

# DO WE NEED A FLY FISHING VEST?

by Michael Abramowitz

Copyright © 2015

*Preface: The following article was originally published in the March 2015 issue of the **Mid Atlantic Fly Fishing Guide**. You can find more information about the Mid Atlantic Fly Fishing Guide on their [Facebook](#) page.*

Most dictionaries define a vest as a close-fitting waist-length garment, typically having no sleeves or collar and buttoning down the front. Lee Wulff is often reported as the originator of the fly fishing vest. He took a jacket and cut off the sleeves and added extra pockets. The "Lee Wulff Tak-L-Pac" was made by Masland of Carlisle, Pennsylvania in the mid 1940's.

With time this concept has evolved into a multitude of styles of vests for fly fishermen and women. When strolling along a stream or lake, the person most often wearing a fishing vest identified as a person who is fly fishing. The spin casting crowd are usually dragging heavy tackle boxes and bait buckets.

Today there are innumerable choices of fishing vests available. My first fishing vest was made from cotton fabric. When the vest got wet, it took hours to dry. Now with modern fabrics, our vests are lighter, dry quicker, and keep us cooler on a hot day if a mesh fabric is used in it.

Before I discuss fishing vests and other storage systems, what are the common items we will need when fishing? The location, where, and when we fish defines the gear we will need. Locations may be wading in or along a stream or a hot sunny tropical beach, or fishing from a drift boat, kayak or floatation tube.

We obviously need fly boxes. A box for midges may be only 2 x 3 x 1.5 inches and hold up to 100 midges. Larger boxes will require larger pockets. A "dropper fly rig box" will be larger than the average box. In this box you have a dropper pre-tied to a surface fly such as a dry fly or terrestrial fly in order time on the stream. This may enable an angler to leave one box in the car or at home. Line nippers and forceps can be on retractors which attach to D rings on the vest. Fly leaders in the envelopes can fit in a pocket. Floatant, weights, and strike indicators usually end up in easily accessible smaller pockets. Some pockets may be on the inside of the vest.

Newer designs of vests have water proof pockets with a clip to store keys. The water proof pocket is also a good location to keep a spare copy of your fishing license. Many traditional vests have a large zippered compartment on the rear of the vest that can accommodate a rain jacket, water bottles, food packets, or an emergency kit. Some fishermen who hike into remote locations may carry a GPS device.

Some vests have the rear pocket to keep hydration bag for fluids. A spare reel and spool with a different line such as a sink tip line, need a storage space. With all the gear, a vest can be heavy. Weigh your vest. Just think of all the exercise you get during the day lugging all that weight on you.

A comfortable fitting vest is essential. The vest collar should be padded, and should be wide as not to dig into your neck. A comfortable fitting vest is a plus for all the time spent hiking to our favorite fishing spot as well as fishing. Style, fabric, color, pocket distribution, how it sits on your shoulders, access to pockets, perhaps a water proof pocket, retractor attachment locations, fly patches to store wet flies and more are considerations. Some vests can double as life jackets worn when in a kayak or boat and have pockets to keep fishing supplies. Another consideration is to choose a color that will help you blend in on the streams to assist with a stealthy approach.

The D ring on the rear of a vest to attach a net is missing from some styles. If you carry a net, do you tuck the net handle in the waist belt of a hip pack or sling pack? This is another consideration when purchasing a vest.

If you take all your fishing items out of the vest, you will be amazed what can be accumulated in the pockets. Do you need the cleaner kit line on the stream? With thoughtful selection you can really minimize the load you pack into the vest.

I have noticed that when fishing new destinations, my vest will contain many more fly boxes than fishing home waters.

Many serious fly fishermen and women may own more than one fishing vest. They have a vest for every type of fishing. Do we really need a fishing vest, and what other choices are available? Currently, we have other ways to store and carry our fishing accessories. A shirt with a few pockets, lanyards, sling packs, fanny packs, a chest pack or a combination of the above items may suffice.

I have a fly fishing shirt with a few pockets on the left and right. Zippers and Velcro secure all the items in the pockets. This garment is a favorite for some home waters, for all I may need is a roll or two of tippet material, two retractors with a pair of

forceps, and nippers. One or two small fly boxes will easily fit in a pocket. Some pockets have a small embroidered hole through which you can feed the end of the tippet from the spool, which is kept in the pocket.

Lanyards with clips are popular. Most lanyards enable you to keep spools of tippet, nippers, forceps, and a small fly box conveniently dangling from your neck. When choosing a lanyard or making one, make sure it has a safety release to avoid choking if the lanyard gets snagged. Lanyards are very convenient when fishing from a drift boat. When in a drift boat, you may hang the fishing vest over the back of the chair to keep your other gear close by.

Sling packs are worn on a strap over the shoulder. Some sling are easy to slide around to the front of your body for easy packs access to the storage compartments. One disadvantage of sling is that the weight is on one side of your body. The solution is to keep fewer items in the pack thus reducing the weight you are carrying.

Chest packs are modified versions of backpacks, except it is reversed and most of your fly tackle is in front of you. Some chest packs are part of a system that incorporates a back pack.

Fanny packs may be helpful if one has back problems. Your gear is kept in a series of pockets on a strap around your waist. When I fish from my sit-on-top kayak, I only take a very small fanny pack. A waist pack is a larger version of a fanny pack. Usually the catalogues or web sites may indicate the sizes in cubic inches to give you an idea of the total size. Still, it is best to see the pack and try it on.

Make a note of the empty weight of the vest and alternative choices. A simple vest may weigh one pound. It may be all you need. Or you may want to consider something heavier with more features.

Many of the vests, waist packs, and sling packs are now made with high strength materials. They may be waterproof. The old 100% cotton vests are low cost entry level vests. Soon a serious fisherman/woman will wish for a vest which will be lighter, breathable, and dry rapidly.

The price range for vests and the alternative choices can range from \$20 to \$230 for a well-made guide vest. Problems may arise with your vest if the thread is of poor quality and they have low quality zippers. This is how manufacturers lower production costs. Whatever item you choose, purchase it at your favorite fly shop. This will give you an opportunity to try it on and ask questions about it. There are

often features in the vest or waist pack that you may not be aware of or how to utilize on the water. For example, better fly vests have loop and a Velcro tab to secure your rod when wading or tying on a fly. There may be straps with buckles to keep a rolled up rain jacket. Elastic cords on pockets to store waters bottles are often missed when you first buy the vest or pack. Ask the dealer to show you all the useful features.

In summary, you may own a simple fanny pack, a vest, or a hip pack. If you are looking for something new to carry your tackle, be sure to consider where, when, and how you are going to fish.

*Mike Abramowitz is an avid fly fisherman from Potomac, Md. He ties flies, occasionally builds rods, and enjoys fishing from a kayak.*