

Fly Fishing

By Todd Tanner

Back in 1973, when my primary means of transportation was an old blue bicycle and the New York Knicks were winning their second NBA championship, an up-and-coming band by the name of Aerosmith

released their self-titled debut album. If you're a rock fan, you probably remember the album's big single, *Dream On*. I

wasn't fly fishing in '73, but the song's lyrics – "dream until your dream comes true" – are a perfect invitation to this year's equipment column. Here's hoping that 2011 turns out to be a banner year on the water, and that something down below really grabs your attention.

Let's start out with the folks who put Twin Bridges, Montana, on the fly-fishing map. The **R. L. Winston Rod Co.** just introduced four new rod lines and I was fortunate enough to fish two of their 9-foot 5-weights: the GVX (\$495) and the BIIIx (\$755). The GVX is a true sweetheart. Winston calls it an all-graphite version of their fast-action Boron line, but don't be fooled – the rod displays enough of that smooth-as-silk IM6/WT feel to make longtime Winston fans smile. If you love throwing dries to rising trout, but you're also looking for a rod that can cast nymphs and small streamers, check out the 9-for-5 GVX. It's a winner.

As for the gorgeous new BIIIx – well, it took me a bit longer to get a feel for this rod, but once I did, it produced some of the nicest, tightest, most accurate loops I've ever seen. I fished the BIIIx extensively on the Missouri in September and October and it's hard to imagine a rod pitching

Smooth-as-silk rods, superbly designed reels, weatherproof jackets, stylish sunglasses and more – all put to the test by our columnist.

Winston's new 9-foot 5-weight GVX is equally suited for casting dries to rising fish and for working nymphs and small streamers. • Lightweight and comfortable, Orvis River Guard Ultralights feature EcoTraX soles.

• Opposite: St. Croix's Imperial rods are smooth, accurate and come with a limited lifetime guarantee.

a nicer line. It's a

little stiffer than the older Winston BIIx, especially in the butt, so it may be better suited to experienced anglers looking to maximize their performance. But if you hope to take your casting to the next level, Winston's high-end BIIIx could be just the ticket.

Sticking with 9-foot 5-weights – the "half-ton pickup trucks" of fly rods – **St. Croix's** Imperial is a nice \$400 rod that sells for the ridiculously low price of \$200. As you know, a \$200 rod is typically a back-up; an

insurance policy in case your favorite stick breaks. Not this St. Croix. It's smooth, it's accurate, it generates high line-speeds and throws handsome loops, and it





handles everything from small dries to weighted nymphs and streamers with aplomb. In this difficult economy, when value and bang for your buck are even more important than usual, the Imperial, which

comes with a limited lifetime warranty, stands out as a truly exceptional bargain.

The problem with writing about **Simms** gear is that I tend to have unrealistic expectations. Whether we're talking waders or clothing, I automatically assume that everything from Simms is going to be well designed, functional and pretty much bomb-proof. Those assumptions may be a little unfair,

but like most Simms gear, the Guide Windstopper Jacket

(\$249.95) clears the bar with ease. I fished this warm, breathable fleece/soft-shell hybrid in a variety of conditions – from brisk October winds to cold December rain showers and snow squalls – and it handled every single thing that Mother Nature threw my way. You can look all you want, but you'll be hard pressed to find a more comfortable, better-designed technical fishing jacket. Oh, and it's a handsome son-of-a-gun, too.

My eyes aren't getting any younger, but **Costa's** stylish matte black "Zane" polarized sunglasses (\$239) – named after Panama's Zane Grey reef – gave me a serious visual advantage on the water this past fall. They're lightweight, their co-molded hydrolite temples fit like a glove, and their patented 580 Silver Mirror glass lenses brush right up against optical perfection. If you're a flats fisherman, or if you like to stalk wild trout under sunny skies, these shades should be up at the top of your list.

You might not have seen this one coming, but the **Ibex Scout Vest** (\$145), which is a double-knit merino wool vest rather than a multi-pocket fishing vest, is one of the nicest layering pieces I've ever reviewed. Ibex is a small company from White River Junction in Vermont, and




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while I can't speak to the rest of their products, the Scout Vest is lightweight, warm and comfortable. It also draws a constant stream of "Lord, that's a handsome vest!" comments from folks who've never seen it before. I literally can't say enough nice things about the reasonably priced, "Made-in-the-USA from New Zealand wool" Scout vest.

Abel, the iconic reel manufacturer, is doing something pretty wild for those of us with old, beat-up Abel reels in our closet. They've developed a process to remove most of a reel's dings and scratches and then restore it to "like new" condition. Even better, they'll take a black reel, like my elderly Pt. 5, and return it with a handsome new artistic finish. (If you ask, they'll also give your reel a mechanical tune-up at the same time.) For less than half the cost of a brand new Abel, you can turn your old reel into a fully functional work of art. They certainly did an amazing job on my Pt. 5.

Last year I gave **Patagonia's** Nano Puff Pullover two big thumbs up. This year, the Nano Puff Jacket (\$179) gives you the same lightweight warmth and protection from the elements in a full zip version. It's soft, comfortable, blocks the wind and rain, and keeps you warm without weighing you down. I've worn mine as an outer layer on trout streams, as extra insulation while sitting in my deer stand, and as a warm windbreaker (under a blaze orange vest) while chasing upland birds. This incredibly versatile jacket is one of my personal favorites.

Speaking of versatile, I fished my Patagonia Capilene 3 Midweight Zip-Neck (\$59) on the Dean in August, on the Missouri in October and on the Swan in December. It's a well-designed piece that keeps you comfortable and dry through a wide range of conditions. As you know, it's not easy to find a base layer that wicks moisture when you're sweating, keeps you warm when the temperature dips, and refuses to smell like an old gym sock after a long day on the water. Patagonia's Cap 3 pulls it all off with style.

Fishpond makes all sorts of interesting and innovative gear, but

their new Marabou fishing vest (\$169) really stands out in a crowd. It's a fascinating mix of old school and high tech, with a reasonable amount of storage and a couple of nice handwarmer pockets. I really like the fact that this vest fits so well and adjusts so easily, and the Silt version, which is the one I tested, combines waxed cotton canvas with a cool mesh lining in an incredibly handsome package. The Marabou vest: great looks, a well-thought-out design and topnotch materials. Well done, Fishpond!

Full disclosure: The folks who run **Trouthunter** are old friends of mine. That said, their new Trouthunter leaders and tippets would deserve kudos even if I'd never met Rich and Jon. Both the nylon and the fluoro perform admirably, with excellent strength-to-diameter ratios and knot strength, while the leader tapers are extremely well-designed. Give the new Trouthunter leaders



Above: The Fishpond Marabou vest is a fascinating blend of old and new. Below: Abel turned the author's old Pt. 5 reel into a functional work of art.



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and tippets a shot and see how they compare to your old brand. I'm betting you'll like them as much as I do.

It's hard to imagine a more challenging place to test a reel than the Dean River. The steelhead are fresh and hot, and the optimal water temps act just like high-octane fuel. Every time I hooked up on the river last summer, I put a **Ross** Momentum LT reel (\$445 - \$645) to the test. As you might expect, it was flawless. The carbon fiber drag worked perfectly, the reel stayed solid and balanced under some of the most demanding conditions in the angling world, and I ended up landing more than my share of nice fish. If you're a steelhead, salmon or saltwater angler, the Momentum LT is, quite simply, one hell of a reel.

Cortland has been manufacturing high-quality fly lines since long before I was born, so it should come as no surprise that the Platinum Dyna-Tip Low-Vis (\$69) is yet another well-designed and well-executed Cortland product. I fished this new trout line,

which boasts a high floating tip, a low-visibility front taper and a large-diameter running line, frequently over the last few months and it performed admirably every time out. If you need a camo or low-vis line for demanding situations, the Dyna-Tip is a great choice.

I'm hard on wading boots – always have been and probably always will be. So I was pleasantly surprised that my **Orvis** River Guard Ultralights with EcoTraX soles (\$159) stood up to almost a year's worth of abuse with no problems at all. These boots are lightweight and comfortable, easy on and off, and offer good ankle support. The EcoTraX soles, in combination with the specially designed studs, afford excellent traction on a variety of wet surfaces, while the boots also minimize aquatic hitchhikers like didymo and whirling disease. All in all, the River Guard Ultralights are excellent wading boots from a company that works hard to protect our rivers and streams. Just don't step on your fly line – those studs are sharp!

If you're a serious rod junkie and you've been waiting for the next great 4-weight to come along, your prayers have just been answered. The **G Loomis** 9-foot 4-weight NRX (\$715) is arguably the best Loomis – and one of the nicest fly rods – I've ever cast. Here's what you get: pinpoint accuracy, tons of line speed and as much distance as you could ever ask for; all in a very light, very smooth rod that's easy to load and fun to throw. My only qualm – and this is completely subjective – focuses on the sky blue wraps. I've always admired the understated, yet impeccable, cosmetics on Loomis rods. The NRX is many things, but understated isn't one of them. My advice, for what it's worth, is to take a look at this rod, cast it, and then decide whether it's the perfect complement to your individual style. One thing is for sure: G Loomis is making waves with the NRX.

Dennis Klein of **Mystic Outdoors**, makers of fine rods and reels, recently sent me a handful of his new Mystic Zip clip-on retractors (\$4.99). I've been



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playing around with them and they certainly seem to be a notch or two above any of the pin-on or clip-on retractors I've used in the past. I haven't had them long enough to say how well they'll hold up, but given Mystic's reputation for quality and value, they could well be the next big thing in fly fishing widgets.

Smartwool's TML Light SportKnit Full Zip (\$160) is a handsome merino wool mid-layer that wicks moisture and helps keep you warm. I've used this piece as extra insulation under an all-weather shell and as an outer layer when there's just a bit of nip in the air. The TML Light SportKnit reminds me of a soft, comfortable wool sweater, but it's more form-fitting and better suited to fishing than most sweaters. If you're an active angler, this Smartwool SportKnit is just what the doctor ordered.

If you have a soft spot for superbly engineered reels that buck industry trends and feature dependability and performance rather than ultra-low

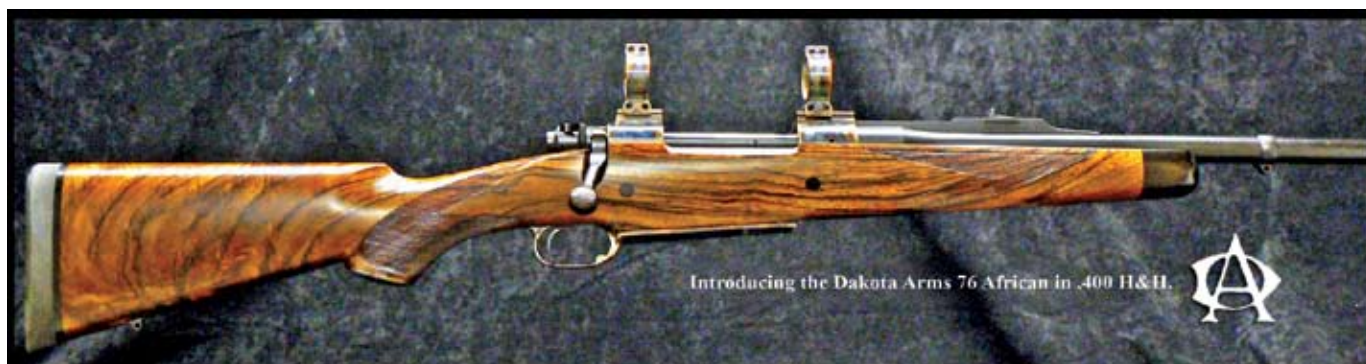
weight, the new **Hatch** 4 Plus (\$450) is an exceptional choice. The 4 Plus is designed primarily for 4- and 5-weight rods, and like the other Hatch reels I've reviewed over the years, it's strong, solid and built to last. The machining and finish are typical Hatch – superb – and the reel functions perfectly with its high-tech stacked disc drag system. The 4 Plus is yet another outstanding reel from the good folks at Hatch. Serious kudos.

The 5-weight Trout LT from **Rio** (\$74.95) is one of the nicest weight-forward lines I've fished over the last few years. It floats high, mends easily and casts like a charm. And with its supple design and long front taper, it's particularly well-suited to soft presentations and small dries. The Rio Trout LT – the LT stands for "light touch" – is everything you could want in a dry fly line. It's also great for rivers like the Delaware or the Missouri where you need a little extra edge to be successful.

I'm awfully picky when it comes to

sunglasses. At a minimum, I want glasses that are well-designed and attractive, with topnotch optics. The new **Pilla** "Charlie" (\$349) delivers exceptional visual acuity in a stylish metal frame. The (literally) bullet-proof Ballistix lenses offer outstanding on-the-water performance, and the glasses are comfortable and easy to wear. If you're looking for handsome sunglasses that shed water, resist fingerprints and protect your eyes from nasty UV rays, check out this outstanding new model.

And finally, while I've never reviewed a flashlight before, last summer I took two small but potent lights up to British Columbia for a week. The **Surefire** G2 (120 lumens for \$69) and the **Fenix** TK11 (258 lumens for \$99.95) both blew me away. They were easy to carry and easy to use, and both put out an unbelievable amount of light. If you like to fish late into the evening, either of these well-designed LED flashlights is worth its weight in gold – especially in grizzly bear country.▶



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