



Fly Tackle for Small Streams

You'll enjoy small stream fishing more if you have the right tackle. This doesn't mean you can't catch fish with the tackle you currently own. You can.

But if after a few visits you fall in love with small stream fishing, you'll want to invest in some different stuff. It will make the experience easier and more comfortable, and it doesn't have to be particularly expensive.

We're not going to waste your time or your money here: we're only going to suggest things that make a difference.

Rods

The biggest issue with your current fly rod is that it's probably too long for most small streams. Of course, it depends on the stream and your rod. If you own an 8' or 8½' rod, you might be alright on *some* of these streams. But a 9' or longer rod will almost certainly be too long.

Here's the problem. On many small streams you have brush on both banks, and a tree canopy overhead. The only way to cast is sidearm, and the only open space for your back-cast is the tunnel over the stream bed and below the tree canopy.

You'll stand with your back jammed into the brush, side-arming the rod. On a small stream, with a 9' rod, your rod tip will be past the mid-line of the streambed. You'll be much more likely, therefore, to snag your fly on the brush on the far side, or hit the tree canopy overhead. You can try compensating by pulling your elbow back, but then it's hard to get a decent casting stroke, or generate any line speed.

A 7' rod (plus or minus) makes it a whole lot easier.

I'm not a big fan of ultra-light tackle. I read posts on web boards from guys raving about their 0-wt or 1-wt rods, but I've never been tempted to try them, much less buy one.

When I first started, I used to fish a 3-wt routinely on small streams. But as I gained experience, and learned how to read the water and catch more fish, I realized there were one or two casts on every outing that I couldn't quite pull-off because of the light tackle.

It was that cast where I needed to stand back an extra 10 feet so as not to spook a fish holding in still water; or the one where I had to shoot my line a few extra feet between two

boulders to hit a gorgeous pocket. Maybe two casts per outing doesn't seem like a big deal, except that these (when successful) often resulted in the nicest fish of the day.

So, at a fly fishing show, I plunked down some money to buy a 7'4" 4-wt rod, and have never used my 3-wt rod since. Because I also occasionally fish streamers, and often use weighted nymphs, that little extra line weight just makes everything a little easier.

"But doesn't the heavier line make a bigger disturbance when it lands?" I hear you light-line advocates cry. Well, yes. But not so much more that it makes a big difference. And the slightly heavier line will turn over a slightly longer leader more easily. I think fish are more likely to be spooked by the sight of your line than by the splash, so that's a good trade-off in my opinion.

But to each his own. If you've always lusted to spend \$1,000 on a Sage 0-wt outfit, more power to you.

Frankly, I don't think which brand of rod you buy matters one whit. This was driven home to me when I bought a \$49 fly outfit at the Sports Authority for an 8-year old boy a number of years ago. \$49 for rod, reel, line, tippet, and an assortment of flies. I replaced the crappy line in the outfit with a good line of my own that I'd retired. I was shocked that I could cast better with this rig than with the \$400 Orvis rod which had been my first purchase in 1990 (and a rod I still used at the time). Yes, the reel seat was ugly plastic, and the cork handle was a little pitted, but it cast beautifully.

There are different actions, and styles of casting, and that matters a lot. So make sure you try a rod before you buy (or at least be prepared to return it if you mail-order). But there are decent rods in all actions, in all price categories. There's no reason you *have* to spend \$600. To me a premium rod is like a premium watch: it's a form of jewelry. The \$29 Timex will keep just as good time as that Rolex. But if it makes you feel better to wear a Rolex, by all means do so. Same with the top-end rods. They are very pretty.

This is even more true for reels on small streams. In fifteen years of fishing small streams, I can't ever remember breaking off a fish because I didn't play it on the reel, or because the drag wasn't set properly, or didn't perform. (Conversely, it's happened to me a lot on big streams, especially out west or in the Southern Hemisphere). Any old reel will do, as long as it balances with the rod.

The nice thing about fishing a 4-wt on a small stream is that you probably already own a 4-wt reel, and don't need to buy a new one.

Waders and Wet Wading

The biggest issue with waders on small streams is that you tend to walk much more than you do on a big stream. You'll probably have to hike in. And you'll cover more stream frontage (see article on "Reading the Water"). So you'll want to be comfortable, and wear waders that don't trap heat. And because the streams are typically quite shallow, you almost never need chest waders.

- Hippers and waist-highs are both better than chest waders. But I'm not a big fan of hipers. Somehow, at some point during the day, I find myself wading into water just over the top (say, to un-snag my fly). For me, waist-highs are perfect. If they're breathable, they're very comfortable, and they almost always provide enough coverage on a small stream.
- Wading shoes matter. They need to double as hiking boots. I'm a big fan of the studded AquaStealth soles. Without studs, the traction sucks (felts are better), but the studded ones are fine, and much better than felts for walking along the bank and up and down trails.
- In late spring and summer, wet wading is a joy. Here's a trick I learned in NZ, where wading wet is a religion. Wear polypropylene long-johns next to your skin, and nylon athletic shorts over them. It will give you some protection from brush and insects, and cut the chill of wading wet. So what if it looks silly: those in the know will assume you've spent time fishing in New Zealand.

Other Stuff

It might go without saying (as it's equally true on big streams as on small), but two of the most important items of equipment you will ever own are 1) a good pair of polarized sunglasses and 2) a decent hat.

Buy the very best pair of sunglasses you can afford. You won't often see a trout holding in the water, they're so well camouflaged, but whenever you do, you'll probably learn something. Ditto for seeing the fish an instant earlier as it rises to your fly, or spotting that fish fleeing upstream after you spooked it.

If you've never owned a good pair of sunglasses, give them a try. Cheap sunglasses give me a headache. Your brain sort of adapts, and lets you pretend they're OK, but you're missing a lot. Put on a good pair of sunglasses after looking through some cheap ones for a while, and you'll absolutely notice the difference. It's like someone cleaned your windshield.

Your hat works with your sunglasses, reducing glare that enters over the top of the frames. It makes an enormous difference in your visual acuity on a bright day. Make sure the bottom of the brim is a dark color. And of course, the hat should be an earth color so as not to spook fish.

Probably the only other thing you might need (assuming you have regular fly fishing kit) is a fishing day pack instead of a vest. You'll want to carry-in lunch and water, rain-gear and a fleece sweater (remember, you're a lot farther from the car) and possibly your waders (if it's a long hike in and out). A fishing back pack, with a day-pack sized back pouch, and fly-box-sized pouches on the front of the straps is ideal.