right one, is a small sling, pack or vest. I started with a colorful *Orvis* sling but I didn't find it comfortable when casting. I still use it as a fun bag for other activities, but not for fishing. Then I purchased a pricey vest designed for women from *Fishpond*. It was quite wonderful except the front zipper wouldn't stay zipped. I returned it to the manufacturer and traded it for a combo sort of pack that could be a chest pack or added to a backpack. The first time I wore it with the backpack, my neck was trashed from the weird way the pack settled on my shoulders so it hangs in a storage room after being used once. Then I purchased a very small *Orvis* waist pack and adored it but found it just a tiny bit too small if I was carrying lunch and my small pistol and cell phone. I finally found a waist pack that has brightened my fly fishing days. It's a *Patagonia Stealth* hip pack. I enjoy using it because it holds my essentials which include: small fly box, tippet holder (clipped to the outside), nippers, forceps, cell phone, pistol, waterproof zippered inner pocket (for key, fishing license, pistol permit, id), floatant, extra leaders, and the bottom holds my *Grayl* water filter. Also, I clip my wading staff retractor to the outside and a small waste container for tippet or trash I find along the trail or creek. Spend extra time at your chosen fly shop trying on slings, chest packs, waist packs, vests. Imagine wearing that piece of gear for several hours. Take your time or risk ending up with a large collection of packs that hang in the closet and glare at you.

Although already mentioned in the safety section, the wading staff is a piece of gear I consider essential. I use a *Simms* aluminum staff with a coated cable system that allows it to be folded. It comes with a holster but I find the holster cumbersome. I purchased a *Simms* retractor that clips on my pack and the staff clips to the retractor. After I settle into a place to cast, I allow the staff, securely tied to the retractor, to float beside and behind me. When I am ready to move on, I simply reach down, pick it up, and continue wading. The staff is great tool that helps by creating a third balance point. It's also a good way to determine water depth. If the water isn't clear, feel for holes, and test stability of the bottom before you step.

The first time I used my wading staff, I didn't check to see if it was tied into the handle. I dropped it, cast several times, reached down to move forward and it was gone. It wasn't tied well. I continued fishing because I thought I'd never find it; however, after fishing a couple hours, I walked along the bank and saw it floating in an eddy, patiently waiting for me to find it.

Other gear that's a must is a hat and eye protection. Even on cloudy days, eye protection is absolutely necessary. Fly line can be unruly, especially if a fish decides to shake the hook and the line springs back towards your face. Polarized lenses are helpful in removing glare off the water, allowing a wader to see the bottom easier and see fish better. All the resources said amber lenses were best. I purchased some nice *Costa* amber-lensed glasses but they were too dark for where I fish. They are great in open, bright places. But I fish in small, overgrown streams with a lot of shade and a lot of cloudy days. I ended up purchasing *Smith's Low Light Ignitor* glasses in a small size to fit my face. They won't win any fashion contests, but they are incredibly clear lenses, are polarized, and the lenses light enough for me to wear on rainy days. I use a lanyard with my sunglasses. I also need magnifiers when threading a fly onto tippet and tying knots. I use *CliC* glasses that have a built-in lanyard that's part of the glasses arms. They have a magnet at the nose so are easy to remove or put on when needed.

Speaking of rainy days, fly fishing can be amazing in the rain. Having a decent rain jacket is a good investment. I've got a high-end *Orvis Pro* rain jacket that works great in cooler rainy weather. It has special features that make it worth the price tag; but, a *Simms* lightweight GoreTex is perfect for warmer rainy days. And it's easy to stuff in a large pocket if needed. It wasn't cheap though. One of the pointers I'll pass along is any gear sold for fly fishing gear is much more expensive than regular outdoor gear. The same, lightweight jacket in another brand would be probably \$100 cheaper; however, I wanted a muted green to blend in with the environment and simply couldn't find that color anywhere else besides the *Simms*.

Before moving out of the gear section, I'll simply mention that muted colors are a good idea. Even in the tropics fly fishing, a fisher wants to blend in rather than stick out. Look at the surrounding environment and choose clothing and hats of the same colors. And now, let's go fishing!

Once I bought basic gear, studied videos, and read books, I felt ready for my first day on the water. The guy I chose to go with, after connecting with several potential guides, had a wife and small kids so I figured he'd be patient. He agreed to take me through the day as a teaching experience, rather than just guiding. We started by putting the gear together, looking at insect nymphs under rocks, and of course ended up fishing. Travis of [Troutzone Anglers \(TZA\)](#), did a great job getting me started. Since then, he's moved into another position as a hatchery manager and I have fished with David, the owner of *TZA*, who has been a wonderful teacher and mentor. Just as it was worth the effort of visiting various fly shops around my home waters, connecting with guides that are respectful and helpful is important...very important. A day on the water with a guide is an investment, so make sure you choose wisely. And remember, if they are respectful and helpful, tip them well.

After that first day of fly fishing with Travis, I returned to the creek where we waded and that's where I began to gain confidence in myself, to trust myself. The first fish I caught on my own was upstream from that place and it scared me because it was so much bigger than anything else I'd caught. I think about that fish a lot as I cast and hope the clumsy landing and release didn't harm it.

As mentioned earlier in this guide, if you want to fly fish alone, start with a familiar area and gradually expand along that creek or river. Eventually add other areas, but never feel bad about taking it as slow as you need to feel comfortable, to stay in your learning and growing zone. As fly fishing women, we need to honor our own preferences about fly fishing, whether it's going solo, fishing with a friend, or finding a women's fly fishing group.

For me, the solitude is what I crave. Fishing with a group doesn't sound appealing at all. The reason I wanted to write this guide is for women that want to fly fish, but especially women that want to explore solitude of the wilds, both in creeks, rivers, and within themselves.

I won't go into techniques for casting and what flies to fish when and where. That information is covered in-depth in so many places. Books, videos, blogs, and magazines all have a wealth of information that is far more advanced than anything I could share. Be hungry to learn and investigate the resources available.



Putting it All Together

*“Fish are not harmed by being caught.
They are harmed by being played
to exhaustion, when taken from water,
by being squeezed too hard,
being held by gills, or
careless removal of the hook.”
Joan Salvato Wulff*

As previously stated, this guide is intended to assist new fly fishers in basic safety and skill sets; however, it's also to help direct new fly fishers to great resources already available. Legends of fly fishing have posted videos and written books on everything a new or experienced fly fisher can ever expect to learn. I'll break down some basic skills necessary for the new fly fisher to study with these other wonderful resources, many of which are free.

Practice. Practice. Practice casting. Find a grassy area or pond. Don't practice casting over gravel or rocks as it will damage your fly line. It's great to watch videos, read books, and study the physics of casting; however, putting all that together starts by practicing before you are on the creek or river or paying a guide \$350 for the day. Or \$600 for the day on salt water. Plus a nice gratuity.

Check out Joan Wulff's DVD and books. Watch videos on casting from the *Orvis Learning Center*. *Mad River Outfitters* has some great casting videos. And if possible, video yourself casting so you can see how you look. Another idea is to hire a local casting instructor to help you improve; but, ask around and see which instructors get good reviews from people you trust.

So you're ready to head out to the creek alone to cast a line. What about the knots? Have you practiced the knots you'll need to tie tippet to leader? What about the knot for tying a fly to tippet? I used a small cord to learn the mechanics. Then, I practiced on monofilament, which is thicker than tippet but smaller than cord. Finally, I practiced on tippet. A lot.

I use a double surgeons knot to tie tippet to leader. For attaching the fly to tippet, I prefer an improved clinch knot. But there are several knots that might work better for you. There are YouTube tutorials on any knot you can imagine and they helped me a lot. A well-tied knot will save a lot of time and a lot of flies. Ask your home shop's employees about knots if you can't figure out which one to use. Ask your guide.

A new fly fisher doesn't have to learn everything at once. It's a life-long process of adding skills, improving skills, and then passing along what you know to others. Perhaps you'll use a tippet ring on your leader, instead of a line-to-line connection. It's all up to you. Experiment. Study. Take responsibility for improving your knowledge base and then, go play on the water.

Speaking of water, when you cast you'll want to learn where fish hang out. I fish mostly mountain trout streams. But wherever you fly fish, learn to read the water. Are fish rising? What does that look like? Are they hanging out in riffles? Or maybe there's a big one under the bank overhang. Reading water is such an important skill there are books written on the subject. Use your resources and dig in to more learning.

What happens when it all comes together? You tie on the perfect fly, cast to the perfect spot, and then BAM! Fish on! What's next? How do you land a fish? Study. Just like everything else, landing a fish is a skill and it takes practice to do it smoothly and quickly so that you can release the fish with no damage.

I use only barbless hooks. More fish will throw the hook, but I don't care. It's so much easier to remove a barbless hook from the fish and from me! It's easy to have a hook under pressure come loose and hit a face or arm or neck. ALWAYS wear eye protection and use barbless hooks for easy removal from your cheek. Or your friend's cheek. Or any other body part.

A net can help in landing a fish but with the small, wild trout I usually catch, I can generally bring them to my left side, allow them to stay in the water on the hook, and simply reach down and slip the hook out without even touching them. That's not always the case, but many times it's that easy. The less we handle fish, the better.

[Keep Fish Wet](http://www.keepfishwet.org) is a fantastic resource for anglers. Check out www.keepfishwet.org for all the information you'll need to keep fish safe as you land and release them. Here's a few of their principles: 1. Minimize air exposure; 2. Eliminate contact with dry surfaces; 3. Reduce handling time.

Never grab a trout by the jaw (or any fish you wish to release). NEVER stick your fingers in the gills... unless you want to kill the fish. Never squeeze the fish. Catch and release is more than releasing a half-dead fish you've fought too long and mis-handled. I've seen people that claim to be catch-and-release proponents who are cruel to fish. I have to walk away, shaking my head. Play the fish quickly and efficiently, keep them in the water while removing the hook. Release them from the net as soon as possible.

After you get a little experience fishing, it might be fun to start tying your own flies. Some people absolutely love doing this, while others think of it as punishment. If it interests you, take a class, watch some videos. If it doesn't interest you, don't do it. I find it fun to use my creativity to tie fly patterns and see what the fish like. The first time a fish takes a fly you created is pretty exciting.

Take each of these subjects and find resources that deepen your knowledge. Part of the fun of learning is locating sources of information that resonate with you. Develop a library of fly fishing books and keep them together so you can easily access them. Keep one at your bedside, on your coffee table, or any place where you can read about the amazing world of fly fishing.



Green Drake newly hatched

Etiquette

*"It used to be that a trout stream was a place to seek solace,
away from other people, away from the noise of civilization.
It was a place to meditate, listen to the songs of birds, and perhaps see a mink
or a fox as you matched wits with wild trout."*

Joan Salvato Wulff

There are some basic 'rules' that new fly fishers would do well to know and follow. And a reminder to women: some men will not respect you and will try to cut you off as you wade a stream. I've had this happen too often. One guy even stepped in front of where I was casting to enter the water. I yelled, "No!" And he backed off. It's pretty unbelievable how rude people can be. Sometimes they might not know, but sometimes they see a woman and feel they can cut us off. But honestly, I had a woman try to cut me off recently and I simply shook my head and said in a regular voice, "Nope." She backed off. It's sad that people have lost common courtesy.

Once I stepped toward a favorite pool, in an off-the-trail part of the creek. As I rounded the split in the creek, a guy was fishing up the other side. I hadn't seen him. He was there first. I walked over to him and said, "I'm not going to cut you off, I just want to cross and walk the far side of the bank upstream. I'll give you plenty of room before I start fishing." He told me that people aren't generally that considerate. I hiked up another quarter mile or more before I started fishing and was very careful not to blow out pools by wading in them. There's a correct way to wade and there's a very wrong way to wade.

On a recent trip with my guide and mentor, we saw two guys wading downstream (you just don't do that) and they were wading through the middle of every large hole, completely scaring the fish. Think stealthy, invisible, sneaky predator kind of wading as the correct way to do it.

Some basic considerations for being polite are listed below:

1. Do not cut off another fisher. Give plenty of space, a quarter mile even. Maybe take a moment to chat with the person and ask what their intentions are and let them know your intentions.

2. Communicate with other fishers. Perhaps three teams arrive at a parking area at the same time. Initiate discussion as to their plans. The rule is, first one to arrive gets first choice. Not everyone knows that. So take a couple of minutes to communicate.

3. Find out what's generally accepted as far as the direction to fish. Where I live and in most places, it's wade upstream. First, the fish face upstream almost always, so if you come up from behind them, they are less likely to spook. Second, if people ignore this 'rule,' there will be situations like I was in with my guide friend, where we're wading upstream and two guys are wading downstream. Somebody has to yield. They are supposed to but given that they had already splashed through every decent pool, we exited the creek and ate lunch.

4. Don't litter. Put tippet scraps or old leaders in a baggie or a little canister to hike out and dispose of property. Fluorocarbon tippet will not decompose. Ever. Nylon tippet will, but it takes years. There's no reason to do this and it's so easy to pack it out.

5. Don't be greedy. If you catch two or three fish from a hole, move on. What's the point in completely stressing out every fish in an area. Consider this: stop counting. Who really needs to know if you catch 5 or 15? And one thing that's been suggested by major educators in the fly fishing industry is to simply limit yourself after catching and releasing a specific number. Keep the health of the fish always in mind.

6. Know the water temperature and if it's too warm for whatever species you are fishing for, don't fish. Show respect to the fish. Learn what the ideal temperatures are and what scientists recommend for a cut-off for fishing.

7. Be polite to the general public. You'll definitely see other anglers, but you'll also see hikers, bird watchers, and others enjoying the day. I was fishing through a campground once and caught a fine trout. I bent down to gently remove the hook without touching it and thanked it out loud for allowing me to interact with it. I glanced up and a mother with two children were watching me. We never know who we are influencing.

8. Leave an area nicer than you found it. If there's tippet or other small fishing trash that you can easily carry, stow it in your trash baggie and properly dispose of it. I've actually seen guides throw several feet

of tippet onto the ground. I happened to be picking up trash (not fishing) that day and walked over to him and simply reached down and picked up his mess, that was at his feet, and put it in the large trash bag I was holding. That's just bad manners on his part and I did my best not to say a word.

9. Tip your guide well...if they do a good job with you. If they are rude, careless, or generally suck at their job, let the tip reflect that. But if they invest in you, help you with casting tips, and answer questions you pose, thank them with a nice tip. Generally 15 to 20% is standard with additional added for extra good service. Don't make the mistake of telling a guide you can't afford a tip. When figuring the cost of the day, include the tip and if it's too expensive, wait and keep saving your money until you can afford a good guide and a good tip.

10. Forget the grip-and-grin photo of a fish gasping for life as you hold on, squishing the internal organs. Instead, have the fish in the water, in a net, and after unhooking it, if you must have a photo, bring up the net for a couple of seconds while you take a quick photo, then release the fish.



Numbers

“Number rules the universe.”

Pythagoras

This holistic way of fishing I advocate isn't about counting fish, so this section isn't about fish numbers. This section is for beginners learning about tippet size, fly rod size, hook size and the crazy way it's all numbered.

For tippet, the smaller the number, the larger and stronger the tippet. Size 3 tippet is stronger and fatter than size 6 tippet. You'll want to read up on which tippet to use when.

For hooks, the smaller the number, the larger the hook. A size 4 hook is big; a size 18 hook is small. You'll want to ask your home shop which size flies work best for where you intend to fish. Do your research, learn as much as possible.

For fly rods, the larger the number, the heavier the rod. A 3 weight rod is smaller than an 8 weight rod. Rods are designed for load and the load they can handle corresponds with the weight rating. This is where your trusted home shop can really help you figure out what your first rod will be. Of course, everyone has an opinion; one person might suggest a 5 weight 8.5 foot rod, while someone else might suggest a 9 foot 4 weight rod...or a 10 foot 3 weight. It can get really confusing. Don't feel pressured to purchase the first time you visit the shop you choose for your home store. Study, learn, talk to all kinds of fly fishers. You'll either get clarity or get even more confused. Regardless, you'll have more information to make a good decision.

Fly tying thread is another super-crazy rabbit hole of numbers. Sizes of fly tying thread are usually labeled using a system left over from long ago when silk thread was measured in zeros. So 000 is 3/0. Once again, we're working a bit backwards. 6/0 (six aught) is smaller than 000 or 3/0 (three aught). If that's not confusing enough, UNI Products entered the fly tying industry and they use a different baseline diameter. For example, 8/0 UNI-thread is smaller than 6/0 Danville. There's even more insanity with fly tying thread numbers but the basic idea presented here is that there is really no constant baseline used by all manufacturers of fly tying thread. I still get confused about all of these numbers and decided to stay with one manufacturer and learn their system and forget everyone else.

Take your time learning the numbers. You'll definitely want to know what size tippet to use and what size hook/fly to use. That might vary from day-to-day or from season-to-season. It all depends on what fish you are inviting into your play space.



Pausing to Enjoy

*“I too have known loneliness.
I too have known what it is to feel
misunderstood,
rejected, and suddenly
not at all beautiful.
Oh, mother earth,
your comfort is great, your arms never withhold.
It has saved my life to know this.
Your rivers flowing, your roses opening in the morning.
Oh, motions of tenderness!”
Mary Oliver*

This little guide contains very basic information to help new fly fishers get started. It might seem like a lot, but thankfully a newbie doesn't have to learn everything at once. And when those first solo trips or trips with a friend begin, there's so much to remember it can be overwhelming.

Whatever you do, take time to enjoy the beauty of the water, rocks, trees, bird song, and whatever comes your way. Pausing to breathe in beauty, to be mindful, is the number one reason I fly fish.

Once, during the autumn here in the mountains, I sat on a large rock in the middle of the creek and watched the golden light of the afternoon reflect on the water's surface. The trees were yellow, the water was golden, filled with reflections...the air seemed to glow with intense amber light. I merged into that golden light and recall the experience often and with great fondness, when I pass by that rock.

Another time my mentor and I were fishing and happened to experience a green drake mayfly hatch that was so amazing I was losing fish because I couldn't stop watching the massive mayflies emerge and fly off of the water's surface. The trout were quite excited about it as well.

It's easy to become so focused on casting, stripping line, trying to avoid falling on slick rocks, that we miss the beauty. And the beauty is probably the number one reason many of us fly fish. Make sure to take breaks to stand or sit and breathe in the essence of the place, to listen for bird song, look for insects, check out wildflowers. Pause to enjoy.



Home Waters

“There is a mistaken belief that we humans are somehow separate from the rest of nature. When we joyfully reconnect with nature and recognize in ourselves the natural beings that we are, true healing will follow.”

Linda Buzzell

If you're lucky enough to live near water where you'll be fishing, you are truly lucky. It might be cold water mountain streams, tidal rivers, lakes, bays, or an ocean. We are stewards of these places. When we interact with the body of water, we interact with the entire ecosystem. We can help with restoration projects hosted by local conservation organizations. We can do a litter pickup day on our own or with friends. We can practice stewardship by leaving no trace while we fish. Helping protect these places puts our love for them into action.

Ponds are found all over, so even if you don't have regular access to a river or creek or saltwater bays or tidal rivers, there is water near you in some form. If you don't fish it, you can still be an advocate for its health. All water is connected. All water is sacred.

Adopt water where you live. Claim it as your home water and do everything you can to be a good steward of it and the ecosystems it flows through.

Photography

“As co-creators of our world, we cannot extricate ourselves to claim a vision of its workings that is aloof from our own participation in it.”

Joanna Macy

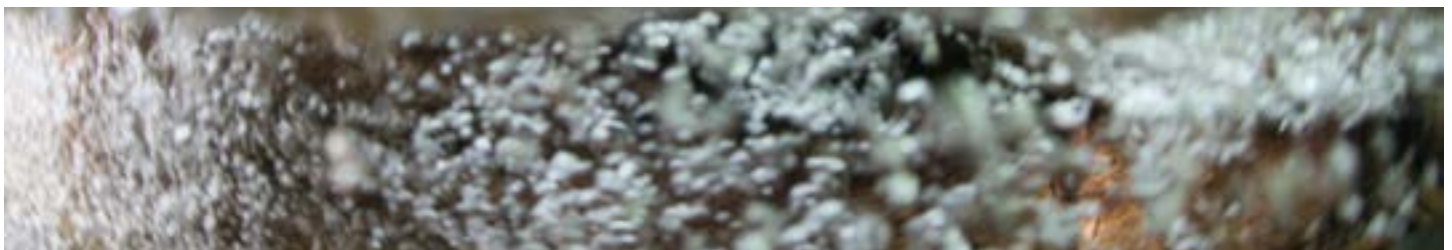
I'm a minimalist when it comes to gear I take along when fly fishing. The one challenge this gives me is with photography. I'm a professional photographer so leaving my heavy Nikon behind is quite painful. But carrying it would cause physical pain and the risk of it getting wet is high.

The alternative is having a very good cell phone camera. I have the iPhone 14 Pro Max. It has the capacity to take really great photos with the option to shoot live and then change the image to a long exposure, giving rushing water the effect of having a long exposure with a tripod. I can shoot one-handed while holding my rod in my other hand. I don't take photos of fish because I release them underwater, so that's not an issue.

A GoPro or similar small camera can be used but a GoPro is a wide-angle camera and will not give close-up shots like a good phone camera. The GoPro can be used for underwater video and photos, so this is a plus.

Photographs I take are usually scenic; however, I have photographed beaver, otter, flowers, insects and other small creatures, all which would not be possible with a GoPro or other wide-angle type camera. Being out in the woods, in the water provides ample opportunity to photograph Nature's beauty.

If I want high quality photographs of an area, I'll hike in with my professional camera gear, without the fly fishing gear. I've hiked over five miles with my underwater housing and Nikon just to play with underwater imagery of mossy rocks and air bubbles in rushing water I discovered while fly fishing. I don't mix fishing days and serious photography days.



Keep Going Back

*"I take fish personally, the way I have my life, like a sacrament.
This is my body. Eat of it. This is my blood.
Drink. I imagine this reverence is what they want of me."
Lorian Hemingway*

Whatever you do, take your time when preparing to go fishing, when gearing up, and before making that first cast. Watch the water. Look for rising fish and insects, watch the currents, notice the location of the sun. Is there wind? All of these pieces of information help determine where to enter the water, how to cast, what fly to use, and give us time to be mindful of safety. And trees. Be mindful of fly-eating trees behind you.

Go out as much as you can. When I taught scuba diving, I encouraged new divers to keep diving. I saw too many people get their certification and then only dive once a year. That's not a good way to keep skills polished. The same goes for fly fishing. We can't expect to get the basics and then put away our gear until we visit the mountains or the coast the following year.

My home waters include hundreds of miles of creeks and rivers so I have quick access to beautiful water. The beauty calls to me ceaselessly. If it's insanely cold or if we've had large amounts of rain that make wading dangerous, I find myself yearning for the feel of water pressing against my legs and casting to fishy-looking water. I love the dance of wild trout on a fly rod.

Everyone doesn't have easy access to fishing water; however, we often forget that fly fishing isn't just for trout. Bluegill, smallmouth and largemouth bass, crappie, carp...anything you can catch with spin tackle can be caught using a fly rod. As noted above, the size of the rod, reel, fly line, and flies vary depending on which particular fish a person is stalking. Maybe a neighbor has a pond with bluegill and they'd be willing to let you fish. Or a nearby lake has smallmouth bass. We need to think beyond trout as our only fishing interest, especially when water temperatures make it too warm to safely fish for them (for me it's 65 degree water temps).

And if you can't find water, find grass and practice casting. And when you're not on the water, continue to read and learn and if you tie flies, tie a stash of flies.

Develop a relationship with your rod and let it do the work for you. Likewise, develop a relationship with water near your home and let it teach you about beauty and interconnectedness. And remember, you don't have to wait for a friend to fish with or a group. By practicing safety and developing good wading skills, there's really no reason you can't have solo fly fishing adventures. Stay within your limits, both physically and emotionally. It's okay to push yourself a bit, but never push yourself into a situation where you feel panicked. Respect yourself as much as you respect the environment in which you play.

Take good care of yourself by learning and practicing situational awareness. Stay hydrated and fueled. Wear weather-appropriate clothing. Always wear eye protection. Know the area where you are fishing. Take some sort of personal protection. Have a way to communicate if you don't have cell service. Tell someone where you're going and when you'll be back.

And most of all, take the risk to learn something new. Learn to trust yourself and challenge yourself to find a new way to be in the world, where you feel confident and capable. Fill your life with beauty. Take it in. Enjoy yourself. Have fun.



Resources

There are amazing resources on fly fishing that are free through YouTube and e-newsletters from various companies and groups. Searching the internet is a great way to get a wealth of information.

There are a couple of books that I'll recommend. One is *Fly Fishing: Expert Advice from a Woman's Perspective*, by Joan Salvato Wulff. Also by Joan is *New Fly-Casting Techniques* and her DVD on fly casting. You can also find many clips from her video on YouTube. As far as a comprehensive guide written by a woman, I'd recommend Susan Thrasher's book, *Thrasher's Fly Fishing Guide*. As a basic book with a lot of great information, I'd start with Susan's book and add more as your interest grows.

The *Orvis Learning Center* is truly a treasure chest of information, from basic to advanced techniques. Check out Tom Rosenbauer's podcast, *The Orvis Fly-Fishing Podcast*. Tom is very respectful of women and is one of the few men that insists guests use the term *fly fisher* instead of *fly fisherman*.

Closing Thoughts

As I mentioned at the beginning of this guide, I'm not an expert fly fisher and after many more years participating in the sport, I still won't be an expert...or even close. My intention in sharing this information is simply to make the idea of exploring this pastime, and especially exploring it alone, more accessible. I've learned a lot about myself with solo hiking and wading that came from personal experience, not from anyone telling me how to do it. Most of it has been about safety. One recommendation I have for anyone wanting to explore solo is to never push yourself to a point where you feel panic, and to always be gentle and kind with yourself, as you will be with the beautiful fish on the end of your fly rod.

It's an honor to have wild trout dance with me. I always thank them for spending a few moments with me and do my best to keep them healthy while landing and releasing them.

To everyone who has helped me build a foundation and advance my skills, I'm so grateful. Special gratitude to *Little River Outfitters* and David Knapp of *Troutzone Anglers*.

*“Never in my life had I thought I was capable of this:
of being alone, of feeling safe with myself, of being quiet...
I realize that simply seeing through the water into their lives has been enough.”*
Lynette Monteiro Musten

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