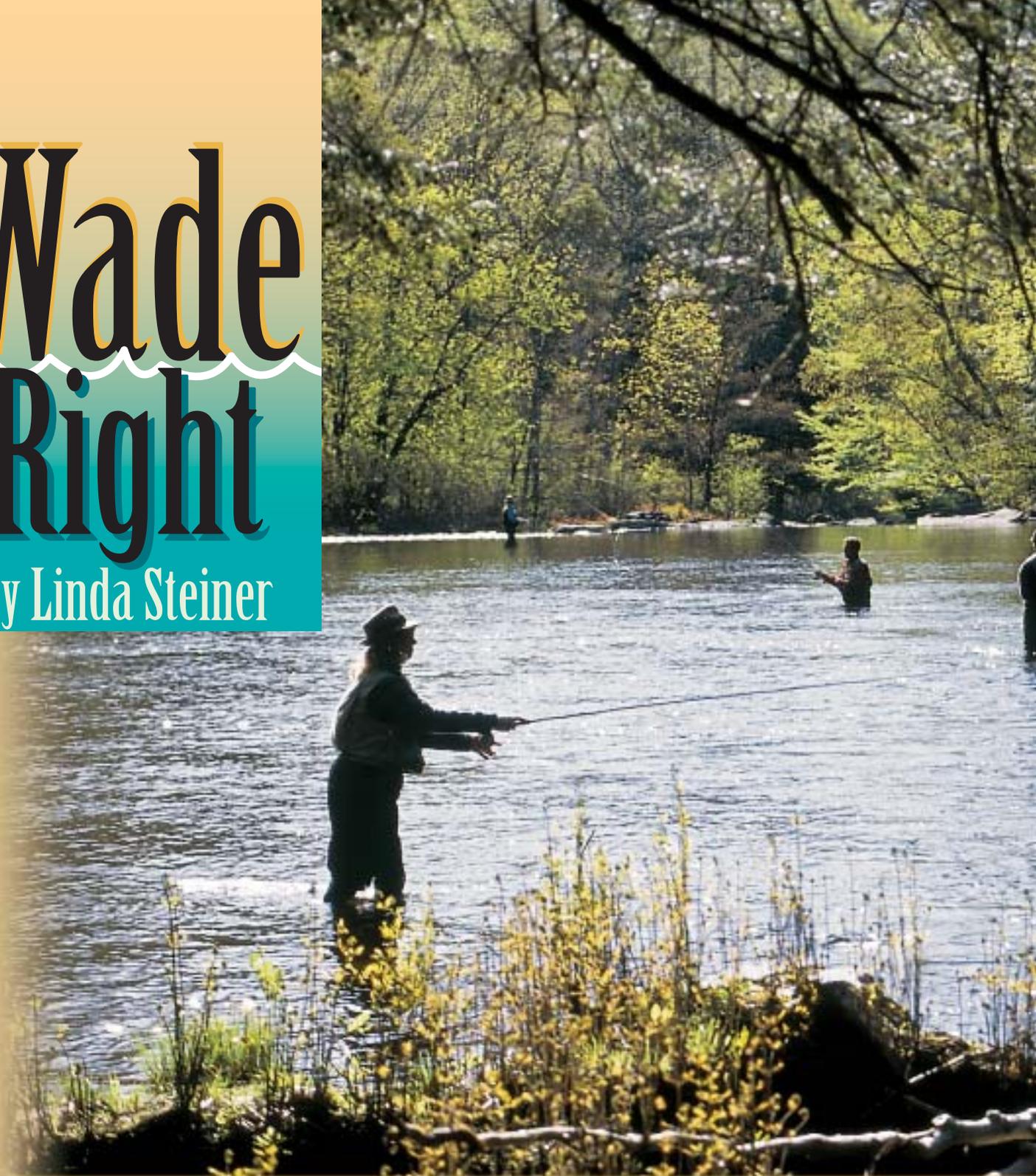


# Wade Right

by Linda Steiner



*photos by  
Linda and  
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**Your feet slip** and you scramble to stay upright. You're going down, down into the river. For a brief moment the water closes over your head. Fear grips your heart. What you have dreaded most is about to happen—when you pop to the top again, hair streaming, maybe spitting out a minnow or two, you'll be met by uproarious laughter.



Becoming the source of a snicker for fellow fishermen isn't all bad. If we can't lighten someone else's day occasionally, what are we here for? However, there are more comfortable ways to add a chuckle to other people's lives than taking a dunking while wading—ways that don't have the possibility of snapping a fishing rod, breaking an arm or leg, or even losing your life. Drowning, as they say, will really spoil your day.

Learning to wade correctly is not only about safety—and maybe saving face—but also about being a successful

angler. Wading is much more than walking in water. Wading helps an angler get to the most advantageous position from which to make a cast, without disturbing the fish. Being a good wader allows an angler to reach water, and fish, that other people cannot.

Having proper equipment is the first step to becoming a world-class wader. Yet many anglers spend far less and get far less quality in what gets them to the fish—their waders—than they do on the rod, reel, line and lures that they can use only when they do get to the fish! Put as much money into purchasing waders and you will immediately up your fishing opportunities and catches.

That their wading boots should have had felt soles is the first lesson that “slipped-and-went-under” anglers learn once they're topside again. Wading over slick underwater rocks with rubber-bottomed boots is like walking on ice. Algae just compounds the slipperiness. Cushiony felt soles grip rocky bottoms, even with weed growth. They also work well when wading through mud or sand. Consider also studs, to wade like a champ.

Hip boots are often the choice of anglers who want to save money. But unless an angler can guarantee he is only going to fish water lower than the top of his hip boots, he should invest in full-length or at least waist-high waders. Casting to that far-rising fish always takes one more step out. And that one step always takes hip boot wearers over the running boards.

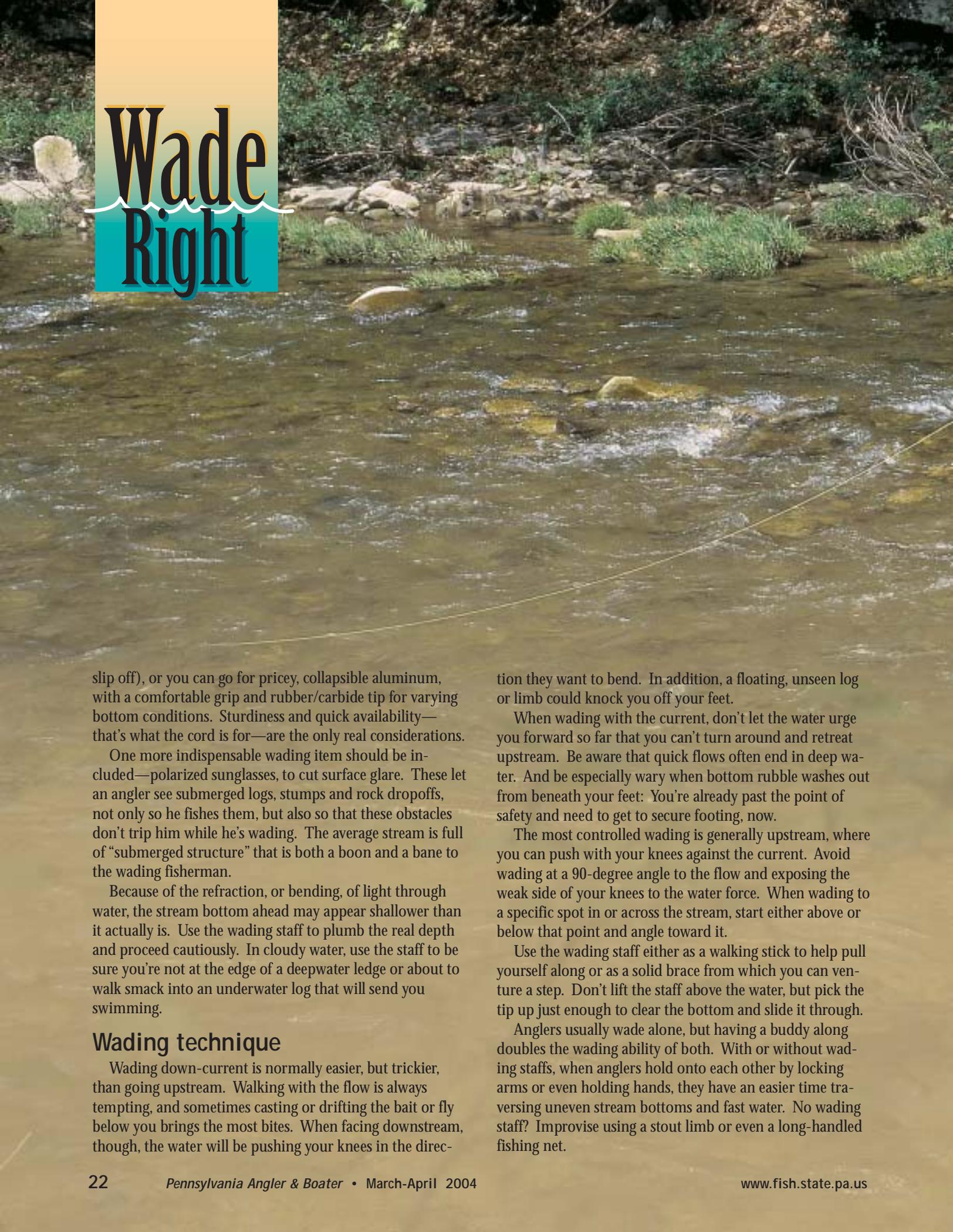
## Wading gear

Whether an angler buys lightweight, breathable or keep-you-warm neoprene waders depends on when, where and how he'll be fishing. Many opt for the lighter material and add insulating clothes underneath. Some like boot-foot waders, while others prefer stocking-foot waders and buy wading boots separately. Whatever you decide, add gravel guards, or gaiters. These go over the top of the boot and around the ankle, keeping out stones and sand that can wear through or be just plain annoying.

A belt, generally nylon web, should be cinched around the wader waist, not to hold them up (suspenders do that), but to prevent the waders from filling with water if the angler falls. What keeps water out will also keep it in, and beltless, water-filled waders will double as an anchor. You want to visit, but not sleep with, the fishes.

Roomy, tightly belted waders, however, also trap air. If you slip, you could go bobbing downstream with your feet ballooned higher than your head. Press out as much air as possible when donning the waders or loosen the belt a little once you're in the water, to let the air escape, and retighten.

The most important piece of wading equipment is attached to the belt—the staff. This is the angler's third leg. With it he becomes a steady “tripod,” instead of a tippy “bipod.” Wading staffs can be as simple as a broom handle with a strong cord attached (drill a hole so the line doesn't



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slip off), or you can go for pricey, collapsible aluminum, with a comfortable grip and rubber/carbide tip for varying bottom conditions. Sturdiness and quick availability—that's what the cord is for—are the only real considerations.

One more indispensable wading item should be included—polarized sunglasses, to cut surface glare. These let an angler see submerged logs, stumps and rock dropoffs, not only so he fishes them, but also so that these obstacles don't trip him while he's wading. The average stream is full of "submerged structure" that is both a boon and a bane to the wading fisherman.

Because of the refraction, or bending, of light through water, the stream bottom ahead may appear shallower than it actually is. Use the wading staff to plumb the real depth and proceed cautiously. In cloudy water, use the staff to be sure you're not at the edge of a deepwater ledge or about to walk smack into an underwater log that will send you swimming.

## Wading technique

Wading down-current is normally easier, but trickier, than going upstream. Walking with the flow is always tempting, and sometimes casting or drifting the bait or fly below you brings the most bites. When facing downstream, though, the water will be pushing your knees in the direc-

tion they want to bend. In addition, a floating, unseen log or limb could knock you off your feet.

When wading with the current, don't let the water urge you forward so far that you can't turn around and retreat upstream. Be aware that quick flows often end in deep water. And be especially wary when bottom rubble washes out from beneath your feet: You're already past the point of safety and need to get to secure footing, now.

The most controlled wading is generally upstream, where you can push with your knees against the current. Avoid wading at a 90-degree angle to the flow and exposing the weak side of your knees to the water force. When wading to a specific spot in or across the stream, start either above or below that point and angle toward it.

Use the wading staff either as a walking stick to help pull yourself along or as a solid brace from which you can venture a step. Don't lift the staff above the water, but pick the tip up just enough to clear the bottom and slide it through.

Anglers usually wade alone, but having a buddy along doubles the wading ability of both. With or without wading staffs, when anglers hold onto each other by locking arms or even holding hands, they have an easier time traversing uneven stream bottoms and fast water. No wading staff? Improvise using a stout limb or even a long-handled fishing net.



On a large creek or river, getting out into the water, sometimes many yards from the bank, is often the only way to reach fish. Just remember that major waterways have a lot of volume and flow force, as well as extra depth. Don't assume the shallows you waded through from shore extend downstream or upstream to where you've waded now. Make sure you can return safely either by retracing your route or by studying the river from shore before you commit to wading. Tributary creeks, even small runs, often dig deep pockets where they enter the receiving stream, so be aware of moving water coming in behind you.

Just because an angler wears waders doesn't mean he must walk in to their brim. Don't splash into the deepest hole around, chasing the fish out and ruining the catching for yourself and for other anglers. Go only as deep as you must or don't enter the water at all.

Another reason not to plunge in to the top of the waders is that the more an angler's body is below water, the more he is subjected to the push of the current. He'll also be closer to going under completely. In particularly heavy water situations, wear a life jacket, especially a vest or a jacket style known as a Type III flotation aid. These kinds of life jackets mimic a standard fishing vest with pockets and fly patch, and they also provide insulation in cold weather.

### Wading cautions

Wade fishing in winter or otherwise icy water, such as below bottom-release dams, brings the added concern of hypothermia. Not only does this chilling and possibly killing lowering of the body core temperature compound the dangers of falling in, but a numb and cold angler who stands too long, too deep in waders in a frigid flow may have trouble getting back to shore. Take a break and warm up before you get to that point; the fish will wait. Remember to wear your life jacket while wading in cold water.

Impoundments bring another caution to wading, if they generate hydroelectric power. The river level downstream of the dam may rise quickly when water is released to run the turbines. Before entering the river, look for signs saying how often and when the water releases take place, how fast the water comes up, how deep it gets, and when it recedes. The signs should also tell you if a warning horn or whistle sounds, signaling you to get to shore immediately.

Small steps are the rule when wading, and if you're fishing as you go, that's all you'll want to take anyway. Pay attention to your angling, but stay aware of where your feet are planted and where the next move will take you. It's not "wimpy" to back out of a questionable wading situation, and no one will laugh at you for staying dry. ☐

