

FLY FISHERMAN

EARLY-SEASON • 1979

Volume 10 • Number Five

May • Price \$1.75

*How to wade safely
and effectively to broaden
your fly-fishing enjoyment*

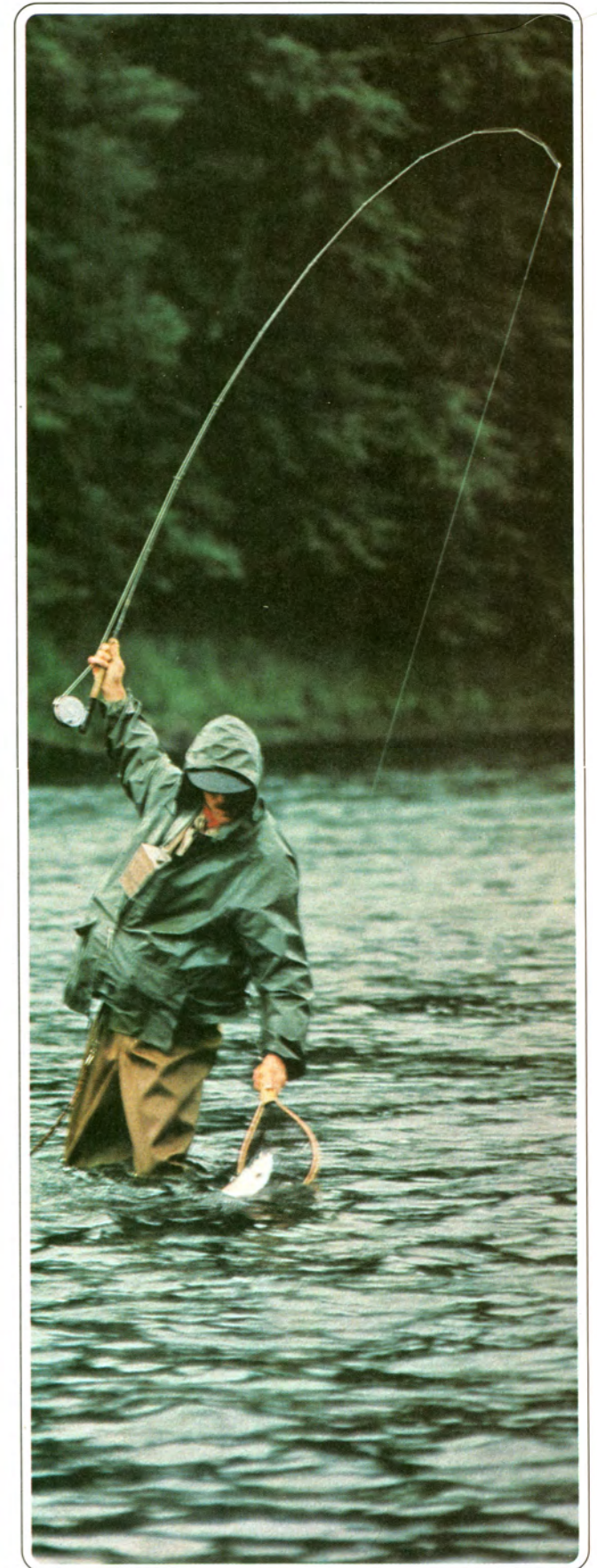
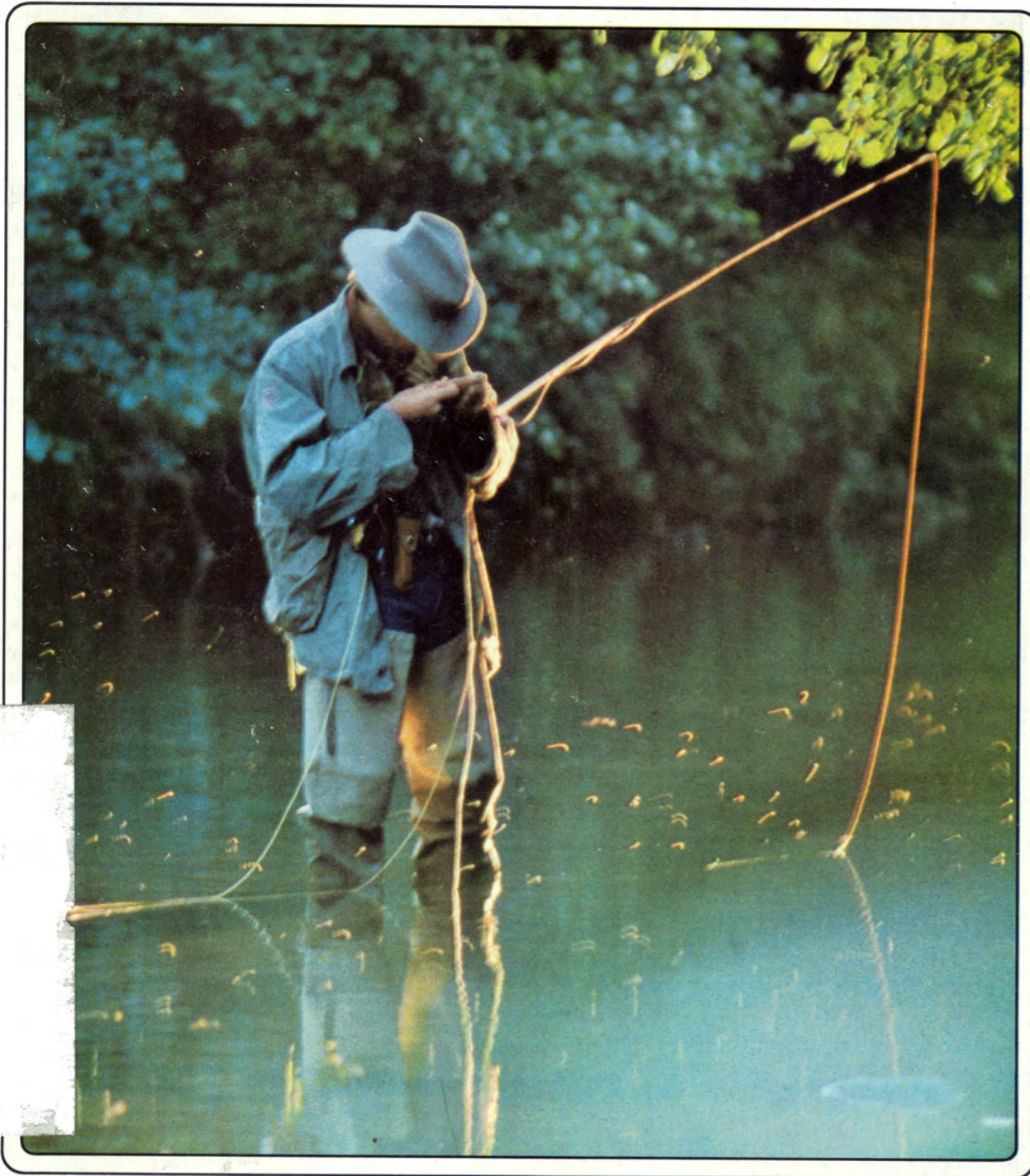
Wading Techniques

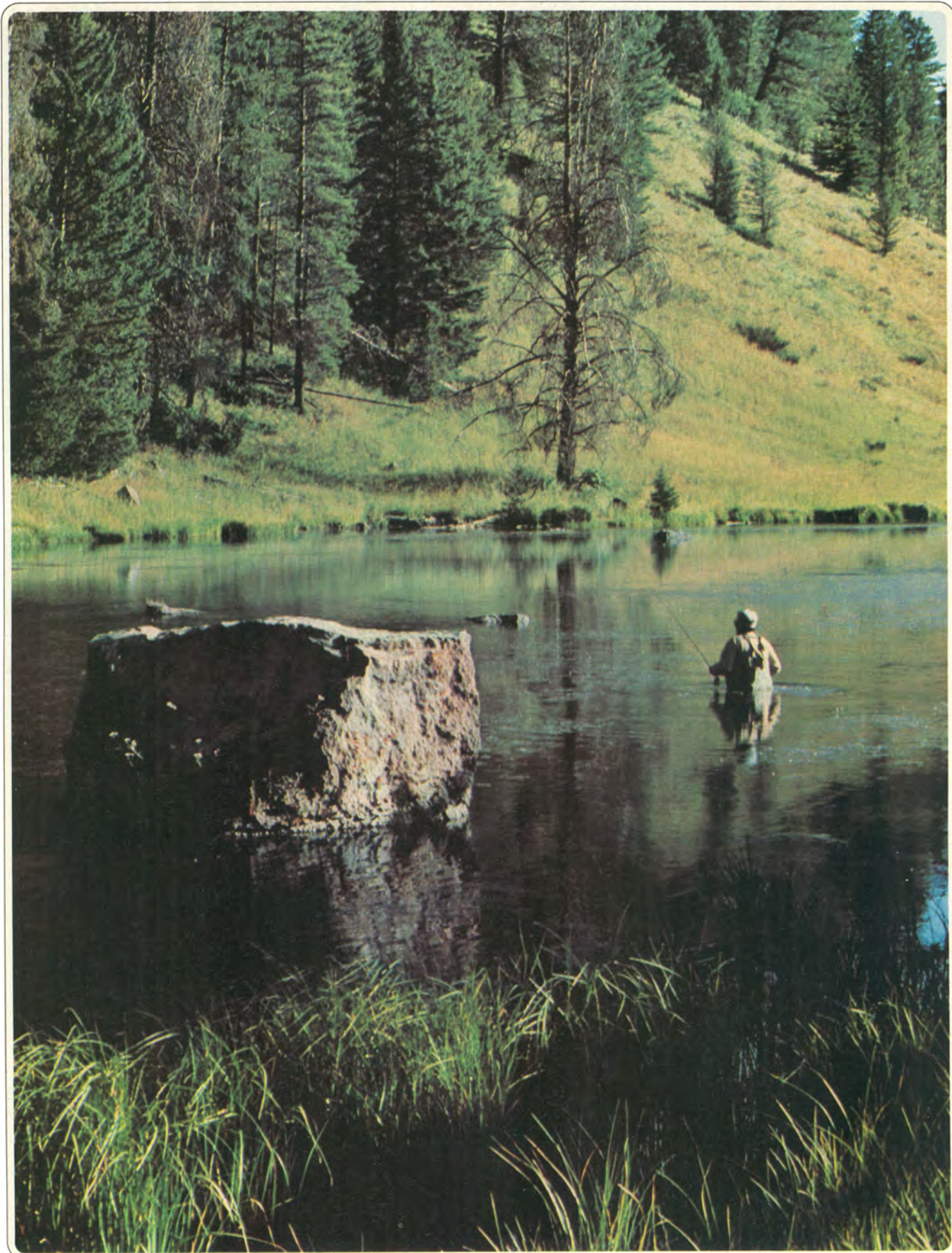
ANDY PUYANS
AND
RALPH KANZ

ONCE YOU HAVE chosen a set of waders with the proper fit and obtained the other necessary equipment for safe wading, you still require an understanding of safe wading practices. Most people don't seem to consider safety when approaching waters they are going to wade. However, if you wade safely you are less likely to spook fish: Stealth is a natural result of safe wading practices. If you are overly aggressive you may actually scare more fish than you catch because you wade through areas that should be fished. Not all fish are on the other side of the stream. And also there are certain wading situations in which you can actually be taking your life in your hands, when one little slip can prove fatal. Unfortunately, too many people wade in dangerous locations without even considering the possible consequences.

We have one important axiom concerning wading: Be a chicken. Chickens seldom drown. If you are unsure of the safety of a particular situation, don't take any chances. Your life is more important than catching a fish. While there is no substitute for experience, caution can make up somewhat for a lack of it.

ANDY PUYANS and RALPH KANZ contributed the first of two wading stories to the previous issue of FFM. The first article dealt with equipment, and this second article deals with technique.





This angler is fishing in a weed-choked spring creek in the Rockies. This slow-flowing stream with a sand-and-pebble bottom can be properly waded using waders with lug soles. John Randolph photo.

Wading . . .

The basic wading technique described below should be used whenever and wherever you wade, in moving water or stillwater. When walking, the heel is normally the first part of the foot to strike the ground, but when wading this can be a big mistake. Weight should not be put on the heel but concentrated on the ball of the foot. In addition to weight placement, the method of shifting weight from one foot to the other is very important. To wade properly, one foot should slide along the bottom, the toe searching and feeling for obstacles. This searching step should not be too long, for too long a step can lead to loss of control. While one foot is sliding forward, the other should be firmly planted with most of your weight concentrated on the ball of this anchor foot. Once the searching foot has found a firm hold, you should shift your weight to that foot and slide the originally anchored foot up to it. The anchor foot should then find a firm foothold next to the searching foot. The next step should be executed in the same manner as the first, and the same foot should search on every step. If you choose your right foot to search, it should search on every step, and the left foot should anchor each step. Always take your time and be sure of every foothold. Never hurry. When approaching obstacles, always wade around them.

When wading properly, you don't create waves that could warn a fish of your presence. It doesn't matter where you are fishing, because in both fast and slow waters there is the possibility of creating waves. If you will move your knee forward first, with minimal raising, this movement will place the toe in a better searching position as well as reducing the chance of waves. In addition to moving your leg correctly, taking your time will reduce the chances of excessive water disturbance. Don't charge; be sure of every step, and you will be less likely to take a spill. There are times when you will fall or slip even though you wade carefully. Some rocks are not as solid as they might seem, and your commitment of weight can suddenly cause a firm foothold to disappear. Even the best of waders have occasional problems.

Now that we have an understanding of the basic wading technique, there are some modifications that need to be made when wading in moving water. First, you should always try to stay sideways to the current. When you are sideways to the current your body is affected less by the current's force than when facing into it. Our basic wading technique employs the *downstream* foot as the searching foot, and the upstream foot as the anchor. Wading this way, the upstream leg makes a current-break for the downstream leg to search in. You can lean into the current while your weight is concentrated on the anchor foot and the searching foot is working below. Once the downstream foot finds a good hold, plant it firmly and concentrate your weight on it. Now bring the upstream anchor foot even with the downstream foot. Keep your steps small and well controlled. Working a slight down-current angle is much easier than working up or across, and conservation of energy can be important if you are going to fish in a strong current all day. Using the current to your advantage can be important. Avoid wading directly upstream whenever possible because of the energy it requires. Moving directly down current may seem easy, but loss of control can be a problem because the water forces you to move faster than you should.

A wading staff can act as your third leg to give you extra support in fast water. A staff should always be used on your upstream side when crossing a river. You should lean into the current and put your weight on the staff when you are moving. However, be sure the staff and the upstream anchor foot are planted before moving the downstream searching foot. Once the searching foot finds a firm position, bring the upstream anchor foot even with it. With both feet planted, move the staff to a new position and repeat the procedure.

For normal fishing situations the wading staff should be tied to your upstream side. Your fly line tangling with the wading staff can be a problem when fishing, but the problem can be minimized by placing the staff in the current behind you. In moderate currents the staff can be used on either your upstream or downstream side, but when the cur-

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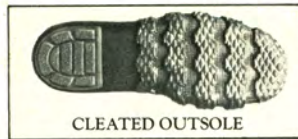
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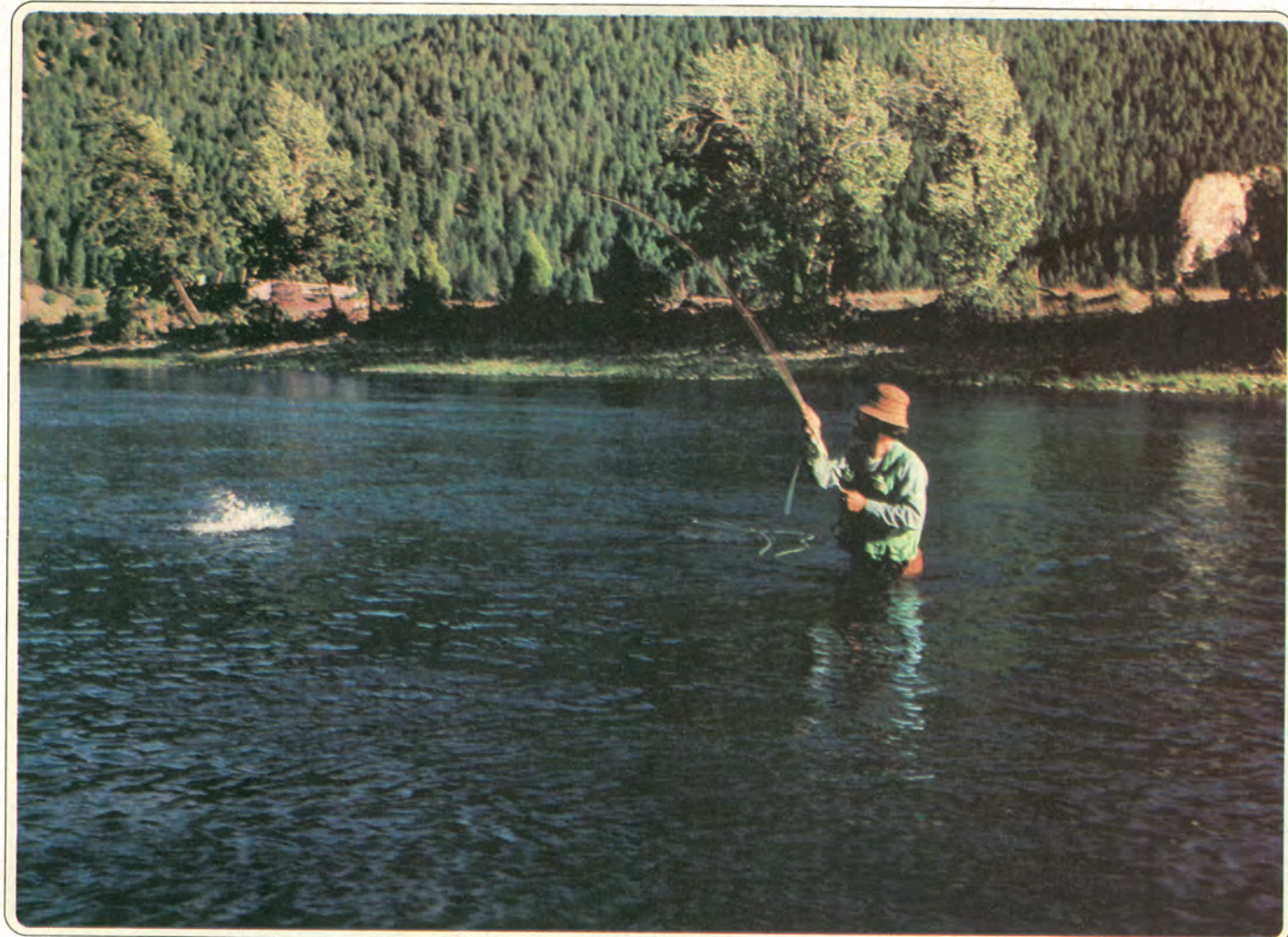
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Wading . . .



Wading rivers such as the Big Hole in Montana, shown here, that have large, slick rocks requires the use of one of the super-traction devices on the market. This angler may not have been able to wade into a position that would have allowed taking this fish without the proper traction devices. John Randolph photo.

you wade on various types of stream bottoms.

THE LUG SOLES FOUND on most boot-foot waders provide the best traction for mud stream bottoms. Mud bottoms are found even in streams that are basically rocky, and often it is necessary to go through mud in order to get to the waters you are going to fish. Watch out for sloping, slippery mud banks in streams, lakes or bays where a drop in water has recently occurred. Sometimes the roughest part of wading is getting to the water. If you encounter mud that your boots sink into slightly, twist your foot as you slowly remove it from the mud. The twisting action will break any suction that might hold the boot. Once in the water, beware of rocks or other debris stuck in the mud. Be-

ware of very deep, soft mud: The searching foot on every step should test the firmness of the mud to estimate the depth to which it will sink. Sometimes in streams there will be gravel lying underneath layers of mud, which makes relatively easy wading. Because mud particles are so fine and require still water to settle, they will normally be found only in slow-water areas. In most streams you are likely to find mud in the backwaters and eddies. Always be cautious of holes in mud, whether they be depressions or soft spots. In some places mud can be so deep that the angler can sink waist-deep or deeper. The biggest problem in this situation is keeping boot-foot waders on your feet and not in the mud. If you are stuck deeply and firmly, you may have to "swim" out of the mud.

SAND AND GRAVEL can occur in almost any speed of stream current you will encounter. In these situations lug soles are all you'll need for sure-footed traction. In lakes and slow-moving reaches of streams with sand and gravel bottoms, the only real problems to be encountered are obstacles. Go around the obstacles—not over them. It is easy, for example, to become careless while wading some of the spring creeks, but spring-creek weedbeds can often hold rocks that can easily trip a careless wader. Currents move sand and gravel easily, so stream-bottom holes form quickly. In very swift waters beware of these materials washing out from under your feet. What was at first a firm foothold, can quickly disintegrate. Sand and gravel can also have a ball-bearing type of action, and although

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Otto Teller (right), and George Griffith are dedicated conservationists. Teller, a world renowned fly fisherman, founded the AMERICAN LEAGUE OF ANGLERS to give fishermen a voice in protecting our fisheries. Griffith, a noted dry fly enthusiast and ardent trout fisherman, saw a need to protect these fish and founded TROUT UNLIMITED in 1959. Sunset salutes these men for their outstanding efforts.



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Wading . . .

you are standing on the bottom, the upper layers of the bottom may be moving down current — and your feet right along with them. Behind rocks in fast flows, sand and gravel will sometimes deposit, creating easy footholds in otherwise tough wading areas. Watch out for sand that has filled in over other types of material. We have seen this in tidewaters of rivers when a thick layer of kelp has washed into the river and a layer of sand has filled in over the kelp. The kelp under the sand starts to decompose, and when you step on what appears to be a sound layer of sand, your feet sink two feet into rotting kelp. The smell is not too pleasant!

DIFFERENT-SIZE ROCKS can be found in all types of waters. The wader soles required to hold on rocks vary from felt to some of the super-traction devices we discussed in our first article, "Choosing Waders," which appeared in the previous issue of FFM. For most situations felt will be adequate, but where there is moss or mud on the

rocks you will need something to cut through and grab on the rocks. Often the edges of streams can have rocks that are muddy and slick, making access to the water difficult. The slower-moving waters, where you tend to concentrate less on your wading, can be the worst areas for moss and mud.

Rounded medium- to small-size rocks create another unique wading problem. When you get good traction on this type of bottom, the rocks can literally roll out from under your feet. When approaching large rocks, you should simply wade around them, but some streams are composed almost totally of bowling-ball-size rocks that you cannot wade around. When wading on these rocks you will stumble, even if you do get good traction, because you are rolling every rock you step on. The solution is to root one foot around and try to get it underneath the rocks, actually rolling them away to secure your footing.

Some streams will have mixtures of sand, gravel and assorted-size rocks. In this situation try to wade the areas that are composed of the smallest particles. Beware of rocks with

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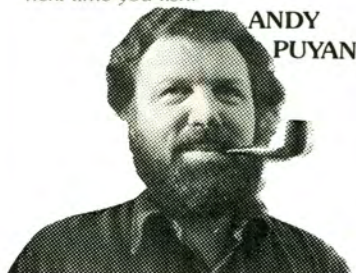
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Wading . . .

gravel under them: They may not be firmly seated and could roll over easily. Again, you should get underneath the rocks and roll them aside in your search for firm footing. Working down between larger rocks is another way to find firm footholds, but be careful that you do not wedge your foot in so it becomes stuck. If you take a spill with a foot stuck between two rocks, the results can be very damaging to you.

Soapstone and lava rock are some of the nastiest wading bottoms on which to maintain traction. The sandals that use caulk-type spikes seem to work best on these rocks because the caulks penetrate the pits and soft spots in the rock. Slate and shale are other types of rocks that tend to be very slick. For these rocks the sandals with aluminum bars seem to provide the most traction.

THE BEST PLACE TO CROSS a stream will vary depending on water depth and current speed. On streams with slow pools that are not too deep, crossing in the pools will be easiest. However, many large streams with fast-flowing water have conditions that prevent this; in these situations you should cross at the top of a riffle, just below the tailout of a pool. This area generally has the firmest footing and the least current velocity and will usually offer you the safest crossing.

Even though you are careful when wading, occasionally the desire to go a little bit farther often gets you into difficult positions. What are the warning signals that tell us we could be headed for trouble? The main indicator of potential trouble is loss of control—you cannot move with the same authority and confidence you should be able to. The first thing to do when you feel out of control is—if possible—stop and evaluate what is happening. If you feel that to continue is not the proper course of action, then you need to either turn around or back out. Turning around can be the toughest part of wading, because if you are in a current, you will end up facing it as you turn. The turn needs to be made with a great deal of caution and care. Turn slowly in the current and be sure your feet are planted and you have firm an-

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chors every time you move. Do not try to move all at once; take a number of steps to do it, slowly turning into the current (facing upstream) and coming around sideways to the current once again. Backing out of the current means just what it says, but be very careful in doing it. Take your time, and carefully plant every step.

If you reach a point where you have gone through the worst wading but need to return through the same area, there are a number of things to remember. First, stop and rest to regain your strength, and while doing this see if there might be a slightly easier path to follow on the return. Quartering downstream will be the safest way to return. Don't take too much of a downstream angle, or you might lose control and take a spill.

Most serious wading problems seem to start when you are having a little bit of trouble and make a hasty decision about solving it. If you will take the time to solve the little problem, you may very well prevent the big one.

Even the best waders will take an occasional spill when they commit themselves to a foothold that ends up being less than solid. What should you do when you fall in? The first rule is *do not panic*. Try to stay under control and not expend energy floundering or fighting the current. Try to ride with the current and quarter toward safer waters or the shore. Do not try to fight the current; you will get nowhere. If you are wearing flotation equipment and take a fall, relax for a moment and then work your way toward safer areas.

WADING CAN BE VERY enjoyable and add immensely to your fishing pleasure, but you need to be equipped properly and to use the correct wading techniques. Above all do not drown. To quote Milford "Stanley" Poltroon: "Drowning not only causes stream pollution but vexes remaining family members who must bear the responsibility for the disposal of the waterlogged fisherman's unused worms, tackle, and so forth. The lesson this teaches is *be considerate of others*; do not drown. Or, if you must do so, pick a water inhabited by chub and carp, rather than good gamefish."

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