

Understanding Fly Fishing Tippet

By Bob Mallard

While restocking my Fly Vest and Driftboat Bag in preparation for spring last week, I realized just how complex the world of Fly Fishing tippet material had become. As one of the most important components in regard to a properly rigged Fly Fishing outfit, I am surprised that some anglers still view tippet material as a commodity product (i.e., many anglers buy whatever is available or whatever is the cheapest).

Tippet material can be used to extend the life of your leader by allowing the angler to replace what is cut off retying flies or broken off on fish or snags. In addition, the flyfisherman can use tippet material to "Tune" a leader (lengthen,

Examples of Monofilament Tippet Material:

MAKE	MODEL	TYPE	STRENGTH		
			4X	5X	6X
RIO	FLUOROFLEX PLUS	2 nd GEN FLUOROCARBON	7.00#	5.00#	3.65#
RIO	POWERFLEX	COPOLYMER	6.40#	4.90#	3.40#
ORVIS	SUPER STRONG	COPOLYMER	6.00#	4.75#	3.50#
UMPUQA	STANDARD	POLYMER	6.00#	4.00#	3.00#
UMPUQA	DECEIVER	1 st GEN FLUOROCARBON	5.00#	4.00#	3.00#
RIO	FLUORFLEX	1 st GEN FLUOROCARBON	5.00#	4.00#	3.00#
ORVIS	MIRAGE	1 st GEN FLUOROCARBON	4.75#	4.00#	3.00#
MAXIMA	CHAMELEON	POLYMER	4.00#	3.00#	2.00#

market, it is important that the Flyfisherman has a complete understanding of the types of tippet material and how to best use them. Understanding this will make any angler more successful as a result of more fish hooked and fewer fish lost. In order to gain a better understanding in regard to tippet materials, there are a few terms and

(0X=.011", 1X=.010", 2X=.009", 3X=.008", 4X=.007", 5X=.006", 6X=.005", 7X=.004", 8X=.003", etc.)

IGFA (International Game Fish Association) - A designation assigned to a tippet material stating that the "Strength" (Pound Test Rating) has been certified for tournament fishing (tippet material that does not say IGFA has been rated for strength by the manufacturer only).

For the purpose of this article we will focus on the three most commonly used types of tippet material, i.e., Polymers, Copolymers and Fluorocarbons. However, it is important to note that there are tippet materials made of single-strand steel, multi-strand steel (coated and uncoated), etc., that are designed for special conditions ("toothy" prey, etc.)

As noted above, the majority of Polymer tippet material is made of nylon. Nylon tippet material is sometimes referred to as "Hard Nylon" (usually associated with Saltwater fishing) or "Soft Nylon" (general use). Nylon tippet is best known for its ability to turn over large flies (due to its stiffness) and superior abrasion resistance. However, many Polymers have a low "Strength-to-Diameter" ratio (refer to table above). Polymers are best suited for situations where abrasion resistance is important ("toothy" prey, rocky areas, etc.), diameter is not critical (the fish are not "Leader Shy"), large flies are used, or heavy winds are present. As such, Polymers are popular with Saltwater, Salmon, and Warmwater anglers as well as trout anglers casting large flies (Hoppers, Stoneflies, Hexagenia, etc.) or fishing in windy areas.

Copolymer tippet material is best known for its suppleness, elongation characteristics (stretch) and better than average "Strength-to-Diameter" ratio. Copolymers do not have the abrasion resistance of polymers. However, some copolymers such as Rio PowerFlex have proprietary coatings to improve

abrasion-resistance. Copolymers are best suited for situations where abrasion resistance is not critical (Spring Creeks, Lakes and Ponds, etc.), diameter is critical ("Leader Shy" fish), and presentation is important (slack line, dead drifts, etc.) As such, Copolymers are popular with trout anglers whom use small to medium size flies in water where light tippets are required for large fish. Also note that most Copolymers (and Polymers) have a low density and as such float longer than some other tippet materials (preventing the fly from being dragged under).

Fluorocarbon tippet material, the newest entry to the market, is best known for being much less visible in water than other materials due to its low refractory index (1.42 vs. 1.62 for nylon). In addition, Fluorocarbon has good abrasion-resistance, UV-resistance, better than average knot strength, and in the case of 2nd Generation Fluorocarbons (Rio Fluoroflex Plus, etc.), a Strength-to-Diameter ratio that exceeds most other materials. However, most Fluorocarbons often cost more than twice as much as Polymers and Copolymers. Fluorocarbons are best suited for situations where visibility (or lack of) is critical. As such, Fluorocarbons have become popular with serious Nymph fisherman and anglers whom use Wet Flies, Buggers and Streamers in clear water for leader shy fish. Also note that Fluorocarbon has a higher density than Polymers and Copolymers (1.72-1.76 vs. 1.15 for nylon) and as such sink faster than other materials making them a good choice for dropper fishing and in certain circumstances (where the appearance of the leader on the surface spooks fish) dry flies.

Lastly, here are some important tips in regard to the proper use of tippet material:

Always use a "Diameter" ("X" Rating) vs. "Strength" (# Test Rating) reduction between sections of leader/tippet to ensure proper roll-over.

Be aware of major differences in Strength-to-Diameter ratios between types and brands of tippet material to ensure that the breakpoint is in the lowest section of the leader.

While it is OK to do "double jumps" (more than one "X") when working with tippet material between 0X and 3X (0X to 2X, 1X to 3X), it is not a good idea to jump more than two "X" (0X to 3X) from one section to the next (it negatively impacts roll-over and knot-strength).

While working with tippet material between 4X and 8X, it is not advisable to jump more than one "X" from one section to the next.

The last section of tippet (closest to fly) should be between 2 and 4 feet (3 feet is ideal for most conditions).

Always wet your knots before tightening them (ensures that there is no slack which when tightened quickly could cause breakage).

When using Fluorocarbon, it is best to attach it to a Polymer (or Fluorocarbon) section of leader/tippet (Fluorocarbon is very hard and can damage softer Copolymers).

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Below is a grid identifying the best choices for specific angling conditions:

Condition	Material	Characteristics
Saltwater	Polymer	High Abrasion-Resistance, Economical
Saltwater (Line-Shy Fish)	Fluorocarbon	High Abrasion-Resistance, Low-Visibility
Warmwater	Polymer	Abrasion-Resistance, Stiffness, Economical
Trout / Small to Medium Dryflies	Copolymer	Suppleness, Strength-to-Diameter Ratio
Trout / Large Dryflies	Polymer	Stiffness, Economical
Trout / Streamers	Polymer	Abrasion-Resistance, Stiffness, Economical
Trout / Streamers (Line-Shy Fish)	Fluorocarbon	Low-Visibility, Abrasion-Resistance
Trout / Nymphs	Fluorocarbon	Low-Visibility, Abrasion-Resistance
Trout / Drovers	Fluorocarbon	Low-Visibility, Sinking



shorten, etc.) while many anglers use tippet material to construct custom leaders to meet their specific needs and personal preferences. Lastly, tippet material is being used more and more to rig droppers when fishing multiple fly rigs.

With all of the variations of Tippet Material available in today's

concepts that the angler should be familiar with:

Monofilament - A generic term referring to a continuous single-strand material (all polymer, copolymer and fluorocarbon tippet material is considered monofilament). **Polymer** - A generic (i.e., not just for tippets) term referring to a "Synthetic" material such as Dacron, Rayon, Nylon, etc (Most tippet material referred to as "Polymer" are made of Nylon).

Copolymer (Co-Polymer) - A term referring to a "Synthetic" material made up of multiple Polymers (Most tippet materials referred to as "Copolymers" are made up of Nylon, one or more additional polymers and some sort of proprietary resin).

Fluorocarbon - A term referring to tippet material made of Polyvinylidene fluoride (PVDF).

Tippet Size ("X" Rating) - A designation assigned to tippet material based on the diameter

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