Fly Fishing: Safety

This guide is intended to prepare you in the following areas when fly fishing:

1. Weather
2. Potential Danger
3. Staying Hydrated
4. Hook Safety
5. Fish Safety
6. Wading Safety
   a. Equipment
   b. Reading the Water
   c. With a buddy
7. Watercraft Safety
8. Kayak Safety

1. Weather
   
   » Anglers should be prepared to fish in all kinds of weather including rain, sleet and snow. Being unprepared will result in personal misery or an unsafe fishing situation.

   » Always dress in layers. When the temperature is cold be sure the layer closest to your skin is moisture-wicking and not cotton. The second layer of clothing should provide warmth and your outer most layer should provide warmth but also offer protection from moisture and wind.

   » When the temperature is hot keep your skin covered. Exposing your skin to long periods of sunlight (UV) can be very damaging to your skin.

   » At the first sign of seeing a lightning bolt, remove yourself from the water immediately. Take cover and only resume casting if you haven't heard thunder for at least 30 minutes, this is the protocol from the National Weather Service.
2. POTENTIAL DANGER

» Always wear eye protection when casting, in case of accidental hooking.

» Keep a look out for a “tailwater” (a type of fishery located immediately downstream from a dam, bridge or culvert which can become very dangerous when the dam regulates water out of the reservoir). The water level can rise to dangerously high levels quickly.
  • Before wading in the river mark the water level from a visible location on the bank and keep an eye out if rising occurs. When the water level rises so does the speed of the current.
  • In most tailwater fisheries, a very loud horn or siren is sounded before the water level is regulated out of the dam. If this happens immediately get out of the water.

» When fly fishing from a boat, be sure to wear a life jacket (PFD).

» Make sure a friend or family member knows where you will be fishing.

» Check your cell phone or remote location device coverage at your fishing destination.

» Use waterproof sunscreen with a SPF of 50 or greater.

» Keep insect repellant on hand, if needed.

3. STAYING HYDRATED

» Dehydration and fatigue can put you in severe danger such as loss of mental sharpness which results in bad decision making. The effects of dehydration can impact you especially toward the end of the day, or after multiple days of fishing. Keep a stash of snacks and water with you when fly fishing in case of emergencies.

4. HOOK SAFETY

» Always be sure the barb on your hook is crimped. A crimped hook may result in a less secure hook set on a fish but will allow for an easier hook removal if it accidentally punctures your skin. (Learn the procedure on how to remove a hook from your skin, if needed.)

» Prior to your fishing trip check the rules and regulations of that area on the use of barbed hooks. A barbless hook will do less damage to the mouth of a fish.
5. FISH SAFETY

» Anglers should exercise “catch and release” when fishing. Anglers must learn how to handle fish properly without harming them (FFI offers an excellent “catch and release” brochure).

» Before handling a fish, be sure to wet your hands and do not brush the fish up against dry clothing.

» Use a knotless or rubber mesh net to land a fish.

» Remove the hook quickly while the fish is in the water. Have your hemostat handy if you need to extract the hook from the fish’s mouth.

» If lifting a fish out of the net hold it horizontally and support its weight, keep the net placed below the fish. If grasping the tail area of the fish don’t hold the fish too tightly. If you want to photograph the fish have the camera ready before the fish is handled and minimize the length of time it is out of the water. If you do not photograph the fish, keep the net over the side of the boat, unhook the fish, revive it, and release it without bringing the fish into the boat.

» When releasing a fish, be sure it has been properly revived by holding it in the water with its head upstream. When the fish is ready, it will “kick” away from your hand or net and swim free. Keep these things in mind before setting the fish free: how long was the fish held out of water, how exhausted is the fish, the temperature of the water, and the water current.

» Fish start spawning when the water temperature begins to warm up. Anglers should be mindful of spawning reds (trout spawning beds) when fishing. They are typically in shallow scooped out gravelly areas with a steady current flowing over them. Anglers may not see trout in the spawning redd but do not walk through them and be careful where you wade.

» Check with a local fly shop on “hoot owl” restrictions and when they are in effect. During this time, there is a designated portion of the afternoon when all fishing must cease. This occurs when water temperatures are elevated which reduces the amount of oxygen the fish is receiving. Handling fish during this time can cause the fish to become overly stressed and potentially lead to the death of the fish.
6. WADING SAFETY

» Always cross a river at an upstream angle and be sure your foot is securely placed on the river bottom before taking the next step to prevent falling.

» Keep an eye out for quick water and follow this safe wading formula: multiply the depth of the water (in feet) times the number of feet a stick drifts in a second. If the result is greater than 8, stay out of the water.

» If you fall in, and your waders have not yet filled with water, try to get your feet under you. The current can keep the mouth of the waders flared open and create an anchor-like effect that will drive you down the river. Depending on the depth, you may be better off swimming downstream or across the current until you find a depth that will allow you to stand up or get close to the shore. If you fall and the current is pushing you down the river, keep your face downstream this will allow you to see rocks or other debris in front of you. If the current is pushing you towards a fallen tree or other large obstacle you may have to drop your rod to free both hands. As you approach the tree or large obstacle try to grab hold of the object and pull yourself to shore (don’t let your legs get caught underneath you or the obstacle.)

» Be careful wading in shallow water. There can be foot entrapments such as a branch or ledge that cause you to get stuck, fall in the water and tire you out. If you encounter a wader that is caught in a foot entrapment, wade in behind him
and break the force of the current with your legs. If you reach the wader, try to get a rope or stick against his shins and with a person on either end move upstream. Self-rescue is limited to cutting your boots off your feet with a knife or pair of paramedic shears.

6a. Wading Safety – Equipment

- **Breathable waders**: The neoprene offers protection from cold water and protection from rocks and other debris if you fall in the water.
- **Wading boots**: There are a few different lacing and sole options to choose from when buying or borrowing boots. Before choosing a boot check with the local fly shop or fishery you will be visiting, this may affect the type of soles allowed. Some states have a ban on felt-soled boots.
- **Boot-foot waders**: Some anglers prefer boot-foot waders if in cold water because the neoprene warms up the water inside their boot. It is also easier to maneuver and get your feet free from entrapments.
- **Wader boot bottom/soles**: Some anglers prefer the felt-soled boot because they believe they have better feel for the rocks and bottom of the river. Cleats and traction bars can aide in stability but never wear cleats or traction bars if you will be in a boat/raft.
- **Wading belts**: The use of two belts is recommended. Typically, one belt is used around the waist of the waders, like a belt, and the second belt is placed around the same area but you can to slide it up to the top of your waders. This will restrict water from filling in your waders if you fall. If you fall in the water without a belt, the waders fill up quickly. A snug fitting wading belt can delay or even completely prevent water from filling the waders. A good belt should have a buckle that can be popped open even when under a load.
- **Wading staff**: A wading staff can be used as a probe to feel for ledges, drop-offs, or slick boulders. Make sure to keep it downstream and anchored in the river bottom before taking the next step. It is extremely useful when crossing unstable terrain.
6b. Wading Safety – Equipment

- When crossing a river look for the shallowest and slowest area of current to wade in.

6c. Wading Safety – With a Buddy

- When crossing a river with a buddy:
  - The upstream buddy should hold the fly rods and the downstream buddy should use the wading staff to keep balance. Hold onto each other by the upper wading belt, or the downstream buddy can hold onto the forearm of the upstream buddy, but don’t lock arms.
  - It is extremely dangerous to wade into water that is near or at the top of your waders.

7. WATERCRAFT SAFETY

In this section the use of the word “watercrafts” pertains to a kayak, kick-boat, and/or float tubes. While there are considerations specific to each type of watercraft, the purpose of this section is to emphasize the overall safety considerations when operating these “watercrafts”.

» Always wear a personal floatation device (PFD) or lifejacket; in most places, it is required when operating a watercraft.
» Always have a marine whistle attached to you your PFD in case of emergency.
» Carry an extra paddle. And attach a paddle leash to your paddle to prevent it from sinking or floating away.
» Be aware of wind direction and speed. Both wind speed and direction most likely will change while you are operating the watercraft.
» Use rod holders in your watercraft.
» Before launching, anticipate your activity and movement while operating your watercraft. Place items such as rod holders or other attachments in an efficient location to prevent fly line snagging when maneuvering around the watercraft.
» Do not lean over the side of the watercraft when in a seated position.
» Attach a 360-degree light to your watercraft if you plan on being on the water after dark.
» Be sure to attach a flag at the stern on your watercraft, some areas require one.
» Keep the area in your watercraft organized and clutter-free to prevent tangling equipment such as anchoring devices.
» Secure a landing net in a convenient but out of the way area.
» Be sure to keep a stash of water and snacks in your watercraft.
» Stow a first aid kit and emergency bag (food, water, flashlight, extra clothing, signaling device, flares, reflectors and a compass) in case of an unexpected event.
» Have paddle floats available to help stabilize the watercraft if you need to re-enter a capsized watercraft and keep a bilge pump to help remove water faster.
» Be sure the rudder of the watercraft is operating properly prior to launching.
» If your watercraft gets caught in an area of vegetation or obstacle secure your fly rod and calmly push yourself away from the obstruction.
» If you are re-rigging your fly rod and not anchored, be aware of your surroundings and avoid drifting into an unsafe situation.

The watercraft owner should be trained in the following areas:

» Know the Coast Guard rules for your watercraft. These will differ depending on the type of watercraft.
» Be familiar with boating regulations in general, and specifically in the area you will be operating.
» Know how to launch/land the watercraft and how to get in and out without injury.
» Know how to navigate around other nearby watercrafts in the area.
» Know how to “right” and re-enter a capsized boat.
» Know the proper paddling and steering/maneuvering technique.
» Have a good understanding of fishing at night.
7a. Transporting your watercraft:

- Make sure all straps and tie-down connections are firmly in place.
- Check that all items used in the watercraft are properly stowed and locked down before transporting the watercraft.
- Attached a red flag from the watercraft while it is being transported.

7b. Saltwater considerations:

- Understand the tide patterns in the area you will be fishing.
- Know launch and surf landing techniques.
- Be aware of your surroundings, strong currents can push you into a buoy or dock. Don’t get caught and dragged into a line of buoys or a dock.
- Know the rules of the waterway you are fishing. Specific rules apply to certain watercrafts.

8. KAYAK (SIT-ON-TOP/SIT-INSIDE) SAFETY

Instructions if you capsize in a sit-on top kayak:

» Stay calm.

» First flip your kayak to an upright position. If capsized in a shallow area stand up and simply reach under your kayak and grab the cockpit rim to pull it over and flip in the upright position. If capsized in a deeper area of water, reach over top the kayak to the opposite side, grasp the cockpit rim and pull it toward you to flip it upright.

» Once your kayak is upright and you are re-entering the boat, reach across to the opposite side of the cockpit rim and pull your whole body up and in the kayak, as if you were getting out of a swimming pool.

» Once you are back in the kayak, position yourself back into a sitting position.

Instructions if you capsize in a sit-inside kayak:

» First release the spray skirt. All spray skirts have pull- tabs on the front of them for this purpose. Prior to launching the kayak make sure the spray skirt pull-tab at the front of the kayak is outside the skirt and is easily accessible.
» Next locate the spray skirt tab. This can be difficult to do in the capsized position so keeping your paddle under your arms, bring both hands down to the cockpit rim and follow the rim of the kayak your hands until you locate the pull- tab. Tuck forward to release the tension on the front of the skirt and pull the tab to release the skirt. Continue to tuck and roll toward the front to release your legs from the kayak’s hull. When your legs are half way out of the kayak you should be able to reach the surface for air. Keep your feet and legs in the cockpit so the kayak does not blow away from you and hold on to your paddle. You are going to need them both soon. (Paddle leashes will keep your paddle from separating from you, but do not use them in surf as they can bind you to the kayak).

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