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...fly fishing outfitters

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## In quest of the perfect small stream fly rod

One question we are often asked is what is the perfect small stream fly rod? To be honest, there is no "perfect" small stream fly rod. There, that's that and someone with a bit of intelligence would leave it there. But as those that know us will tell you, that just is not going to happen. As with most things about fly fishing, there are many self proclaimed experts and heavily sponsored gurus that are all too eager to give their opinion on the ideal rod for the smaller streams. We aren't and don't claim to be either.

A lot of us do not realize everything that could be important in making a small stream rod selection and there is a lot to carefully consider before making an investment in a new rod. That is exactly what we're going to try to do here...discuss several important rod and stream factors that govern a small stream rod selection. And in the end...it's you who make the ultimate decision as to which rod is best for you.

### What is a small stream?



Depending on where you are in the world, this can mean a lot of different things. All fly fishers are not in agreement. We may know what is meant when saying a small stream...but would you see in your mind the same thing that another person might see?

So let's leave the words behind and consider some of the characteristic of these waters. We tend to think of these as lined with willows, ferns, and alders (depending on where you are in the world) which provide anglers with undercut banks, riffles and pocket water. There may be no place on the banks where you can comfortably roll cast to the other side. When the water is clear, you can most always see the bottom and again this may mean the structure and surrounds depending on where live. Let's just say that a small stream is one that you can cast across easily just about anywhere on it, that you can wade, is too small for boats and has structure exposed to view. Most of all, we'll assume it has trout in it

### The Small Stream Fly Rod

The factors we will look at in helping you make your selection include weight, length, action, material, sections, colour and several stream characteristics. We will also spend a bit of time on fly lines, as arguably, this could be the most important choice you make in your overall decision process in choosing the right small stream fly rod. We are going to skip terms such as modulus, IM whatever and other high tech sounding terms more suited to discussions about the space shuttle. Let's just keep it simple.

## Rod Weight

When considering a fly rod suited to a small stream most anything from a 0wt to 5wt will work well. Most manufacturers offer rods in 2wt to 5wt and as such, we may limit our discussion to these three weights of rods. The ultimate choice of the rod weight has a lot to do with the size fish you will target. As a broad rule of thumb, many small streams only support small trout. Some streams, of course, do have larger fish. Generally, you will most likely be looking at catching fish from 6 to 12 inches. You'll get an occasional larger fish and countless Jack Fish too.



Okay, what is a Jack Fish? These are the fish, generally called fry, that are so small that when you set the hook you jack them up out of the water and they sail back over your head. The name Flying Fish was already taken.

Rod weight becomes a very large consideration simply because the fight of a small fish feels better to the angler using a lightweight fly rod such as a 2 wt. The 16 inchers will feel like trophies on a light rod also but there are some disadvantages that you should remember too. One is that by the time you get the bigger fish landed, it may be exhausted to the point of no return and may soon die after its release, and more so in periods of extended warm weather and/or low water conditions. This is a mute point if you planned to take the fish home with you anyway, however should be considered.

Another thing to think about is the hook set. The lighter weight fly rods offer you little help in setting the hook. The problem was that we lost a good number of fish within two seconds of the hook set, or more appropriately the lack of it. If you are using this type of rod you had best make sure your fly hooks are de-barbed and honed needle sharp. In this case, a 2wt suits in perfectly and with almost no problems of getting the hook to set.



We are huge fans of a 2wt and 3wt when it comes to small stream rods, enjoying the lightweight feel and the versatility of these. The lighter weight rods allow a more delicate presentation and some added protection when using a very fine tippet.

Casting is another issue with rod weights. So for the beginner, we would not recommend an extremely light weight rod. A 3wt or 4wt would be a better choice at this stage in the learning curve. That said, if I were only going to own one rod for small streams and wanted to use it on a variety of venues, it would easily be a 7ft 6in 4wt fly rod that performs beautifully in close, can throw a larger fly if needed and has been used on the edges of lakes simply for the pure enjoyment of the sport.

Now on the other hand, it would be fair to say that many small streams are so small you are not really casting as such anyway. You are only “flipping” and “dapping” with an occasional short roll cast. In that light, we would suggest that first class casting skills are not overly important, however you will need to learn them properly first. It depends upon the size of the stream, brush, overhanging trees and even the wind as to how much “real” casting you may be doing. A very typical small stream meandering through a valley meadow will likely have minimum obstructions. The wind, however, may create a problem and you may actually need a 4wt in order get the fly where you want it. Or perhaps more so, to prevent it from landing where you don’t.

## Rod Length

Interestingly, there are now two very distinct and quite different schools of thought on what may be the proper length for a small stream fly rod. That said, your ultimate choice of rod length may be even more important than rod weight.

You will find these groups divided between advocates of a short rod, which for now is the majority, with consideration to the usual brush and overgrown cover that may characterize the small stream. There are now a growing number of long rod advocates and equally convinced there technique is superior. The techniques is often referred to as “high sticking” or “Cz nymphing” and brought to the forefront several years ago when introduced more globally in world competitions. This again is where the character of the stream itself will help you in determining the best length for you in any given situation.



Shorter rods, say 5ft to 7ft 6in, may be ideal for the tightest and brushiest of creeks. Best of all, these short rods are almost irresistibly “cute and sweet”. I have a small arsenal of these rods that include everything from a 5ft to a 7ft 6in rod in fibreglass, graphite and split cane. Upon first examination, a few of these are met with a laugh until cast and the fly angler finds that, in the right hands, these rods can be weapons.

Some fly fishers find that long rods, ranging anywhere from 8ft 6in up to 11ft. may be the ideal choice depending on your technique. You may be high sticking to finicky trout and you need that extra reach or decide to learn more about the Cz techniques alluded to above. Many fly rod companies are now offering blanks ranging up to an 11ft 3wt and above that are either well suited to or purpose built for this style of fishing.

## Rod Action

We firmly believe that if you plan on chasing small rainbows or browns on a small stream, a fast action may not be the best choice. We would recommend a medium and slow action rod as being better suited for small streams. You will have better control, more accuracy, more tippet protection and softer presentations. There are some fast action fanatics out there and if a fast action rod feels good to you, then by all means use it. Personally, I prefer a medium action rod as it just feels good in hand and performs perfectly on the water.

These types of action favour a more relaxed casting style. They do offer the accuracy and the delicate presentations that is often need on these small creeks. The medium action rod slightly out performs the slow action on hook set, yet the slow action remains another great choice for fishing for small fish. And on this subject we now rest.

## Rod Blank Choices



As with any other freshwater fly rod, the choices here are bamboo, fibreglass and graphite. Most rods sold today overwhelmingly are graphite. Graphite rods are lighter in weight, more sensitive, and have a faster response rate compared to fibreglass or split cane. That said, these too are certainly to be considered and perhaps viewed as a first choice due to the advantages offered in terms of presentation, subtle casting and the simple aesthetic enjoyment of your fly rod.

It is important though to not overlook fibreglass fly rods. As with any material used to create a fly rod, these have continued to evolve, and with the advent of s-glass, are a far cry away from the old style e-glass fibreglass rods that many of us may recall. Fibreglass is smoother to cast, offers a very delicate presentation and, regardless of weight, may be a little less tiring to cast all day long.

Doug Macnair, a highly regarded casting instructor and fly fishing writer, says "In the short rod format, fibreglass handles very much like bamboo and in my opinion beats graphite every time. I would suppose that my all time small stream favourite is a 6-footer from 1963." You probably won't find many fly rods around made in 1963, but today's modern fibreglass fly rods may one day become the equivalent.

Hand crafted split cane rods are also a fly fishing work of art. They certainly have an aesthetic advantage over glass and graphite. Yes, they are usually quite expensive and yes, worth every penny you spend. It is true that the classic split cane rods are heavier. However, this relatively small increase in weight is also one of its advantages, for this additional weight gives these rods an inherent loading characteristic that makes them very smooth casting.

## Sections

How many sections should your new small stream rod break into is simply a matter of preference, functionality and of course up to the wisdom of the manufacturer when laying up the blank. A very short 2pc rod, say of only 5ft, is very convenient. You only have two sections to worry about. Aligning the guides during assembly is so simple. A 6 pc or 7pc rod is also convenient in its own way if you don't mind a little extra time assembling them. It's probably safe to say that the largest selling rods come in 4 sections and if we consider that these rods range from 5ft. to 7ft 6in for our purposes here, it is equally safe to say that the size of the rod in the tube is still going to offer a great deal of convenience for both hiking into remote areas and travel.





It's a good idea to consider how you will usually be travelling as well. Will you fly or drive? If you fly, that can present an entirely different set of circumstances and this can get pretty ugly at times. There is usually no problem flying with a four piece rod, without reel, as carry on. But like a lot of carry on rules today, a lot depends on who is working the security check point. Try to carry on a fly reel. you find that most airline officials have said there is enough fly line and backing to tie up a whole flight crew. In short, we would like to simply remind you that the rules and regulations vary as does enforcement and you would be wise to check with both your airlines and destination points in regards to the rules and regulations.

## The Fly Line

Now that we have talked about some of the important characteristics of small streams and factors to consider when purchasing your new fly rod, it would be a mistake to close our discussion without a discussion of the importance of the often overlooked fly line. This determines how your fly rod feels, reacts and we believe is one of the most important choices you may make.

The starting point should always be staying with the manufacturer's suggested line weight recommendations. Whilst we would be the first to suggest that at some point, we will see a more uniform crossing over from a line standard set by the AFTMA over 50 years ago, this is a good starting point. What now makes it more difficult is the way in which many fly line companies have marketed fly lines in say, a half weight over and so on. Generally speaking, we would suggest that your new fly rod rated at say, a 3wt, should cast a 3wt WFF or DT with reasonable efficiency.

However, it is our suggestion that you may wish to "overline" as a general rule of thumb and here is why. Let's say you're using a 3wt rod with a 3wt line on a small stream. Most of your casts are going to be less than 15 or 20 feet. Take away the leader and you only have about 10 feet or so of fly line aerialized. That is not enough line weight to allow the rod to perform as designed. So, in this case, it makes perfect sense to overline your rod. Ten feet of a 4wt line might give you enough aerialized weight to allow the rod to perform better and thus improve your casting. So think about it. You may want to overline your new rod depending on how far you think you'll be casting.

In the case of the DT, we often find that one weight up may add to the ease of loading the rod and has the benefit of being the right length to simply cut in half and fish as a new line as needed. You may find, as we have, that you simply do not need more than say, 20 yards of fly line and a small amount of backing for these rods.

## Conclusion

There you have it. Have we covered every possible aspect of selecting the ideal small stream fly rod? Probably not, but you now have enough information to assist you in selecting the best fly rod for your specific applications. We started this article with the simple premise that the quest for the perfect small stream fly rod may be a journey that takes many turns along the way. And in that, perhaps that is the greatest truth of all. This amazing sport is a life long journey that is constantly evolving and changing. We wish you well on your quest.