

The Complete Spinfishing Trout Angler's Vest

by Mike Bleech

Why do you think trout fishing vests have all those pockets? Not to be fashionable, I assure you. Trout are fussy critters. And in Pennsylvania streams, you are dealing with three different trout, each with its own preferences.

A trout anglers' vest is like a tool box. Whatever you need has to be there when you need it. Organizing your fishing vest with all of the necessary gear is the first step to enjoying a successful trout season.

Hooks

Perhaps it is because hooks are such basic fishing tools that many anglers do not think much about them. But in fact, it is because they are such basic fishing tools that we should put a lot of thought into them. If you attend a professional baseball game and watch the players warm up, notice what they do. Shortstops catch ground balls. Home run hitters swing the bat. Pitchers pitch. They do not practice trick plays; they practice the basics.

Similarly, you should put the most effort into the basics. What hooks should you use? Are there specialized hooks for any of the baits you use? Are your hooks the proper size for your baits? Are the hooks sharp?

Do not be satisfied with just any hooks. Hooks are made in many styles and sizes for good reason. Baitholder hooks, for example, work great with nightcrawlers or red worms, but they tear up smaller grubs. For grubs, plain fine-wire hooks are better. The guideline for hooks is to use hooks that do minimal damage to the bait, and which add minimal unnatural appearance to the bait.

Size 10 baitholder hooks should cover your worm fishing needs. For maggots, size 12 fine-wire hooks will suffice. You will also need salmon egg hooks that can be completely buried in whichever salmon eggs you use. Four sizes ranging from 8 to 14 should be adequate. Split-ring double or treble hooks and a bait needle will make your salted minnows more effective. Try size 10 if you use treble hooks, or size 8 if you use double hooks. Treble hooks are also used with artificial "putty baits." These baits will not last long on single hooks. You could carry a few closed-eye trebles for this purpose, but if you already have split-ring treble hooks, they will suffice.

Splitshot

Splitshot should handle all of your sinker needs. I like those splitshot wheels that contain several different shot sizes. Wheels keep your splitshot organized and take up very little precious vest space.

In a typical trout stream, you should be changing your shot several times. I often change shot a few times in just one pool. This is most critical early in the season when baits and lures should be very close to the bottom. Trout generally do not move far to feed in cold water. You should fish pools thoroughly. In a pool that may vary in depth by four or five feet, and where current changes considerably, there is no way you can cover it all with the same weight on your line.

Be sure to carry the removable type of splitshot.

Bait

Take a lesson from fly anglers who understand that trout can be extremely fussy eaters. Carry a large assortment of bait. This might include grubs, salmon eggs, worms, salted minnows and artificial baits. You might narrow this list if you know specifically which trout inhabit the water you plan to fish.

"Garden hackle" -- plain old red worms -- are the universal trout bait. They are natural food, even though trout that have never seen a worm eat them readily. Worms have traditionally been carried in a belt container. This is a good option, but you do not really need a container as bulky as typical worm boxes. A smaller container that fits in a vest pocket will carry all the worms you need for a day of trout fishing. The best worms for stocked trout are small. The only times you might need nightcrawlers are when you are fishing specifically for big brown trout.

Grubs are also universal trout bait. They are even more natural, at least in appearance, than worms. About the only times trout see worms are when they are washed into streams by rain runoff. Grubs typically sold at bait shops: maggots, wax worms and meal worms -- are not actually normal trout food, but they look like some of the insect larvae that inhabit trout streams. I prefer maggots because they are the smallest of the common baitshop grubs, closer to the size of caddis worms that are found in many of our streams.

Salmon eggs are often the most effective bait for rainbow trout. They can also be effective on brook trout and brown trout. Brook trout seem especially drawn to red salmon eggs. Rainbows can get very fussy. Some years it seems there is a hot egg that works everywhere. Then the next year you can't get a trout to look at those same eggs. More often, one particular type of egg is hot for a while, and then another egg gets hot. There are cheese eggs, shrimp eggs, corn eggs and plain salmon eggs. There are yellow eggs, orange eggs, pink eggs, green eggs, red eggs, white eggs and, well, salmon eggs of virtually any color. The more you carry, the better your odds of having what the trout want at any given moment, on any given stream.

Salmon eggs offer a big advantage over most natural baits. They do not spoil quickly. They can even be held from one year to the next if they are not exposed to extreme cold or heat. With a few jars of salmon eggs in your fishing vest, you are always ready for trout fishing. The same can be said for the artificial "putty baits."

If you fish streams that are stocked mostly with brook trout, be sure to carry a pack of salted minnows in your fishing vest. Brookies often attack salted minnows when they show absolutely no interest in anything else. Brown trout also go for salted minnows.

If you keep your fishing vest out of direct sunlight and extreme heat, salted minnows, salmon eggs and putty baits will last a long time. Nevertheless, store your worms and grubs in the refrigerator between fishing trips.

Artificial lures

Bright colors are just what you need for trout, at least early in the season. Later, when the streams get lower and warmer, natural colors will probably get better results.

Start with a selection of spinners. My all-around favorite is a gold Colorado or Indiana spinner blade with orange dressing on the treble hook. I also have a lot of luck, especially in stocked lakes, with a silver willow leaf blade and white hook dressing. But you will not catch me trout fishing without several other combinations. A little bit of bright red on a gold spinner blade is great for brook trout, and yellow hook dressing sometimes turns poor days into good days.

You should understand one of the reasons for using different spinner blade shapes.

Generally, the more round ones, called Colorado blades, or oval-shaped ones, called Indiana blades, spin at slower retrieve speeds. The long, thin blades, called willow leaf blades, require faster retrieve speeds. They run deeper and work better in swift current.

Tiny spoons are at their best in larger streams, and in lakes where longer casts are beneficial. The first thing you should understand about spoons is that they should wobble instead of spin. If your spoon spins, you are using the wrong spoon. Like spinner blades, the shape and weight of spoons determine how deep they run, and how fast they should be retrieved. Your ability to put together a selection of spoons to cover the broadest range of conditions determines the effectiveness of the spoon pocket in your fishing vest.

In addition to shapes, color selection is important. Carry a few that are plain gold and plain silver. Combinations of gold with red or orange are excellent for brook trout and brown trout. Combinations of silver with red, green, blue and chartreuse tend to be effective for all trout. Your spoon selection will put you in good shape if you visit one of the Lake Erie tributaries for steelhead, or one of our larger creeks and rivers for brown trout.