



Enough for one man?

# Is it any good in the back of the cupboard?

Text & Photos: Miki Äikäs

A good friend of mine is going to start fishing for salmon. He asked me a bunch of questions about the gear and flies: what is really necessary and what might not be all that important; what would be a good rod; what kind of reel he should get; and what kinds of flies he ought to use?

I wanted to give him honest answers to all his questions. This made me contemplate on these things.

Fly fishermen often have an urge to get new equipment even though they might not necessarily need any. They fill their boxes with newly tied flies, out of which only a fraction might ever get wet. Especially in salmon fishing, flies and the gear are often discussed on an almost hallowed level, and as new products hit the market we many times see the same advertising slogans the manufacturers attempt to sell their stuff to us poor anglers. It is possible to get a beginner salmon fisher confused even with much less hype, and even the more experienced anglers might face difficulties keeping up with the flood of new products. It is nevertheless true that the development of different equipment has been staggering, and for example the thought of pulling on the sweaty old neoprene waders in the summer heat feels extremely unpleasant these

days. Yet, the same neoprene waders still remain an excellent option when the waters are cold.

I have been pondering on this issue of gear and reached a decision not to buy anything I don't really need. The basic question is this: should a beginner or hardened salmon fisherman run headlong after new gear, or is a bunch of new stuff always better than the proven and functioning old stuff?

Let's start with the fisherman's arguably most important tool: the rod.

The development of fly rods, the two-handed ones in particular, through wooden, cane, bamboo, and glass fiber blanks to the current basic graphite rod has been amazing. When the first graphite rods hit the market several decades ago, they made a fast breakthrough. That was understandable, because the new material was clearly cheaper and faster to manufacture in large quantities than the hand-crafted wooden rods. Graphite's lightness and durability were also something new, not to mention the various possibilities to modify the action of the blank.

In my opinion, bamboo and other handmade rods are a chapter of their own, and due to my nearly nonexistent experience about them it is useless for me to ponder on them more profoundly, so let's concentrate on graphite rods.

In the course of my personal salmon fishing career I have tried out hundreds of two-handed rods. These days it is already difficult to find a poor rod, but fifteen years ago there were still big differences between different rods. When, for example, G Loomis brought their IMX fibre rods to these northern reaches, I was among the first ones to get the chance to try them out. The 15" IMX was a staggering experience after the British "old school" rods I had owned before that. I fished for years with the IMX and brown-blanked Sage rods, and when the inspiration for many other rod models, the GLX, arrived, I started using that one. I still think that this groundbreaking rod is one of the best fifteen-footers to this day.

I think the period when nothing revolutionary happened on the rod front was surprisingly long, in fact. A few years back, however, something happened and certain rod manufacturers took a leap forward. Each of them had their own tricks to cut the weight of the rods, and the diameters of the blank appeared to shrink visibly.

I could pick as an example the Loomis/ Shimano Asquith series, where the new Spiral X- technique has dropped dozens of grams of weight in comparison to the same manufacturer's previous series.





Too many flies to choose. Maybe this one is the Right one? ▲

Other brands also improved their product development radically, making their new series really light and pleasant to use.

Now new fibres are entering the market and the rumours have it that still lighter rods are on their way to the hands of the fishermen.

If you fish for salmon for a week a year and own a rod that you think is a good one, most importantly one that feels good in the hands, is durable and even happens to have an even somewhat reliable guarantee, there's not much point to go running headlong after the newest products. Of course, a new rod is always a new rod, but usually one of the "better rods" is also an expensive one.

In that situation I'd rather spend my money on the fishing.

But if you fish all summer long, it is only understandable that you require the best possible performance from your gear.

The best is not always the most expensive and the newest on the market – rather, the kind that suits your taste the best.

When I was offered a new rod to try out a few years back, the first casting motion in the garage was nothing special. When I went to the shore a few days later to try the rod out for real, it felt really good right from the first cast. Having now fished with it for a couple of seasons I can say that my old rod lies almost completely forgotten in the cupboard. Had I felt that the new rod wasn't suited to me, I wouldn't have bought it just because it was brand new.

The new rods have had no impact on the number of fish I catch.

If you want to look for downsides of new and lighter rods, they might be their durability and, of course, the price. But that also is something that's relative, because there is no real way to measure rod durability. Personally I believe it is impossible to make the rod blank

infinitely more narrow without loss in its durability. With the new fibres and blanks the lightness and action of the rods can be made more pleasant, but time will tell whether the light and narrow rods will endure stress the same way the older, stronger and weightier rods do.

To return to the question of whether a new rod is always better than an old one, I would say that the fishing line used with the rod and the caster's style and skills still play the largest role in this play. I think a good new rod will aid even a beginner to perform better and learn faster, but a new rod will not solve all problems. Not everybody learns to cast excellently, no matter how wonderful the rod is.

The fact is that the salmon pays no heed to new equipment, so usually the equipment are the fisherman's compulsory or voluntary purchases. Longer casts could speak in favour of buying a new rod, but if the money



Well served Hardy Perfect. Still going strong. ▲

spent on the rod diminishes the budget reserved for the actual fishing, what good is the rod standing in the back of the cupboard?

**Line repository?**

I think the reels that can be used on Spey rods can simply be divided into categories as simple as old/classic reels versus modern reels.

Personally, I admit to being a staunch admirer of classic reels, but I've got nothing against the modern ones, either.

I have held many a reel in my hands, and only the most enjoyable have remained. My reels are no collectors' items; I fish with them all the time. I like the look of the old reels and don't want to replace them with modern ones.

For example the old Hardy Perfect reels are still great, in my opinion, and they produce just as many fish as a state-of-the-art modern reel.

I recall a time on a salmon river when, for some reason, a salmon accepted my fly. When I finally managed to struggle the fish on shore, its gills were badly torn and bloodied. I knew it would be pointless to put it back in the river and decided to kill it with a blow on the head. Despite the high water and deep shore I succeeded in pulling the fish on the grass, but there was nothing like a rock or other substitute for a priest within reach. First I tried to hit the fish with my fist, but that led only to pain in the knuckles. I couldn't come up with any options, so finally I unscrewed my old Perfect from the rod and banged the salmon dead with it. I find it hard to imagine some new, modern reel enduring similar abuse. Of course, that is in fact not the intended use for a fly reel...

Thinking about these two groups, especially as regards salmon fishing,

the look of a reel and the status surrounding it mean a lot to many people, but in the end the only truly important criterion for reels is their reliability. For someone, reliability may mean a completely even drag, small initial friction or something similar.

My criteria for a reliable reel are simple: it must have a brake that never gets stuck – in any situation – and it must always behave in the same way whether the circumstances are hot, cold, wet, or dry.

Neither do I want to use a reel with too many small and precise parts that are impossible to replace if they break. Another bonus is easy maintenance on the shore.

A big part of a good reel is spool capacity. Oftentimes, fighting a fish results in a situation where the line is spooled in fast and carelessly and the casting line in a sense fills the spool too quickly.





◀ Slippery soles and rocky bottom can make wading hard.

Sometimes you need a right kind of vehicle to get to the right place. ▼



When the fish is pulled near the shore and it is making its last dives towards deeper water, a badly spooled line often comes from the reel jumpily and in the worst case gets stuck in the reel and will not straighten. The result is a lost fish, a broken leader, or even a broken rod.

The weight of the reel has an incredibly big impact on the rod action. Waving the rod in the shop, one gets some idea of its action, but I think the real action is not revealed before the real situation, when the reel is already on the rod. Some like a heavier reel and feel that it brings the blank action lower on the rod, while some prefer their reels light.

Both have their benefits.

Personally, I prefer a bit heavier reels on longer rods, but moving from 15 feet to 12 feet rods I feel the reel should no longer be heavy. The action suffers on those shorter two-hander rods when the weight of the reel pulls the action of the blank too low.

The most important thing in a functioning combination is the balance where the rod, the reel, and the line work together harmoniously.

Large arbor reels are the favourites of many anglers. In them, the spooling may be a bit faster and the running line maybe stays straighter. In traditional reels, the line is in smaller coils, so some more memory may develop in comparison to a large arbor reel and the spooling might be slower. In many S-shape handle reels the reeling has transmission that speeds up the reeling nicely.

Many fishermen take along two sets of gear when they go fishing. In my case, those sets are “similar”, so have acquired a few reels meeting the same criteria.

New, modern reels are generally lighter than old ones, but precisely in the reel department a new reel is not necessarily as good as an old one. It is wise to buy a good reel that becomes a long-time companion, whose good and less good qualities become familiar to the fisherman over time.

The initial question about the differences between old and new reels indeed brings out strong opinions. A brake of Formula One class strength is not necessary in salmon fishing, but if

someone wants it, why not get it? If the old reel is functioning and reliable, has sufficient line capacity and is in good balance with the rod, getting a new one is not necessarily relevant.

### Fishing lines

Fishing lines have developed dramatically over the past decade, at least in terms of their casting properties. Despite all the development, there are still some old lines that I like to use, because they fish so well.

*Talking about how different lines fish, for example the old 550-900 grain lines are still some of the best fishing lines.*

Comparing the new generations shooting heads with their predecessors in general, they really are a light-year ahead of the so-called old school lines. The makers have truly known what they're doing, and modern lines are really balanced and easy to cast. Many of them even fish really well.

At some point in this development curve somebody obviously realized that in a good line the weight distribution has an important role. While the weight in earlier lines was distributed along too long a length of line, they were hard to cast and needed a lot of length to provide enough mass for the rod to handle.

In modern shooting heads most of the weight is in the back part of the line, so that mass that doesn't lie in the water pulls the anchor and fly into motion.

Talking about how different lines fish, for example the old 550-900 grain lines are still some of the best fishing lines. They may not be as easy to cast, but when you need to go deep, they will go there. In certain deep and strong currents they are also good at slowing the pace.

The good qualities of modern shooting heads are in my opinion

easy castability, fast line changes, and versatile sink rates. On the other hand, if you want to strip all the way to the leader, it is not as easy with a shooting head than with a whole line, or a line with a fixed running line.

The downside of the new lines is the price.

Looking at the line sink rates, there's an almost limitless variety of options. However, in salmon fishing it is possible to cope with a reasonable number of lines. I don't think it is a good idea to get lost in the line jungle, especially if you already own lines suited to your own rod. Shooting heads equipped with loops are easy to take along, and it is likewise easy to change them.

If, for example, I look at my own fishing, I manage most of the season with a few basic lines. A floating belly with an Inter tip is certainly the line I use the most in normal conditions. Another good one is float-inter-2 that I mostly use when fishing with tube flies.

If the current is somewhat stronger or I want to make the line go slower, Float- inter-4 is an excellent choice.

When using sinking lines, 1-3-5 often seems to work really well.

If you are a beginner, these four lines will very probably get you through the season.

Looking at my own lines, I see I have way too many of them. I simply don't need all of them, but for some reason I almost seem to fall for a new line whenever one comes to the shop. If the contents of my fishing bag, just the lines, were exchanged into currency, I could easily afford a great fishing trip.

Well then, do the new lines produce more fish than the old ones? An extremely difficult question, and somewhat ambiguous. When I used to fish with lines that were nowhere near as easy to cast as the new ones, I caught plenty of fish. Sometimes even better than using the new ones. When there are lots of salmon in the river, they will also take flies. At those times different lines provide more salmon, whether they are new or old.







You'll cope on the river as long as you've got a rod, a reel, a fly line, and a box of flies and a roll of tippet in the pocket of your jacket.

Old but trusty jacket. ►



**In fishing jackets, or rather wading jackets, the material and cut play the most prominent role.**



The fly line is an important thing also in the sense that it is our only link to the fly. Very often we don't see how the fly swims; we can only see and feel the line. In other words, we swim the line that for its part swims the fly.

Castability and ability to produce fish do not necessarily go hand in hand, however.

All in all, new lines are much better compared to the old ones. Myself, I would absolutely not return to the old lines, at least when salmon fishing. I'd gladly take some of the old lines' fishing properties and combine them with the easiness of the new lines. The market will probably never see the perfect fly line, so in this respect the quest seems to continue endlessly.

#### What to wear

Leaking waders, wading jacket that breathes in water, slippery soles in the wading boots, or generally uncomfortable equipment?

Most unpleasant in fishing situations. Good waders are something you should not neglect in any circumstances.

My key criterion for waders is their durability. Breathability is in a way a secondary issue, because it is certainly difficult to make breathing (i.e. thin) waterproof fabric waders sturdy enough. The breathing properties of the waders are secondary anyway, as any waders worn in the heat of the summer will make the lower body suffer.

As the water temperature seldom matches the warm air when fishing for salmon, it is really worthwhile to make sure there is enough clothing underneath the waders. This is indeed sometimes a truly painful subject, because it seems almost impossible to find comfortable undergarments. If you want to avoid getting hot when walking, you ought to leave out the middle layer under the waders, but in that case your prostate will be in big trouble when you return back to wading.

Luckily, modern waders have

many alternatives suited to different situations, but as they cost quite a lot, few people can afford several pairs for different weather conditions. I always pack two pairs, if not three, because I loathe leaking waders. Often the spare pair can also save a fishing buddy's trip.

Talking about modern waders, I think the manufacturers overemphasize the breathability. I feel durability together with good fit would be a better investment, and a few wader manufacturers have indeed gotten well ahead of their competitors in this respect.

In my opinion, the waders must endure normal use for at least three seasons, preferably longer. It happens unfortunately often that the quality is compromised due to production costs and choices of materials. Of course the shops need to have affordable waders next to the expensive ones, but often investing on the waders is a more sensible solution than suffering leaking waders already the first time they are used.

The good old neoprene waders

with fixed boots endured well and were perfect for cold waters. These days, correctly chosen innermost and middle layer garments combined with breathing waders offer even better insulation against cold than neoprene. Still, many fishermen prefer neoprene in really cold waters. The neoprene waders were more durable, but the comfortableness of the new waders is vastly superior to neoprene.

I have glued boots to many of my sock model Gore waders. When the sock parts of the waders have worn and it has no longer been worth it have the sock parts replaced, I have cut the waders around the seams of the Gore fabric and the sock parts and glued thermal boots on them. Actually, my self-made boot waders have worked even better than the shop versions. Even now there's a warm pair of boots in the cupboard, waiting for the next waders. Quite some DIY business, this, but the main thing is personal satisfaction.

In fishing jackets, or rather wading jackets, the material and cut play the most prominent role. If you wear the jacket all the time and also use it to carry stuff around in the pockets, the cut and fit/sturdiness become primary factors. In modern jackets the material is often so thin that when you put a few fly boxes, leaders, and perhaps sunscreen in the front pockets, the jacket sort of hangs on the front and is really awkward to wear. On the other hand, if the main purpose of the jacket is to keep out the rain, to my mind the key properties are that it is waterproof and does not take much space in the rucksack.

Over the years, I have had a good number of jackets, but the only one that has persisted while the others have fallen apart is an old Hardy oilcloth jacket. This worn jacket is no longer waterproof, but it is the only product that has lasted in my use for three decades. The best qualities of a "tin coat" like that are that it is warm, durable, and most of all, gives you a great feeling when you pull it on. You can wrap

it in a bundle and sit on it on the rocks to protect the seat of the pants. It also endures sparks off a campfire and keeps the rain out for about five minutes.

I've no longer greased the jacket in years, but I like it more than any of the new jackets.

On rainy days it is better for me to leave the Hardy in the cottage and to wear Goretex.

Wading boots can be even surprisingly different. Some boots simply fit the foot better than others. Also the sensory qualities when walking on slippery stones is of prime importance. Some boots are simply so stiff they are really difficult to walk in. The selection of the sole material is also a problematic issue for many. The felt sole still remains an excellent choice after various rubber compound soles conquered the market more than a decade ago. I've worn rubber-soled boots for years, but I still prefer the felt sole for example in waders with a fixed boot.



At some fishing locations, felt is not a welcome material, because it keeps moist for a long time and the organizers of the fishing are afraid of any undesirable guests that might get either in the water or the bottom vegetation from the wet boots.

To summarize this section, I would say that it doesn't pay to go cheap on the waders. They are a fly fisherman's basic tool that have to be in order.

The purchase of the jacket, again, depends on the intended use. If the main concern is staying dry, the best choice is a waterproof jacket that doesn't take much space in the rucksack and dries quickly after the rain.

If you also stash all kinds of things in the jacket pockets and hope it will keep the water out all day, a more expensive jacket is a good investment. The sturdiness, fit and cut in general take precedence in this case.

Feeling-wise, an oilcloth jacket is a splendid choice, but useless in the rain.

Flies

This topic always brings out the emotions and is really a completely endless area based purely on opinions and one's own experience, as of course are also the other issues handled in this article.

Back in the day it used to be said that a fly, or a new pattern, should not be named before it had certifiably produced fifty salmon. These days I don't think this is true anymore, and many fishermen invent the weirdest of names for their flies. Truth to be told, it must be said that most modern salmon flies are always at least loosely based on some old pattern that has over time been modified into something new.

Most modern flies are patterns that a fisherman who for one reason or another is appreciated by other fishermen brings to the attention of the others, intentionally or not. I would claim that many patterns swimming in the depths of the Internet with the reputation of a true predator are flies

whose developer has caught a few fish with and brought it to the attention of us others through the traditional or social media.

Of course there are flies among them that just work better than some other patterns. However, the salmon will accept a huge variety of flies, so in my opinion, all sectors from the rods, reels, lines, and other equipment have been along on the journey to this happy moment.

*We often make the fly choice too complicated.*

If we think about the choice of fly honestly, we usually choose a fly or a pattern that we have previously succeeded catching fish with. Or we choose a fly that is "known" to work on that river. Emotional ties to a certain material or colour also affect our choices, as do whether we for some reason prefer for example a tube fly as opposed to one tied on a hook.

It is true that some colours and patter are undeniably "better" than others, but it is still necessary to state that it is possible to catch salmon with a wide variety of different flies, regardless of the place, weather conditions, or time.

The most important reason for a given fly's general success is probably the fact that very many anglers use that very fly, so that it gets to spend a lot of time in the water.

What, then, makes a good salmon fly? The answer must be that it is the one that brings a lot of fish.

For me, any fly I catch a salmon with is a good salmon fly. But of course there are other criteria for a good salmon fly, like that it doesn't get tangled and keeps its balance, swimming in the water. Of course, the choice is also affected by the facts that the fly is well tied and looks

pleasant to the eye of the beholder.

Nevertheless, it ought to be kept in mind that the salmon don't give a shit about how many turns the rib has and in which direction it is tied on, or whether the wing has some special material.

*-We choose the fly, not the salmon.*  
Tube flies are popular these days, and I also use them a lot. I also like classic flies and regularly fish with them alongside the modern ones. Green Highlander, Silver Grey and Black

Doctor have given me a lot of fish over the years, and in a certain kind of stream the classic fly works wonderfully.

I find that the good qualities of the classic flies are that they don't get tangled during the casts and generally swim straight almost all the time. The weaknesses of large flies are their weight, and the

fact that there are not many good classic salmon flies to be bought anywhere. I am now talking about the kinds of flies fulfilling the criteria I myself demand from a fishing fly.

As I personally love tying flies, it is only natural that my fly boxes get filled during the long winter evenings. But how many of those flies get tied to the end of the tippet during the season? A fraction.

People who do not tie flies themselves, or don't have time for it, are often at the mercy of us obsessive tiers. Many order flies, and I think they can even appreciate them more than us who spend all our evenings sitting in front of the vise.

Thinking about what I do myself, the flies I tie for myself are repetitions of the same familiar patterns I then fish with all summer long. But of those I take from the vise, only a few get to fish.

On the other hand, lots of flies off my vise go to other fishermen who also use them a lot.

We often make the fly choice too complicated. Maybe it would be better to concentrate on the fishing itself and choose a fly meeting the criteria we expect from a fly, instead of choosing it on the basis of the latest fads.

Different versions of same patterns. Classics tied by Jarkko Reinola. ►



In conclusion

To sum up all of this and to answer my friend, who is about to enter the world of salmon fishing?

Use your head and the knowledge of your friends. Don't run headlong into buying stuff you probably won't even need.

Try out rods every chance you get; test different lines with the rods, also when wading.

Think about what you want from your reel: brake, endurance, hi tech, good looks, or what?

Buy fly lines sensibly; you won't probably need a hundred in order to go salmon fishing.

Invest in staying dry and warm; when the body feels good, the fishing feels good as well.

Tie or buy flies that are known to catch fish. Limit you selection sensibly into a few patterns in different sizes.

Invest your money rather on fishing trips than in equipment lying in the cupboard.

In this world and the situation we live in, we simply spend too much in useless paraphernalia we really don't even need.

I am now talking about all avenues of life.

Many beginning or even experienced salmon fishermen fall too

easily for new things, many of which will be recycled already after the first fishing trip.

I can well understand that the manufacturers and merchants must make a living in this business, but would it be sensible to invest in quality and durability instead of mass sales, even if that doesn't agree with the current mode of trading?

An old friend of mine said decades ago that salmon fishing is a gratifying hobby in the sense that you'll cope on the river as long as you've got a rod, a reel, a fly line, and a box of flies and a roll of tippet in the pocket of your jacket. ●