

Essential Fly Fishing Gear

by Clay Baker



Why would anyone write yet another guide to fly fishing? Trust me I've thought about that very question every time my fingers hit a key. My hope is that I might get a few people to take up the sport, get in the water as quickly as possible and have some fun. I considered writing a chapter describing all the wonderful reasons to go fly fishing. Waxing on and on about the romance and beauty of a gracefully cast fly, the remarkable scenery, the bonding of family and friends, maybe even dip into the allure of a finely crafted bamboo rod. All this had some appeal, but it's all been said many times before and frankly it seems like a waste of your time. If you've read this far you have your own reasons for wanting to go fly fishing, so I'm going to do my best to give you only the bare essentials that will get you in the water catching fish. By the time you get to the end of this article you will have the knowledge necessary to get the gear you'll need. In my next article Getting Started - Fly Casting for Beginners you will learn to cast well enough to catch fish, and most important, have a lot of fun with family and friends for a lifetime. Let's get on with it.

The Essential Gear

Before you can fish, or even learn how you will need some basic equipment. For the purpose of simplifying things I will assume you will be fishing for trout, bass, crappie or some other small, fresh water game fish. If you're fishing for something larger like salmon or steelhead you'll need heavier gear and I'll try to make sense of all that later. What's all this going to cost? Nothing to sky-is-the-limit and every price point in between, but let's try to do the whole thing for less than \$200. If you know someone who already owns fly fishing gear chances are they have some equipment you can borrow; that's it, you done, go fishing. If you hire a guide often they will have loaner or rental equipment available. Look for bargains online, or at a local garage sale. Of course you can go to a fly fishing shop and the pros there will help you find the best of everything you need. For now let's stick to only the bare essentials. With experience you'll decide what optional or improved equipment you want to acquire. Remember I'm trying to get you on the water quick to get to the fun part. I'm going to help you create a shopping basket full of essentials that will be suitable for most of the fishing you are likely to do. At the end of this section you'll find an itemized shopping list so put away the pad and pen and enjoy.



Rod

[\(click photo for more by this photographer\)](#)

I borrowed my first rod when I was eight years old and my cousin tied the flies and gave me a 10 minute lesson, so I got off cheap. When I got home I immediately went out and forked over my hard earned lemonade stand money for a brand new, bright red, fiberglass rod with a real foam rubber grip and a spring loaded auto winding reel. The whole rig, with line cost me \$24.95 and I still have it to this day. The point is, you don't have to spend a lot of money to have fun fly fishing, but I will encourage you to buy the best rod you can comfortably afford because even a cheap graphite rod will make my old fiberglass rod feel like a broom stick by comparison. The endless features that rod manufacturers have designed into their products are beyond the purpose of this article. Just know this; rods come in different lengths and weights. Heavy weights (i.e: bigger numbers) are for big fish and light weight rods (i.e: smaller numbers) are for smaller fish. The first item you need is a 5 weight rod approximately 9-feet long. A 5 weight rod is about in the middle of your available rod choices, so it will give you great deal of flexibility. An inexpensive graphite rod will cost about \$50-\$60 and I've seen packages that include a reel and line for under \$80.



Reel

(click photo for more by this photographer)

A reel is actually a very simple device, but the features available can make this a very complicated decision. For your first reel find one that feels good, is easy to take apart and clean and has a good drag feature. What constitutes a "good feel"? Well, do you like the way the reel feels when you crank it? Does it sound good? Is it easy to take apart? Do you like the color? A reel can cost as little as \$20 and as much as a used car, so I'd suggest that you keep the budget for your first reel in the \$40 range. Make sure to select a reel for 5 weight fly line. Now if you've selected the handy-dandy everything in a shrink-wrapped kit you won't get to try anything out, but you will get past all this faster and beat the rest of us to the fishing hole.



Line

(click photo for more by this photographer)

Want to get really confused, just take a stroll through the line department at your local fishing store. In fact this step would normally be your first decision because the rod and reel is normally chosen based on the line weight you want to use for the fish you are after. I intentionally moved line choice to number 3 in an effort to simplify your first outing to the fly shop. Just look at the array of choices to make; you have weight forward, shooting, sink tip, multi-tip, single taper and double taper, plus there are a variety of line weights, colors and floating characteristics. Plus a fly line is made up of 4 components; 1) The backing, 2) The Fly Line, 3) The Leader and 4) The Tippet. Uhhh....excuse me sir, which one catches fish? The point is there are lots of different types of fly line, but only one that you care about right now. So blank out everything else and select a (5-weight, Weight Forward (WF), Floating line, with a loop pre-tied on one end). Okay Clay, but there are 50 different kinds of 5-weight, weight forward line on the rack. Just in case you haven't been following the general theme here, I want you to select the least expensive one for now. Expect to pay about \$30 for an economy fly line. If you don't get the line with a pre-tied loop you will have to learn to tie a knot, which means more studying, more fishing gibberish and less time on the water. Please, buy the loop and I'll teach you the knot later. Fly lines do come in different colors; just select one that is easy for you to see.



Leader

(click photo for more by this photographer)

Next you need some leader; yet another rack of seemingly endless decisions. In reality you'll want a selection of leaders with you on the water because you'll want to change to different size leaders depending on the size of the fly you're using and the fishing conditions. For now throw one of each of these in your basket; knotless, tapered leaders in 2X, 3X, 4X, 5X and 6X sizes with a loop, please don't make me teach you another knot! What's with all the X stuff, it's just a sizing system; don't worry about it; that'll be the subject of another article. This selection of economy leader should cost about \$10.



(click photo for more by this photographer)

Tippet

Finally, select one spool of (here comes another silly word) tippet in 2X, 3X, 4X, 5X and 6X sizes. Notice that the numbering system is the same as the leader sizes, that's because they need to be matched. The tippet is the section of line that you will use to attach the leader to the fly. Every time you attach or remove a fly you are cutting away line and you don't want to be cutting away at that expensive tapered leader. The tippet also helps make the fly look more realistic in the water by taking out some of the stiffness that's in a tapered leader. Here's the best part about tippet; although I highly recommend it, you don't really need it. I've caught many fish on a fly that is simply tied to the end of the leader. I've done even uglier things with fly line and caught fish, but I won't advise any of those things here. I list it as essential because ultimately tippet will save you money by not cutting up your leader. Budget about \$15 for your tippet material.



(click photo for more by this photographer)

Selection of flies

I used to tie my own, now I just find a local fly shop near where I'll be fishing and drop in to buy what's hot on the water that week. There is no substitute for local knowledge. You could spend years trying to learn the entomology of a water shed and I am certain that if I tell you this is required knowledge to catch a fish on a fly you will buy a trout at the grocery store and take up tennis before this guide hits the floor. On my first fly fishing trip at the age of eight, I am quite certain that I had no knowledge of fly patterns, local hatches and couldn't tell you the difference between a dry fly and a house fly. But I caught trout all day long because someone with that knowledge handed me two flies and pointed me at the water. Eventually you will learn what to use and when, and this will increase your chances of success, for now I'll just ask you to pick up the flies below because I think every fly box should contain this selection. I would also ask you to find some local knowledge. When you decide where you want to fish, find a local fly fishing shop, drop in and ask what flies are working and ask them to put together a selection for you. Buying the flies they recommend is also a nice courtesy for receiving invaluable knowledge. Note that what is recommended during the summer will most likely be different than spring and winter selections. And you may find that you want to use a dry fly in the evening and a nymph during the day. Most of the dry flies and nymphs that you'll use will cost about \$1.50 to \$1.95 each at retail. I've offered some selections of essential flies in the shopping list below. These are the must have flies that you'll use everywhere. They are also great searching flies when you just don't know what to use. The rest of my selections are divided by; creeks & streams, river or lake and you'll find some overlap. What's the difference between a creek, a stream and a river? You can step across a creek. You can wade across a stream. A river, well that'll require some swimming or rowing. Many fly selections are divided by region, but I've found that some of the best flies (read as; flies that catch lots of fish) don't imitate anything in particular, but look like everything in general. Knowing this I contend that you can catch fish with these flies anywhere in the country. Notice that many of the flies are the same for streams, rivers and lakes. My feeling is that size is more important than having a perfect shape or specific color. For this reason I like to carry lots of sizes of every fly. My suggestion is that you get a wide assortment of sizes so that you're prepared for any situation. Start with the essential list and then add the remaining list over time as you need them.



Clippers

[\(click photo for more by this photographer\)](#)

You're going to need to trim line every time you tie on a fly, tie a knot or remove a fly. Clippers cost between \$8-\$15 depending on the quality and features. If you want to save a few bucks just use a nail clipper or a small pair of scissors. Okay, you did it and all for under \$200. My Big Bertha driver cost more than that; heck the green fees are almost \$200.

Optional Gear

This section of my article will probably draw the ire of many fishing equipment manufacturers and dealers as I warn you away from buying gear. But trust me, if you spend any amount of time fly fishing you will very quickly be whipping out the little plastic card as fast as a roll-cast to snatch up the latest and coolest gear that helps you enjoy the sport. I want you on the water right away, there will be plenty of time to browse the aisles and catalogs to buy the extras.



Polarized Sun Glasses

[\(click photo for more by this photographer\)](#)

You can fish without them and the fish won't know the difference, this is why I consider this item optional. I always wear a pair because I like not fighting the glare and I can see the fish in the water easier, besides they are really cool looking and if looking cool while fishing is important to you than I suggest you invest in some polarized sun glasses. But check, you may already own a pair. If you buy a pair I recommend getting the style with side lenses or the wrap around type.



Fly box

[\(click photo for more by this photographer\)](#)

A fly box can cost \$5 to \$50 and frankly it's a convenience. When I was a kid I carried my flies in a plastic sandwich bag and later upgraded to a film canister my brother threw away. I had to be careful though because the flies would get stuck in the sandwich. These are not ideal storage solutions, but they also don't cost bunches of cash either. When you buy flies the store will give you a little plastic box which may work for you for a while. Eventually you'll want a box that helps you organize your flies better. My preference is a box that floats and has ribbed foam inserts so that I can store flies in rows organized by type and size. I also like to label my boxes for particular streams or lakes so that I can quickly grab the right gear and go.



Net

I'll take a great deal of abuse for saying this is optional equipment, especially from the catch-and-release community; of which I'm a member. If you're planning to release the fish a net really helps protect the fish from injury. And there are some nets that are better than others with respect to protecting the fish from harm. I list it as optional because you can fish without one by learning to hold a fish properly with your hands, remove the hook, revive the fish and release it healthy. You'll find more information about proper handling in another article. While I would encourage you to buy or borrow a net, you can fish without one if you take the time to learn how to release the fish. By the way, we don't "throw them back", a fish is released carefully after being fully revived. Buy or borrow a net if you can, but don't stay home because you don't have a net.



Waders

(photo by: R. J. [click image for more by this photographer](#))

Waders are optional because it depends on where and how you plan to fish, and I guess on how fussy you are about cold water. If you fish California water in the summer you'll probably be fine in shorts and an old pair of tennis shoes. If you fish from a boat you'll certainly have no need for chest waders, but might want to wear hip boots if you'll be pushing off from a beach. You may not like wading and find that you're content finding places where you can fish from the bank. I've come to love pulling on my chest waders so that I can stand in a clear running stream to cast a fly, but that's me. Waders are not essential; get the waders when you really need them, but don't max out the plastic just because the fishing magazines show anglers in waders; sun glasses and vests are much cooler anyway.



Vest

([click photo for more by this photographer](#))

Vests are so cool. I'm not sure how many I own, and there are certainly more in my future. How can anyone resist all those little pockets and the endless ways that the manufacturers dream up to arrange them. As a designer I would love to help Orvis or Simms dream up the next great vest. Besides, the fly fishing vest is iconic, it's the image that most of us have of a real fly fisherman or woman. You don't need it! The fish won't care what you wear and it'll be one less thing for you to hassle with. A vest costs from \$40 to \$170 and you're going to use it a few times a year; at least until you reach some level of fishing obsession. If you already have a shirt or jacket with a bunch of pockets, try that for a while and put the vest on the birthday wish list.

The Essential Shopping List

This is your check list from the previous section.

1. **Select a kit** that includes:
 - 5 weight rod, reel and line

Or buy the following components;

2. **Rod**

- 5 weight
- Graphite material
- 2 piece rods feel and cast best, but a 3, 4 or 5 piece rod is easier for traveling

3. **Reel**

- Reel designed for 5 weight line

4. **Line**

- 5 weight, weight forward, floating line, with a loop
- Dacron backing
- Knotless, tapered leaders in 2X, 3X, 4X, 5X and 6X sizes with a loop
- Tippet spools in 2X, 3X, 4X, 5X and 6X sizes
- Ask the store if they will load the backing and line for you

5. **Flies**

We really need some great close up shots of all these flies. Any photographers with a macro lens and good lighting want to take a shot at this we'd love to display your work; we'll even send you the flies and instructions on what we'd like to see.

Essential Flies:

These four flies represent what I think are the essential flies that no angler should be without. These four flies do such a great job of representing many different forms of food that you should be able to fish anywhere in the United States with this simple set.

- Adams (sizes 12-18)
- Gold Ribbed Hares Ear (sizes 10-14)
- Quill Gordon (sizes 12-18)
- Muddler Minnow (sizes 6-10)

If your budget allows I would like to see these flies in your box as well so that you are prepared for any situation, but don't worry if you can't add them all, the essential list above will catch lots of fish. I have divided these fly selections into the areas where they are best fished, Creeks & Streams, Rivers and Lakes or ponds. Notice that there are several duplications in each list. See, you do not need a degree in entomology to do this!

6. **Clippers**

Your clippers are kind of a multi-tool. They should be stainless steel, have a little needle point at one end to open up the eye on a fly and it's nice if it has a sharpener and a little trough shaped attachment for helping you tie knots.

Putting it All Together

Now that you have your essential gear you need to assemble it. There is nothing complicated about assembling a fly rod, but it helps to have someone walk you through it, so that you don't make some of the common mistakes that might create difficulties later.

1. Assemble the rod

When assembling a fly rod you want to achieve two things; 1) get all the guides lined up, and 2) make sure you can easily take it apart again. To make sure you can easily take the rod apart grease the male end of the rod section with a little oil from your face. Yeah you read that right. I run my finger and thumb down the side of my nose and then rub it on the male end of the rod section. When it's time to pull the sections apart you won't be struggling or worse breaking your rod or one of the guides. Plus there's nothing to buy, you'll always have rod grease on hand, or on face. Some rods have indicators, either a small dot or lines that aid in aligning the rod pieces. If your rod doesn't have indicators you'll just have to do it by sight. Once your rod is assembled and all the guides line up, use a gold or silver permanent marker to make a small dot on each of the adjoining sections to help you align the rod sections in the future. Just two little dots are all you need, in fact the smaller the better.

2. Attach the reel

On a fly rod the reel always hangs below the grip. If you're right handed you'll most likely want the crank on the right side of the rod, left handed anglers will want it on the left side. But it really doesn't matter, whatever you prefer is the best way to use it. Hold the reel so that the crank is on the correct side and the fly line is coming off the bottom of the reel. Now slide one tip of the reel base into the small slot in the reel seat. The slot will be aligned with the guides. Then slide the metal O-Ring over the other end of the reel base. Most O-Rings have a notch that is meant to fit over the reel base. Finally tighten the nuts up to the O-ring. If your rod has two nuts, tighten one all the way and then the other. The second nut is to keep the first from loosening. Mystical fishing magic keeps the second nut from loosening, that's why there isn't a third nut.

3. Thread The Line

First make sure the line is coming off the bottom of the reel. Place the grip end of the rod on a clean surface to protect the reel from getting in the dirt or sand. I'll often lay my backpack or fishing vest on the ground or just use the tailgate of my car. Pull out a few feet of fly line and then bend it in half making a pinched loop. Feed the loop through all the guides making sure not to miss any guides and that you haven't wrapped it around the rod.

4. Attach the leader

If you followed my earlier instructions you should have a leader with a loop pre-tied on one end and fly line with a loop in one end. To attach the leader just slip the leaders loop through the loop on the fly line and then pull the leader through its own loop and pull tight. The two loops are now connected.

5. Attach the Tippet

If you're just going to practice casting, tie on about a foot of tippet that is the same size as your leader. For instance, if you attached a 5X leader, attach a foot long piece of 5X tippet. The general rule is that the tippet should be the same size as the leader or smaller. My practice fly is a bright orange bug. I cut the hook off with a pair of lineman pliers to make it safe. I guess I really cut the hook off to make me safe around myself; since I'm practicing I assume I'll make mistakes. You could also just use a bright piece of yarn or tape; it's just to help you see the end of the line. If you're fishing, you'll want to tie on at least three feet of tippet. In some streams or lakes you'll want a lot more; but we'll talk about that later.

6. That's it, go have some fun.

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