

## *Granite Bay Flycasters* *Wading Safety Guidelines*

Wading is essential to successful fly-fishing in streams. It is also, when properly and safely done, a most pleasurable part of the sport. The operative word here is "safely." Quite simply, no fish is worth risking your life to catch it.

"Safe wading" can be broken down into two sets of criteria: (1) possession of proper safety equipment; and (2) use of proper wading techniques.

**ESSENTIAL SAFETY EQUIPMENT.** The following items are essential. You should not step into a river without them. Exceptions exist for waders; i.e., there are situations where "wet" wading is appropriate, such as when the ambient air and the water are warm enough to avoid hypothermia. Do not skimp on these items; buy the best safety equipment after researching available products.

1. **Polarized glasses.** Non-polarized sunglasses are useless to the fly fisherman. They will not remove surface glare. This means that where glare is present (and it almost always is present), you cannot see the bottom. Polarized lenses remove the glare, giving the wading angler a clear view of the rocks on the bottom. When the rocks are visible, you know where to safely place your feet.
2. **Wading staff.** Proper use of the staff will be discussed later. Most guides will not take a client on a river unless the client has a good staff. The staff acts as a "third leg," enabling the wading angler to retain stability while wading through currents and around rocks. Staffs come in wooden and metal models. Whatever model you choose, make sure that it has a secure strap that attaches to your wading belt, your vest, or some other appendage, in a failsafe manner. It is scary to watch a wading staff float downstream while perched in the middle of a swift riffle.
3. **Wading shoes.** Wading shoes should be properly sized—meaning they are of proper width, and (normally) one size larger than your street shoe size. Always try shoes on with waders or a neoprene bootie to obtain a proper fit. Side support is important for preventing ankle injuries, and for absorbing "hits" on rocks. The front "box" should be firm for the same reasons. The soles should be felt, with or without spikes. Spikes are good in the water, but can cause slippage on dry rocks. Most falls, in fact, are on dry rocks. The newer rubber soles are, in a word, insufficiently tested.
4. **Wading belt.** A firm, tightly cinched belt can save your life. It will not keep all water out of your waders, but it will keep intrusion to a minimum for a while. The neoprene belts are useless for safety purposes. The best belts are made of a webbed material, with adjustment straps.
5. **Water bottle.** Dehydration can cause loss of equilibrium. Drink plenty of water while on the stream. The refillable bottles with a filter are ideal.
6. **Waders.** As stated above, there are times when wet wading is possible. But if waders are needed, make sure that they do not leak, and that they keep your legs and feet warm. Cold feet/legs are clumsy, and cause falls. Use proper layering techniques to avoid clamminess, which in turn will cause cold.

**GOOD WADING PRACTICES.** Assuming you are properly equipped, there are a number of "rules" which, if observed, will minimize the chance of an unfortunate accident.

1. While walking on the shore, use your wading staff and carefully place each step. Most falls occur on dry rocks, and spiked boots can increase the risk. It pays to be observant, and to not look at the river while walking among rocks. If you want to look at the river, stop and do so, and then continue walking.
2. Make use of your staff. It can help you, at the very least, to:
  - a. find depth so that you don't step into a deep pocket and pop your hat off.
  - b. brace yourself in heavy current. Always keep the staff upstream of you, even though it sounds counter intuitive. Rule of thumb: if you have difficulty planting the staff

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where you want it because the current moves it downstream, you should not go there.

- c. move safely. Always keep the staff out in front of you and walk to it. It's of no use to you when it's behind you. Maintain two points of contact with the bottom at all times. If both your staff and one leg are off the bottom at one time, you increase your risk of falling drastically.
3. In particularly difficult situations, several tactics are helpful: (i) use the buddy system—hold hands or lock arms until the difficulty has passed; and/or (ii) shuffle along, feeling your way along the bottom.
4. Plan ahead as you contemplate the water you are about to wade. Plan your route, and plan an escape route should things get tough.
5. In difficult situations, take small shuffling steps and angle your direction downstream.
6. If you need to turn around, turn downstream. Turning upstream can throw you off balance.
7. It is far easier and safer to angle your path downstream; wading upstream in even moderate current is difficult and can cause loss of balance.
8. Don't step on the top of big rocks; keep your feet on the bottom between the bigger rocks.
9. Avoid rocks with a smooth, flat edge and that have a 45-degree angle from top to bottom. Your foot will slide down that surface and if the rock is large, you will be thrown off balance.
10. Avoid getting your feet wedged between two rocks. If your foot feels cramped when putting it down between two rocks, withdraw it immediately. A wedged foot means you will have to remove your boot, which can be dangerous in deep or swiftly moving water.
11. Be alert to changing water levels in tail water streams. Upstream dam operations will affect water levels, often with no warning at all, leaving anglers stranded.
12. Be wary of "sweepers"—tree limbs in the water downstream of you. Wading around them will put you in deep water.
13. If you do happen to fall into the river in a spot deep enough to cause you to be pulled downstream:
  - a. Don't try to swim.
  - b. Position your feet downstream and float on your back.
  - c. Don't fight the current; work your way to the side to the shallows or slower water, using your feet to push off boulders.
  - d. Avoid foot entrapment by not trying to stand until you are absolutely sure that you are out of the current and out of danger.
  - e. Don't panic.
14. Here are some "nevers" you should never:
  - a. Take a step without knowing the depth.
  - b. Cast and move at the same time.
  - c. Exceed your energy limit—in other words, as the day wears on, you will tire. Be aware of this physical fact, and adjust your wading accordingly. We don't need heroes.
  - d. Wave your rod around in the air when there is lightning around—graphite rods are great conductors. Observe the meteorologists' "30/30" rule: if you see lightning and the thunder clap is 30 seconds or less later, get out of the water; wait 30 minutes from the last visible lightning strike to resume your activity.
15. One last suggestion: always err on the side of caution. Don't take that extra step unless and until you are completely sure it is safe to do so.