

GOTTA HAVE GEAR

WET WADING GEAR BY BACKCOUNTRY SKINZ | Review by Brian Clark

It takes a brave man to wear skin-tight leggings while fly fishing. At least, it did, many years ago, back when the many dramatic benefits of wading in hydrodynamic apparel were less well-known and before photos of such daredevils had begun to appear regularly in mainstream advertisements and posts. These days you can still count on a snicker or two, but every year more adventurous anglers are discovering this ingenious hack.

As a hirsute and hopelessly straight middle-aged gird-dad, my days of being worried about emasculation are numerous decades behind me. I got on board with this trend many years ago, and I was astounded to discover what the women in my life have always understood: leggings are incredibly comfortable and practical.

My first bodysuit was a tropical neoprene skin that I wore while SCUBA diving, and I quickly learned that it moderated temperature changes while also providing protection from abrasion and the various things-that-sting inevitably encountered if you spend any serious amounts of time in seawater. Thus primed, I didn't hesitate to snag some cheap leggings that I wore under quick-dry shorts for a wading-intensive saltwater fly fishing trip. They worked incredibly well. Not only did they keep my tender parts from chafing during those notorious death marches across the flats, they integrated beautifully with my knee-high neoprene socks and robust wading boots. I never got grit inside my boots. No matter how gritty you are, getting significant grit down against your skin can really take the fun out of a flats trip — just as can leaky waders or an unscheduled swim that puts a few drops (or a few gallons) into your boots.

The good folks at Backcountry Skinz have taken note and developed an entire line of waderless wading gear. While they also offer hoodies and hats and shorts which provide solid UV protection, and several neoprene booties to go inside wading boots, their most innovative products are two types of wet wading pants: lightweight, breathable, moisture-wicking SolarFlexz™ leggings, and two versions made from neoprene — the 1.5mm Z-Series™ and the perforated AIRBLITZ™ pants. Let's roll through a quick run-down of the benefits and compare how the different versions perform in various settings.

Abrasion-resistance

Leggings won't keep you from getting stabbed by something with a long enough spike to go straight through the fabric, but do provide a buffer layer that insulates your skin from many snags and most of the floating stingers — including jellyfish. The lighter SolarFlexz leggings do really well in tropical conditions. You're never quite impervious to nasty stabs from falls on coral or marl or the dreaded "Ironshore" rocks, but they do great for a broad range of typical fishing, hiking, and wading conditions. The neoprene versions take this benefit to the next level for higher elevations and cooler climes. They offer a bit of cushion in addition to coverage from regular abuse.

Bug Repellent

If you're being attacked by murder hornets or extremely large and aggressive mosquitoes, the thinner SolarFlexz leggings probably won't save you. But for many other pests — from horseflies to most of the no-see-ums — the thin leggings do provide a layer of protection. Again, the neoprene versions offer more coverage and are effectively impervious to bites.

Sun Protection

All three types of wet wading pants from Backcountry Skinz offer at least UPF50 protection, even the thin leggings. Personally, I hate having to apply and reapply sunscreen throughout the day, and worry in the meantime about whether I'm getting burned. These leggings solve all of those problems for the entire lower half of my body without adding significant weight or restricting movement.

Fast Drying

Many wading pants advertise as fast drying, and some are — but leggings dry faster yet. Even the AIRBLITZ and Z-Series neoprene versions dry faster than any conventional pair of waders simply because they're vented on both ends.

Temperature Regulation

For me, wearing the SolarFlexz leggings in the tropics feels like a wash temperature-wise when compared with regular quick-dry pants. They definitely offer more cooling than pants

when they're wet and you're getting breeze while running in an open boat, but otherwise they're similar — their benefits lie in the other categories.

There's more to tell on the neoprene side since they're designed to be worn in cold water. If you've done extensive wet wading in mountain rivers — especially tailwaters where the water can be frigid even on the hottest summer day — then you know the SANNA routine: Shock when you first enter the water, Agony for a few minutes, Numbness once you're adjusted, Needles after you get out and your limbs begin to wake up again, followed by Afterglow. Both the AIRBLITZ and Z-Series dull the intensity of all of those stages — except for the Afterglow. They work exactly like a SCUBA skin: you simply don't get as cold or numb, don't add much weight or lose mobility, and you still get the satisfaction of having waded wet.

Out of the water, the perforated AIRBLITZ pants offer more air movement than the Z-Series, but they're still much more comfortable when you're wet and in the water. Both can also be worn under traditional breathable waders as a thermal layer for exceptionally cold conditions.

Hydrodynamism

To me this is the killer app for leggings. In a river, waders create bulk that gives the current dramatically more surface to push against. Wading in waders feels like barging across the current; wading in leggings feels like gliding in stealth mode. I think leggings are even more advantageous when you're sprinting across a saltwater flat: the pants aren't flapping against you, creating drag and making noise.



All the wading pant alternatives from Backcountry Skinz are lightweight, packable, durable, and some have extra features — like a cell phone pocket. They're made for both men and women and come in a wide variety of patterns, from solids and a variety of camo styles, and supporting a real company doing authentically innovative work in the fishing world. With premium wader prices now well over US\$1,000, wet wading pants which reduce weight and drag, provide protection against sun and bugs and abrasion, and which don't reduce mobility seem like a bargain. Outside of the coldest winter days, I may never wear waders again.

SolarFlexz™ MSRP US\$65

Z-Series™ MSRP US \$130

AIRBLITZ™ MSRP US\$145

Website: www.backcountryskinz.com