

FOOTWEAR FOR COLLECTORS

by Bruce Gebhardt, Philadelphia, Pa.

Some collectors wear hip or chest waders--boots connected above the crotch and extending up to the waist, or up to the chest. Other collectors wear only sneakers.

The former collectors enjoy a longer collecting season because of protection from the cold. It's possible to buy lined waders, but even unlined ones offer some protection.

Waders also protect against unhealthful or unpleasant water conditions.

The disadvantages of waders are several. They cost a lot to start with, then there is the problem of simple water safety. Waders can fill up with water and drag their wearer to a watery grave. Or, worse, he might have to jettison the waders. Regardless of the rarity of emergency, people wearing waders always have to be aware of wader height vs. water height. (We don't want the water to go over the top and get our little footsies wet, do we?) They end up not fully enjoying one of the theoretical advantages of the waders.

Driving between sites in waders is not a great idea; thus, collectors have to go through agonizingly slow rituals--putting them on at each new site, taking them off afterward. Wading in my sneakers, I've usually developed a complete roster of the site's species list and given pet names to all the fish by the time the wader-wearers get down to the water. How am I supposed to stay polite and appear interested while they repeat the same things I've already done? I yearn to get on to the next site.

Sneaker-clad collectors enjoy convenience, quickness, and comfort. In addition, the author has chronic foot problems that would not permit use of wader boots without extensive padding and cobbling.

This year the writer investigated possible improvements on sneakers without going to waders.

There are special wading shoes developed for fishermen. They correct some of the deficiencies of plain old sneakers. For instance, as sneakers wear down, the tread becomes treacherously slippery, even though the shoes have months of useful terrestrial life left. Further, sneakers always have those stupid holes in them which are difficult or counterproductive to close up. Sand, mud, and gravel pour through. Even if those holes are blocked, substrate material can enter in the lacing area.

L.L. Bean catalogues have occasionally shown what look to be olive-drab high-cut canvas or duck basketball shoes. They go by the brand name of Phoenix Palladium and come from France, but Bean calls them "Pathfinder Approach Boots" for men and women. They appear in some Spring editions. I first saw them in a friend's 1989 Bean catalogue, then didn't find them in mine, received the same time with the same cover. The guy who answered Bean's 800 number had to search a bit to find them. The shoes reappeared in the 1990 Spring book.

The features of these shoes are:

*deep, stiff rubber cleats in place of sneaker tread;

*sides of the tongue are closed off with material so that the tongue is not a separate flap around which sand and mud can pour in;

*laces tie through flaps on each side of the top of the shoe preventing gravel from entering the shoe;

*removable hemp inserts replace the usual sneaker foam insoles; it is thus easier to dry out the inside of the shoe, and the hemp doesn't develop "sneakeroma." Besides, in an emergency, maybe you could smoke the inserts. Just kidding. A disadvantage is that infiltrated sand wears them out.

The rubber cleats seem commendably non-skid. They're high enough to raise your feet above the upper crud in the substrate. While substrate materials do enter eventually (despite shoe height and the closed off tongue slats), it's nothing like what sneakers let in. They dry very quickly.

Drawbacks? Aesthetically--not that olive-drab is so aesthetic--the green tone washed out quickly, leaving a browner color. This causes no problems; it's just puzzling the makers didn't think of it. They could have just made it brown to begin with.

An initially ominous sign was that the rubber piece covering the toe top is shorter than on the average traditional canvas-and-rubber basketball sneaker. Since there's no conventional series of metal grommets in rubber around the laceholes, the combined result is that there's mostly canvas on the toe top. I envisioned my foot being squashed by rocks that fell on it, and expected injury in toeing-over rocks. I'm still conscious of vulnerability, but nothing bad has happened. Perhaps I've subtly changed technique. The toes are made of tough, sticky rubber that seems effective in lifting rocks.

The shoes seem a little klutzy for everyday, non-aquatic use, but that's probably inherent in any shoe with thick rubber cleated tread. The tread shows wear rather easily in everyday

use, but there's still plenty left after a year. In fact, they've become an everyday pair of shoes. Cost: \$42.

Bean also offers some similar-looking American-made shoes. Called "Maine Canoe Shoes" (3322PP, \$26.00), they're tan, and instead of cleats have thick tan rubber soles with curved edges and crosswise grooves. These shoes wouldn't give the traction of the Pathfinder, however, and useful tread life is a question.

Cabela's Fall 1989 catalogue offers a couple types of wading shoes. The Hodgman Lakestream Comfort-Plus Wading Shoe (EK-83042, \$33.95), is a canvas and rubber confection with rubber-cleated tread, similar to Bean's in concept; however, the cleats are much lower in profile, indicating a possibility of early wear-out and less grip. Curiously, the toes seem angled up as on harem slippers; This could cause my tortured dogs some discomfort, but might be OK on decent feet. Maybe the shoes flatten out when a foot's in them, but if they're that flexible they mightn't offer much arch protection for those situations where you have to balance on a sharp rock edge.

There are laces that fit through holes at the bottom and a couple of figure-skate hooks at the top. I'm not certain how the laceholes are set up and whether gravel can seep through the top of the shoes. They have small holes in the side blocked off by fabric on the inside. This probably facilitates drainage. If the fabric is firmly seated, it wouldn't admit substrate. \$33.95.

Orvis, a mail-order firm with retail stores in a few upscale areas, appears to have the same model for \$62. They also have a version of the same shoe with felt sole for the same price. I'm not upscale enough to be on their mailing list, so I can't give you the numbers.

Cabela's has two felt-sole models. I bought a pair of Cabela's Wading Boots (EK-83304, \$36.95), described as their best. The idea of felt soles is strange at first, but one can well imagine that their grip is excellent on slippery rocks. Practice has supported that theory in the few cases when I've used them amid rocks. On muddy banks and certain flat surfaces, however, since flat, they're slippery. Moreover, one would not want to wear such shoes on dry land for fear of wearing them out. They seem quite comfortable.

My preference is for as much canvas on the top and sides of the shoe as possible, except for areas needing protection. Canvas facilitates ventilation and prevents skin problems if you wear the shoes when driving between sites, or driving home a long distance. Even on dry land, high-styled leather/plastic-trimmed "running shoes" or "athletic footwear"--which used to mean just sneakers--cause excessive sweating and possible irritation when moist. Shoes with a lot of leather or plastic on top look like a sure case of athlete's foot when the foot is wet for a long

period of time. The Cabela's Wading Boot I have is coated with leatherlike, presumably plastic topping; the Hodgman is canvas. The other model in Cabela's fall catalogue (EK-80127, \$34.95) is covered with some leather/plastic material. It features more midsole support and a tough-looking box toe.

Rather than conventional lace holes, Cabela's Wading Boot has metal eyelets separate from the shoe surface, and come with long, rather slippery laces. These laces tend to come undone, even when double-knotted, and they're hard to tighten. Non-slip cloth laces would be preferable.

Bass Pro Shops has something called the Finley Wading Shoe ('90 Spring Fever catalog #S737-600, \$39.96). I wish I'd bought it. The soles are felt. The shoe fastens not with laces but with three Velcro straps. Ironically, it might be advisable to change out of the shoes after wading rather than drive in them to the next site, because of the covering. At least they would be easier to remove than waders. The leather/plastic toe covering and rubber toe plate seem to offer good protection. I like them better than my boots because of the Velcro.

Besides wading shoes, there are some interesting accessories. Cabela's sells felt soles complete with glue; you could turn any shoes into wading shoes. Probably other outdoor suppliers offer these kits too, to repair felt-soled waders.

Orvis has tire chains for your feet! They fit their regular wading shoes and probably could be adapted to other shoes also. \$12.50. Cabela's has a slightly different device to accomplish the same thing. It has a studded plate under the foot, i.e., to be strapped onto the soles of footwear. About \$20, I think.

When the virtues of wading shoes are added up, the best ones combine some of the foot protection and traction of waders with the flexibility, speed, convenience, and comfort of sneakers.

Sources

Prices quoted in above may not be complete because of shipping and handling costs, nor current, but are offered as a guide. Readers can either try to obtain catalogues or order by credit card via an 800 number (below). I do not have complete addresses, but locations are indicated, since sometimes in-state callers have to use a different number.

BASS PRO SHOPS, 1935 S. Campbell, Springfield, MO 65898 (1-800-BASS PRO)

L.L. BEAN, Freeport, ME (1-800-221-4221)

CABELA's, Sidney, NE, (1-800-237-8888)

ORVIS, Roanoke, VA (1-800-541-3541)