

John Hollifield



What is your story?

I have lived in Hayesville, NC my entire life, on long-time owned family property. In fact, my two sons represent five generations that have been raised here. I spent 32 years in manufacturing management in jobs ranging from Industrial/Quality engineer, Human Resources Manager, and 6 Sigma/Lean Manufacturing Coach. I recently retired in order to devote more time to my long-standing passions of fly fishing and bamboo fly-rod making.

How long have you been fly fishing, and how did you get started?

I tied my first fly at the age of 8, using material from a Noll fly tying kit my dad received as a birthday gift. He soon learned he didn't have the patience necessary to learn the craft, so he passed it down to me. For the next few years, I continued to play with the fly tying, but when dad and I fished, I would use an old Heddon spin casting rod equipped with a Johnson Century bait casting reel. Dad would fly fish a run, and if nothing rose to his dry fly, I'd cast to see if I could catch anything. My terminal tackle at this point usually consisted of a "Yallerhammer" streamer attached to the end of a Macdonald spinner. In most streams in our area, that was frequently deadly. I actually began fly fishing in earnest around 11, I suppose. While I enjoyed catching fish on spinners, I was captivated by watching fish rise to my dad's dry flies. I pestered him until he finally bought me a fly rod of my own. It was a Shakespeare Wonder rod, it had a white fiberglass blank, and I believe it had maroon wrappings. I spent countless hours in the front yard learning how to cast. I'm pretty much self-taught, so I have many of the bad casting habits that go with that process. I've recently taken some casting lessons, so I'm working on correcting those flaws. There's always something to learn. Throughout my childhood, my dad and I spent countless weekends either fly fishing or grouse hunting, depending on which season was open. Fishing trips often involved weekend camping trips to places like Slickrock creek in the Joyce Kilmer / Slickrock wilderness, Fires Creek near my hometown of Hayesville, or the upper waters of the Nantahala river, above white oak bottoms campground in Macon county.



featured rod builder

How long have you been building fly rods and how did you get started?

I built my first fly rod around 1984 from a kit I ordered from Cabela's. It was built on an 8' 4 weight blank with a rather slow action that was comparable to the old fiberglass rods that I was accustomed to. Through the years I dabbled with an occasional rod build, always with a graphite blank, and just for my individual use. I've been making bamboo fly rods for about 3 years now and they represent 100% of my rod making now.

What prompted your keen interest in traditional fly rods?

From an early age I've enjoyed crafting things. I've always been interested in traditional things, especially pertaining to outdoors pursuits, so it was just natural that I eventually get around to bamboo fly rods. My first start with bamboo came when I bought a few old Horrocks Ibbotson rods off Ebay. They were in pretty rough shape, so I set about the process of reworking them. I learned a good bit just by stripping the varnish, replacing ferrules, straightening sections, installing new grips and such. These were all skills that would be useful when I began making my own rods from scratch. The only thing I really wasn't doing at this point was making a new blank. Following my wife's encouragement, I took a bamboo rod making class from a local maker and just fell in love with the entire process. Soon after the class, I purchased a planning form, block plane, and other necessities, built my own heat treating oven, purchased a few culms of bamboo, and built my first rod in a corner of my basement. I still have that rod and fish it regularly.

How are your rods available?

My rods can be purchased directly from me or from selected fly shops. You can visit my web page at www.HollifieldBamboo.com, drop me an email at jhollif@gmail.com, give me a call at 828.557.9790. I have a few rods on hand, but I prefer to work with a customer to design and build a custom rod to meet their unique needs. Seven to eight feet, three piece rods in the 3-6 line weight range are popular. I've built everything from a 4'-6" four weights up to an 8'6" eight weight. Rattan grips are popular, as well as my hollow built blank models and swelled butt rods, too.

What rods have you originated, or put an original spin on?

About a year after I began making bamboo rods, I decided I wanted to incorporate hand engraving work in my rods. I took lessons from a Firearms Engraving Guild of American, a certified Master Engraver, purchased the equipment to do the engravings, and began to practice. I'm proud to now offer hand engraved reel seats and ferrules, a treatment that I do personally in my shop. As a further upgrade, I can offer 24k gold inlay in the reel seats. This affords me the opportunity to create some unique and artistic embellishments on the rods I offer. I can work with the customer to create a design that is truly meaningful to them. I believe that I and one other maker are the only two currently making and engraving personally the rods we offer.

What are some of the older rod building materials you use that are tough to find?

Most materials are fairly available. However, one concern recently has been with the bamboo itself. All the bamboo imported to the US comes from essentially one source. The owner of that business has experienced some pretty serious health issues. When word spread of his illness, many makers rushed to buy up stock to meet their needs for a while. As a result, his inventory was rapidly depleted. Luckily, I have enough on hand to get through a couple of years. Also, really good quality cork can be difficult to find. If you are able to find it the cost can be pretty high.



What are some of the newer rod building materials that really impress you?

There are a lot of very high quality materials currently available. I really like the ferrules made by CSE, a company located in Vermont. They offer superb quality in any size you can need. Since they see a lot of stress, you simply can't afford to compromise on their quality. That's why I only use CSE in my construction. Plus, I've recently begun using the Recoil brand of guides from REC Components. They are lighter weight so they restrict the action of the rod less, yet they are made of a very hard material and resistant to wear.

Many new bamboo rod makers make a lot of their tools due to the cost of obtaining those made by major suppliers. Panning forms, binders, ovens and etc. can constitute a significant investment for the budding maker. With the exception of my oven, I chose to purchase mine through Bellinger located in Washington. It can be rewarding to make a set of planning forms I suppose, but I decided I would rather devote the time required to do so, to the task of actually making rods. Form accuracy in great part, can determine the accuracy of your blanks. With Bellinger forms, I've never had to worry if my forms were true.

featured rod builder

Do you teach fly fishing or rod building?

I offer on-on-one instruction for rod making at my shop. Using my tooling, equipment and material, a person interested in making a rod can do so over a week long class. We will start with a culm of bamboo, and at the end of the week, they will have a complete and ready to fish, two piece rod of their own creation.

Are you available to come speak to TU or FFF groups?

Yes. I would be happy to speak to any interested TU or FFF groups.

What are your personal favorite fly rod designs?

My granddad used to say that his favorite cobbler was, "Whichever I'm eating at the time." Now I may not go that far with my fly rods, but I do have a fairly eclectic taste. I've built rods based on several different traditional tapers by makers like Leonard, Payne, Edwards, Garrison, Divine and Dickerson. From that list I suppose I favor the Dickerson tapers most, followed closely by those designed by Edwards. I also have a number of my own tapers that I have found to work well, too. Each taper has its own character. What appeals to one caster may not necessarily appeal to another, but that's one of the things I enjoy about making bamboo rods. I can work with a customer to select a taper based on their abilities and needs, for many different situations.

What are your personal favorite southern waters to fly fish?

While I enjoy fishing many of the more familiar waters of western North Carolina/Northern Georgia, such as the Nantahala, Raven Fork, Tuckaseegee, Toccoa, Chattahoochee; I really prefer the smaller streams. I especially enjoy those that hold native "Specks" or brook trout. With my recent retirement from a public job, I'm hoping to have more to time to get into the Smokies a bit more frequently too.

What suggestions do you have for someone who is considering buying their first custom fly rod?

Don't be afraid to try bamboo. Although the initial cost of ownership may be a little more than graphite or fiberglass, they are by no means less durable. A high quality bamboo rod, properly cared for will retain its value indefinitely, and perhaps even appreciate in value over time. Rods of other construction will tend to depreciate the moment you take them out of the fly shop. Bamboo rods are often handed down from generation to generation, and rods 100 years old are not uncommon. Though beautiful, they are in fact, excellent fishing tools. A properly designed bamboo rod can protect a 7x tippet, yet still offer enough power in the butt to handle trophy fish.

I would suggest you visit a reputable maker, one with several different models available for casting. Cast their rods and others in all the models you can. Try various lengths, tapers, line weights. Discuss your fishing needs for the rod with the maker. They can suggest models and tapers that best suit your goals.

