



Fly Fishing

By Todd Tanner

It's time for my annual gear review and I'd like to point out that while a closet full of top-notch equipment won't make you a better angler, it definitely pays to fish with the best you can afford. As a wise man once said, life is too short for lousy rods and leaky waders.

Simms G4 Pro Stockingfoot Waders (\$499.95)

I don't know about you, but I like to stay dry and comfortable on the water. The

G4s are Simms' flagship waders, and they lived up to their lofty reputation. I beat on these waders constantly, jumping in and out of drift boats, sliding down rocky banks and pushing through sharp-edged river ice. They were impeccable. If there are better waders around, I haven't run across them. The G4s boast 5-layer Gore-Tex Pro Shell fabric technology, zippered, fleecelined hand warmer pockets, and a ton of thoughtful features. Made in the USA, and highly recommended.

Abel Super Series Quick Change Reel (\$760) If there's been a knock on Abel over the years, it was that you

Elegantly crafted rods, silky smooth reels, a whisper-soft line plus waders, clothing and a fly-tying kit . . . all new and all top drawer.

needed a coin or a screwdriver to remove your spool. Now, with the new Quick Change, you can change spools instantly, without tools. I took a QC 7/8 up to British Columbia last summer, and it performed perfectly. I liked the reel's bulletproof construction, its powerful

drag system and its high-quality workmanship and materials. The Abel QC isn't inexpensive, but it's worth every penny. If you're looking

for a salmon, steelhead or bonefish reel that's made here in the U.S. and built to take years of serious abuse, the Abel Quick Change should be right at the top of your list.

St. Croix 9-foot, 4-weight Legend Elite Fly Rod (\$440) I'd never fished a St. Croix fly rod until this past December. If the Legend Elite 4-weight is any indication, I've been missing out on some great rods. St. Croix's website focuses on their Integrated Poly Curve tooling technology, their slim-profile ferrules, their high-modulus/high strain SCV graphite and their Advanced Reinforcing Technology. I can't speak to all the high-

St. Croix produces its four-piece Legend Elite in 12 freshwater and 7 saltwater models, all with premium, high-modulus graphite blanks.

tech jargon, but I can tell you that this is one sweet, smooth-casting, high-performance fly rod. Even better, it sells at a very attractive price. This rod is quick, it's accurate, it throws gorgeous loops and it's made in the USA. I don't know how you can go wrong with this St. Croix. It's a winner.

Patagonia Stormfront Duffel (\$400) So you have a trip planned and you need a waterproof duffel that will handle anything and everything you can throw at it, from airplanes to rafts to sharp sticks. This is your bag. At 31 by 14 by 14 inches, the Stormfront holds a ton of gear, while the waterproof zipper, welded seams, removable shoulder straps, haul handles, compression straps and double-layer construction help guarantee excellent performance. I beat on this bag. I dragged it over snow, ice and rocks. I let it bounce around in the back of my pickup truck for hundreds of miles. I dumped it, full of gear, into the river. It proved itself rock solid and waterproof – just what you'd expect from Patagonia.



Patagonia Nano Puff Pullover (\$150) I honestly don't know where to start with the Nano Puff. It's light. It's warm. It's comfortable. It sheds water. It packs down to almost nothing. Frankly, it's a killer piece of clothing and I wish I had three of them – one for fly fishing, one for bird hunting and one for wearing around the house. I actually took a Nano Puff and stuffed it under the kitchen faucet, then opened the tap up for a minute or so. Two seconds later, it was dry to the touch. This is an incredibly versatile piece that you can wear with a shell or by itself. My only question is whether such a lightweight pullover will prove to be durable. If it does – and I won't be able to make that call for another year or so – the Nano Puff won't just be a Home Run; it will be a Grand Slam.

Mystic M-Series 9-foot 3-inch, 5-weight Fly Rod (\$399) Every once in a while,

you pick up an unfamiliar fly rod and enjoy a pleasant surprise. Mystic is a relatively new company, but you'd never guess it from casting this 5-weight. It's smooth and accurate, with an easy-to-like progressive action. In short, the M-series 5-weight is everything you'd want in a trout rod. I fished this Mystic on several Montana rivers, throwing everything from small dries to streamers, and it was a real sweetheart. My only concern is that the cork grip might prove a bit stout for folks with smallish hands. Overall, though, this is a handsome, well-designed fly rod that's a pleasure to cast. At \$399, it's also one heck of a value.

Sitka Coldfront Jacket (\$529) Sitka is known for their truly outstanding sporting



From top: Tom Morgan handcrafted this nifty 8 1/2-foot, 4-weight, one of only 60 fly rods he builds in a year. • Abel's Quick Change reel features bulletproof construction, a powerful drag system and top-quality materials. • Lightweight but strong, Matrix sunglasses from HiDefSpex come with a lifetime guarantee against lens breakage.



gear, and the Coldfront is no exception. If you're heading to Montana, Alaska, British Columbia, Labrador, Russia or Argentina – or anywhere else where you're liable to run into nasty weather – this is the jacket you'll want. Yes, it boasts Gore-Tex Softshell technology with a DWR finish, and yes, it has a microfleece lining, and yes, it features laser-cut and micro-taped seams. But at the end of the day we're looking for performance, not marketing hype. This jacket performs. It handles wind, rain, snow, sleet and freezing rain the same way Derek Jeter handles a double play or Tiger Woods handles a 9 iron. The Coldfront will tame just about anything Mother Nature throws in your direction. It's serious protection for serious anglers.

Ross Evolution EL Reel (\$245 to \$315) The Ross Evolution is one of my all-time favorite reels and its updated version, the Evolution EL, seems like a worthy successor to the original. It's light, handsome and features a silky-smooth Teflon-impregnated Delrin drag. Both the frame and the spool are fully machined from a 6061-T6 proprietary aluminum alloy, and the EL's spool cap, escapement cover and drag knob are also aluminum. The Evolution EL is visually striking in a sculpted, minimalist sort of way. I'm not quite ready to retire my old Evolution, but it was a pleasure fishing the new one. It's a terrific reel at a very reasonable price.

Teko Organic Merino Wool Socks (\$18 - \$25) I hate fishing with cold feet, and Teko's organic, chlorine-free merino wool socks are warm, soft, and oh-so-comfortable. They're made in North Carolina from shrink-resistant, chlorine-free merino wool and dyed with non-toxic dyes. Do yourself a favor and pick up a pair or two. They're exceptional fishing socks.

Cortland 444 Classic Whisper Taper Fly Line (\$59) This new Cortland line is exceedingly supple, with an extra-long front taper. It casts well and lands softly on the water, which makes it a great choice for long leaders, light tippets and small dry flies. I was particularly impressed with how pliable the line stayed in cold water, and how easy it was to get a nice drift with my dry fly.

Cortland's new Whisper Taper is available in both WF (2 to 8-weight) and DT (2 to 7-weight) configurations.

Fishpond Tomahawk Fly Tying Kit (\$169) My old portable fly tying kit consisted of a plastic Tupperware container with lots of stuff jammed inside. With that in mind, it's safe to say that this new fly tying kit from Fishpond has hauled me out of the dark ages and straight into 2010. The Tomahawk is a beauty. There's a ton of room – you can load everything from hooks to hackle to your vise – and it's far more organized than I'll ever be. Just keep in mind that you can carry so much inside that it gets downright hefty. The Tomahawk, which is constructed of both 420 Denier Rip-stop nylon and 1680 Ballistic nylon, is hands-down the nicest portable fly tying kit I've ever run across.

Cloudveil Hellroaring Jacket (\$200) Soft shell jackets are becoming more and more popular with anglers, and this Cloudveil is a dandy. It's lightweight and comfortable, the fabric stretches and breathes, the soft shell blocks wind and handles a light rain with ease, while the articulated fit allows you to move and cast without binding. In short, it's a hell of a nice jacket. The Hellroaring has a DWR water-repellent finish, a bonded fleece lining, zippered handwarmer pockets, two large chest pockets and an oversized rear pocket. Oh, and it's handsome, too. What more could you ask for?

HatEyes Magnifiers (\$29) Okay, it's time to fess up. I'm getting old enough that my close-in vision isn't worth a damn. Fortunately, HatEyes makes a wonderful little magnifier that clips on the brim of my hat and folds out of the way until I need to tie a knot or check on my fly. It boasts both stainless steel construction and optical grade acrylic lenses, and it comes in four different lens powers. This little guy is worth its weight in gold.

Orvis Hydros 10-foot, 7-weight Tip-Flex Fly Rod (\$525) What do you call a 10-foot, 7-weight that throws pretty loops, casts a variety of distances with ease and mends like a champ? An Orvis Hydros. This rod doesn't have all the cosmetic upgrades or weight-shaving hardware of its more expensive Helios

cousins, but it shares much of the proprietary Helios technology and it's a fine fly rod in its own right. If you're a steelheader looking for a rod that loads in close but can still sling a line to the far side of the river, this 7-weight Hydros deserves your serious consideration.

HiDefSpex Matrix Sunglasses (\$279) There are lots of good polarized sunglasses out there, but the HiDefSpex Matrix is a cut above. The frames weigh less than an ounce, while the Polar Varia lenses boost both color and detail, and allow just the right amount of light to pass through. When you add Ballistx Lens Technology for strength and safety, top-notch polarizing, a lifetime guarantee against lens breakage, a Hydrolio coating to repel water and protect against fingerprints, and 100 percent protection from UVA, UVB and UVC rays, you end up with some serious sunglasses. Bottom line, these comfortable, stylish glasses offer excellent on-the-water performance.

Tom Morgan Rodmakers 8 1/2-foot, 4-weight Fly Rod (\$1345) I usually focus on high-end fly fishing gear in this column. Every once in a while, though, I like to include something truly unique – like this Tom Morgan 4-weight. Tom's company only builds 60 or so fly rods a year, but the rods . . . well, they shine. The materials and components are, as you'd imagine, exceptional, and the craftsmanship is superb. But that's only part of it. This is a Henry David Thoreau rod, a Dali Lama rod, a Thomas Merton rod – it has a soul. It is without a doubt one of the sweetest, most transcendent graphite fly rods I've ever cast.

Now don't get me wrong. This little 4-weight won't excel in the wind. It won't handle 80 feet of line. Nor will it impress the high-modulus parking lot casters who hang out at your local fly shop. But if you love throwing small dry flies to rising trout on a warm summer evening, this rod is pure magic.

The last I heard, Tom was taking rod orders for 2012. If your checkbook can handle the \$1,345 price tag, you might want to drop him a note and ask whether this little beauty is right for you. ✨

