

# Down among the **dead men**

Waders are supposed to keep the shooters comfortable and dry. But, as with everything in life, it's a trade-off. Charles Duff explains the down-side:

**W**aders are an essential part of the waterfowler's gear, even though one of Murphy's many laws states that the depth of the water where you want to go will always be one inch deeper than whatever you are wearing.

Wellies are really not much good for anything more challenging than wet grass. So your options are either the hip-boot style of wader much loved by the trout anglers amongst us, or chest-high waders.

However, neither should be donned without some serious reflection. Both can, in the wrong circumstances, bring a promising career to an abrupt end.

If you should fall over, or into, the water they fill up frighteningly quickly. The moment you try to get up or out, you will find that your body is now carrying up to as much as the equivalent of your own weight again in very heavy, very cold, water, trapped inside the waders.

It is difficult to move with full wellies. It's rather like wearing a pair of cement booties. The hip-boots approximate having both legs encased in heavy casts, and the chest-highs make it almost impossible to move at all. Furthermore when you try to get the darn things off, they then stick like glue to your torso and limbs. With the suction of the water it's bad enough to take off a pair of wellies. Hip-boots square the difficulty and chest-highs cube it!

So when you go waterfowling, always have a very sharp knife very close at hand, and be prepared to use it. You won't have a whole lot of time if the water is deep.

Some ten years or so ago, I was crossing a river feeding into the headwaters of a large dam near Ermelo. The bridge, if you could call it that, was a willow tree washed down in a flood which had lodged itself across the river. At that point the river was not much more than 5 metres across, but it was well over 2 metres deep, with very steep sides. One metre from the bank and it was at full depth, more of a gutter shape than your common-or-garden river.

I was alone at the time and half-way over, I slipped and straight down to the bottom I went.

Clad in chest-high waders, a thick sweater, a Barbour, cartridge bag over one shoulder and gun in my right hand, I was



Illustrations from *Jachtekeningen van Rien Poorn* (ed. by Van Holkema & Warendorf, Bussum, 1973)

*'...waders are potentially dangerous and not to be taken lightly...'*

reasonably heavily laden. Talk about "down among the dead men let him lie" and "full fathom five your father lies"! Forget those stories about one's life flashing before one's eyes, there was just no time for that. I remember glancing up at the surface and thinking how bloody far away it looked.

All I could think of doing was to crouch as I hit the bottom and then spring upwards. All that jumping in the lineouts years before must have paid dividends because my left hand just managed to get a hold of a veritable twig sticking out from the trunk. The water in the waders acted like an air-brake, so though it felt like the greatest jump of my life, it probably wasn't that great.

Very gingerly, because a dead willow twig is as brittle as glass, I placed the precious gun on the main body of the tree. Now holding on with both hands, I tried to heave myself onto the tree...

No way! I could get the top of my chest onto the tree, but that

was it.

So hand over hand I moved to the edge, crawled out and lay head down to let the water flow out of the waders and allow my racing heart slow down before taking stock of the situation. I had the really vicious headache that really cold water bestows, which didn't help, but stripping off the outer layer of clothes, I then, oh so very carefully, moved out along the tree and retrieved the gun. My retriever had already swum over and was watching with tail awag. He probably thought I was having some fun! Since then I've always had a very sharp knife very close at hand when wearing waders.

Two factors saved me: firstly the bottom was relatively firm; secondly I had something solid to hang onto at the apex of my despairing leap. But if I had fallen out of a boat or a canoe it would have been a monumental task to get the waders off with one hand, whilst hanging on with the other. With hypothermia rapidly setting in, it's a toss-up whether or not one would actually make it. Cutting them off is definitely quicker.

A friend, Chris, whilst over-enthusiastically urging his puppy on during a retrieve, took one step too many, and straight down into the same river he went. Luckily for him James was close by. As he got to the spot, all he could see was

the ends of the barrels of a (loaded) shotgun waving frantically above the water. Shades of Excalibur in the lake! He hauled Chris out, very carefully, by the barrels. Where Chris had gone in was very muddy, and he said that once on the bottom he found himself incapable of movement. Thus it really is a good idea not to go waterfowling alone. I could regale you with many similar stories. There was the slightly stout buddy who slipped in the mud and landed on his back. Like an inverted turtle he just lay there, arms and legs frantically flailing the air. A real gas for the onlookers, but not so funny if you are alone.

All these would merely underline the point that waders are potentially dangerous and not to be taken lightly.

Technology has come to the rescue of the more affluent amongst us. You can now obtain neoprene waders, though at a quantum increase in cost. The major advantage of these is that they are buoyant. So if you shoot duck regularly they could be regarded as an insurance and investment. A quick stroll through a couple of angling shops has shown that plain coloured ones are available, both with built-in wellies and without. My feeling is that those with stocking feet ends would be more useful and warmer. Wellies on their own are not exactly warm, and thus several pairs of socks have to be worn with the built-in versions, adding to the difficulties in

getting them off. If money is no object, many dealers in the USA can supply all sorts of the latest high-tec camouflaged versions.

Always buy at least one size larger than your regular size, and don't forget to pack some talcum powder. Liberally sprinkled inside it makes getting them on or off one heck of a lot easier.

The other down-side to waders is that any exertion soon works up a monumental sweat. It's not very funny, you slog over a couple of hundred metres of goeey mud in them getting to your shooting spot, arrive just before dawn, and discover that your lower half is wet with sweat. Meantime the ambient temperature hovers about zero. Again modern technology has come up with the answer. The polypropylene 'long johns' and socks made originally for skiers wick this sweat away from the body and keep you much drier and warmer.

Although such a set will cost you as much as a set of waders, if not more, they are an essential investment in creature comfort, so go out and get some. You will find that the difference is truly remarkable.

It is all part of the attraction of waterfowling; the gear you need to keep body and soul together costs as much as the gun. Ammunition costs pale into relative insignificance by comparison. Δ

