

Fly Fishing Leaders

by David Lambert

The fly fishing leader is a necessary and very important component of your equipment – it is the nearly invisible connection between your flyline and the fly. Unfortunately, so much has been written about the superiority of one leader design over another that leader construction has been made to seem difficult and complex.

It shouldn't be that way. Leaders for salt and warmwater are not so complex.

That said, know that fly fishing with bad leader is much like throwing a waterlogged baseball; it often doesn't go where it's supposed to or do what you want it to.

Very experienced fly fishermen have labored long hours to determine the exact combinations of knots and monofilament lengths that will build the optimum leader to deliver your fly to a fish. Many paragraphs are devoted to the leader in fly fishing literature . . . and whole books have been written advocating certain leader constructions over another.

The result of all this, naturally, is to confuse us and generally muck-up the waters with regard to fly line leaders. The construction of leaders has taken on an air of challenge, of difficulty.

Butt Section

Mid Section

Tippet

Frankly that's just not the case. Stated simply, the fly fishing leader is constructed of a (usually) tapered monofilament line which begins with a thicker butt section and reduces in diameter down its length to the tippet (the small end to which your fly is attached). Leaders for most fly fishing situations can be bought from fly fishing stores and catalogs.

Most commercially made leaders are knotless with a 25-, 30-, or 40-lb. test butt section. They taper to different test strengths relative to the type and size of fly they are designed to deliver. A typical redfish leader, for instance, might be a nine-foot length of tapered mono which starts with a 35 or 40-lb. butt section and tapers down to a 10-lb. or 12-lb. test tippet. Leaders for largemouth bass are usually shorter, maybe 7 1/2 feet in length. The tippet section for a smaller freshwater trout leader may be only 2-lb or 3-lb. mono, rated in the 'X' system. Many leaders for sinking lines are straight 3 1/2 –foot lengths of mono.

It's not that confusing.

Fly fishers often construct their own leaders by tying successively thinner lengths of mono together using blood knots or double overhand knots. Hand-made leaders are economical, easy to make, and fun to experiment with. Don't get bogged down in formula and theory if you don't want to.

Here's a simple leader for most saltwater environs. It's particularly good for redfish flies. It's from fly fishing legend Lefty Kreh. Lefty has made a life's study of all aspects of fly fishing, including knots, leaders, and knot break-strengths.

"This leader is great for turning over heavier flies traditionally associated with saltwater fly fishing," Lefty told me a few years ago. "I use only premium grade mono for all my leaders . . . and all sections from the same manufacturer, like Berkeley Big Game or DuPont Super Tough," Lefty said. "I don't recommend stiff mono for butt sections," he warns, "they don't transmit the energy from the fly line to the rest of the leader, and that causes the leader to collapse."

Lefty's Simple 50% Leader

50% butt section, usually 40# test

½ that length in 30#

½ that length in 20#

18-24 inches of tippet (usually 12 or 16 pound)

For a 9 foot leader this would translate into finished leader of 54 inches of 40# knotted to 27 inches of 30 lb, knotted to 14 inches of 20 lb, looped to 18 inches of 12/16 #.

"This formula can be varied slightly and it won't affect the performance or turnover capabilities. Exact measurements aren't necessary," Lefty said.

These lengths produce a 9-foot leader, but remember to add a few inches to each section to allow for loss when you tie them together.

This leader will turn over a big deer hair bug or a beefy, weighted fly beautifully. I tie it now for most of my own fishing uses. Lefty suggests that lengthening or shortening the butt section will provide differing leader lengths for differing conditions.

A couple of items to keep in mind about leaders: 1) They are undoubtedly the weakest element in your fly fishing outfit. Check them often for nicks, casting or wind knots, and abrasions. Replace the bad section. It's easy to lose a good fish to a bad leader. 2) If you build your own leaders, be certain that you've tied the knots correctly and moisten them before you pull them tight. Then check the whole leader for soundness with a few good quick hard tugs, then some long pulls – that's how the fish will test it.