

gearhead

FLY LINES FOR BAMBOO RODS

Bob Mallard

When it comes to tackle, I am all about technology not tradition. I am an unapologetic fan of graphite rods, large arbor reels—including those with graphic designs, condition-specific extruded leaders, fluorocarbon tippet, articulated streamers, tungsten bead nymphs, modular tech packs, and multi-sole wading boots.

The closest I have to traditional fly tackle is a few older Winston rods, a so-called “retro” glass rod, and a couple of small arbor reels. I am more like Kelly Galloup than Isaac Walton—and more likely to be found reading *The Drake* than *A River Runs Through It*. I like beer, not Scotch; and prefer a cigar to a pipe. I don’t own a stitch of tweed—but I do own a lot of GORE-TEX®, Windstopper®, and SPF.

While working on my book, 50 Best Places Fly Fishing for Brook Trout, I decided to interject some tradition. I had an opportunity to buy a 1970's vintage bamboo rod that was part of an estate sale I was liquidating. I figured I would never get a better chance to take the plunge so I pulled the trigger. Next I chased down a small arbor click-and-pull reel—you don't put low-riders on an antique car...

While I have cast a lot of bamboo rods--or "cane" as some refer to them—I am admittedly no expert. As a result, I did something I never do—I hit the forums for some advice on what line to use. While many opined, very few asked me what I was going to do with the rod or even what the length, line-weight or action was—all things to consider when purchasing a fly line for any rod. Two lines—both decades old--dominated the discussions. Fly line giants Scientific Anglers and RIO were barely mentioned—an odd omission in any conversation about fly lines.

Several of the forum faithful suggested a specific line--arguably the most popular product with bamboo users—and that I cut 6-12" off the front end to "tune" it. In addition to having a front taper, the line has a 6" level tip and a bonded loop. That's like ordering a BLT and throwing away the bacon—and a sign that while some may think it's the best option, it might not be—at least for what they do...

Not satisfied with what I heard; I perused the catalogs, searched the internet, called the vendors, harassed the reps, and otherwise educated myself as to what was available. I stopped short of considering a silk line--the idea of having to grease my line to make it float seemed messy and unnecessary.

gearhead

Bamboo rods run the gamut. Some can barely handle the suggested line weight—especially longer ones. Others need to be over-lined to effectively load them—especially short ones. In some cases popular lines such as Scientific Anglers' GPX and RIO's RIO Grand that are half a line-weight heavier than advertised only make matters worse. Plus bamboo rods are about finesse, not power; making so-called "performance" lines moot.

While not what you would call extensive--there are more options than you might think. I obtained some samples and field-tested them. All did something well—and some did a lot of things well. I cast at realistic distances for dry fly and small stream fishing. I made sure not to double-haul or otherwise work the rod in a way it was not intended to be used.

In general, what makes a fly line a good fit for bamboo rods is suppleness. Aesthetically, you probably don't want a fluorescent orange or chartreuse line—that would be like wearing a trucker hat with a tweed jacket.



Photo by Cecil Gray

Many bamboo enthusiasts are purists—they fish only dry flies. Others fish small stream pocketwater. There is a big difference between standing waist deep in a placid river casting a #18 sulphur to a rising fish thirty feet away, and standing on dry land trying to stuff a #12 beetle under an overhanging branch twelve feet away. The line that does the former well can be a detriment when trying to do the latter.

Some lines such as Cortland Sylk and Wulff Bamboo Special are designed specifically for bamboo rods. Others such as Cortland 444 Peach and Wulff Triangle Taper have established a cult-like following amongst bamboo aficionados. And some such as Scientific Anglers Mastery Trout, Orvis Superfine and RIO Trout LT, while not normally associated with bamboo rods work well on them.

Choosing a line for a bamboo rod is not that different than choosing a line for any other rod. What you plan to do with the rod should dictate what line you choose. The dry fly purist is best served by a line with a long front taper. The pocketwater fisherman is better off with a short front taper. Triangle tapers employ a long continuous front taper—they turn-over well. Tapers such as those used in Scientific Anglers VPT, Orvis' Superfine and RIO's Trout LT are similar with very long--albeit multi-stage--front tapers. While these fundamental concepts seem lost on many of today's fly fishers, it appears to be especially true with regard to bamboo users.

gearhead

Lines with front tapers 8' and longer are considered “presentation” products. Those with front tapers shorter than that are what are referred to as “all-purpose” products. Presentation lines do not perform well in tight quarters—or when trying to turnover a heavy or bulky fly. All-purpose lines can be a bit splashy. While there is not much you can do to make a presentation line fish in tight well, you can present a dry fly pretty effectively with an all-purpose line if you use a long enough leader.

While they have fallen out of favor over the years, double-taper lines tend to present a fly very gently. The belief that they roll-cast better than weight-forwards is somewhat misleading. Unless you get out beyond the belly—28' to 45' on the lines tested—there is no difference assuming they have the same front taper.



Photos by Cecil Gray

Below are the lines I feel are best suited for use with bamboo rods. All are accurately weighted and relatively supple—and with subtle colors.

Make	Model	Color	Front Taper	Belly
Cortland	444 Classic*	Peach	8'	20'
Cortland	444 Classic Sylk*	Mustard (w/Black Specks)	10'	24'
Orvis	Hydros Superfine	Willow	3.3', 5.7'***	17'
RIO	Trout LT*	Camo/Beige	7', 12'***	22'
RIO	RIO Gold	Gold/Moss	5.5'	23'
Scientific Anglers	Mastery Trout*	Dark Willow	6.3"	21.7"
Scientific Anglers	Mastery VPT	Willow/Orange/Willow	13', 9'***	22'
Wulff	Bamboo Special	Ivory/Brown	7'	38'
Wulff	Triangle Taper	Ivory	36'	N/A

Notes:

- Vendors and products are listed in alphabetic order.
- Tapers reflect a WF5. Some products vary by line weight.

* Available in Weight-Forward and Double-Taper

** Denotes a multi-stage “compound” Front Taper



BOB MALLARD has fly fished for over 35 years. He is a blogger, writer and author; and has owned and operated Kennebec River Outfitters in Madison, Maine since 2001. His writing has been featured in newspapers and magazines at the local, regional and national levels. He has appeared on radio and television. Look for his books from Stonefly Press, 50 Best Places Fly Fishing the Northeast (Now Available), 25 Best Towns Fly Fishing for Trout (Spring 2015) and 50 Best Places Fly Fishing for Brook Trout (Winter 2015). Bob is also a fly designer for Catch Fly Fishing as well as the northeast sales rep for both Stonefly Press and Catch Fly Fishing. Bob can be reached at www.kennebecriveroutfitters.com, www.bobmallard.com, info@bobmallard.com or 207-474-2500.

