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## **Birch Bark Handles**

Expand Your Grip  
Making Horizons

**The 2006  
National Rod Builders  
Show Report**



# Birch Bark Handles

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Why not try something different for your next rod grip or handle? Unique materials for making truly custom fittings may be as close as your own backyard.





**F**inland is a land of forests and lakes. Birch have been said to be Finland's national tree. True, but birch is widely used in handcraft works all over the northern hemisphere - anywhere you can find birch growing. One could write a long article about many ways to use birch, but this article will concentrate on birch bark and its usability to rod builders.

During the past year I have been greatly intrigued by the method knife makers have been using to make beautiful birch bark handles for their knives. I did a lot research into implementing this technique with regard to rod building. Unfortunately, I didn't find anyone who had been using such a method or material already. Although many rod builders seemed interested in the prospects of such a method, I was unable to find much more beyond my original suspicions that it could be of value in custom rod building.

*continued...*



## The Material

Growing birches can be found in the northern hemisphere. White birch is the best to use in craft work. The best time to take bark from the tree is in spring or early summer. At that time bark can be peeled off most easily and will be at its thickest - which is important for what we're going to be doing with it. Cut the bark all the way to hard inner wood and peel the bark off around the trunk. *\*(Because quality bark can be gathered from fallen trees, the taking of bark from living trees is not advised. The removal of bark from a living tree can result in death of the tree.)*

After the bark is removed, cut or bore your rings from it as soon as possible. If you intend to use the bark sheets later, lay out the sheets and put some weight upon them. This prevents bark from curling up, which they have a tendency to do on their own. Always store them in dry place.

Bark can be also bought from craft stores who sell items for knife making. Another good source could be birch bark canoe makers, who might sell you small leftovers from their projects. Such leftovers may not be large enough for further use on canoes or kayaks, but can be sufficiently sized for our rod building uses.

## Preparing Bark Rings

When you have bark sheets ready for processing, you need certain tools to do it. There are two options to cut bark down to usable sizes. You can just use a knife or scissors to cut bark to squares of 35x35mm. With this method, you need to do much more work while sanding a grip. A better way is to use a hole punch with an inner diameter of 33-35 mm. An example of a hole punch is shown on the left on picture 1. Place a bark sheet over a wooden pole and use the punch with a hammer to obtain as many rings as you need.

After an adequate amount of rings are done, they need to be cleaned. All bark's surface material (white) needs to be removed. It will peel off easily with a knife. If the bark is very inflexible or the inner side of it is very thick, remove enough material from there as well. You want the pieces to be clean and flexible so they are easy to use.

The last thing to do is to make a hole in the center of each bark ring. The diameter of this hole or bore, should be the same as the diameter of the threaded rod or mandrel you are going to use when turning the item. You can make these with a smaller punch as shown at right in picture 2. Other items needed are nuts for your threaded rod and larger washers (bigger than your bark rings).



### Making the Insert

Since you are making a bark handle, you need to have a drawing of a handle with the desired measurements before you start to glue the individual bark rings together. In such a drawing, the length of bark sections are decided. Bark rings need to be glued on together in small parts. As a rule, I don't glue more than 20 rings at one time. The handle project I've outlined for this article required 4 stacks of 20 rings each.

First use a candle or block of paraffin and rub it along the threaded rod to prevent glueing the rings permanently to the rod or mandrel. Spin a nut on the rod, put the washer on and slide the first bark ring down to the washer. Apply slow cure epoxy to the bark ring on the rod and slide the next bark ring down on top of it. Make sure you turn the second ring 90 degrees before putting it top of the first bark ring. The third ring, and each additional ring, are also turned 90 degrees when compared to the preceeding ring. Alignment of the rings is shown in picture 3. By aligning the rings in this manner, the overall strength of the grip is greatly increased.

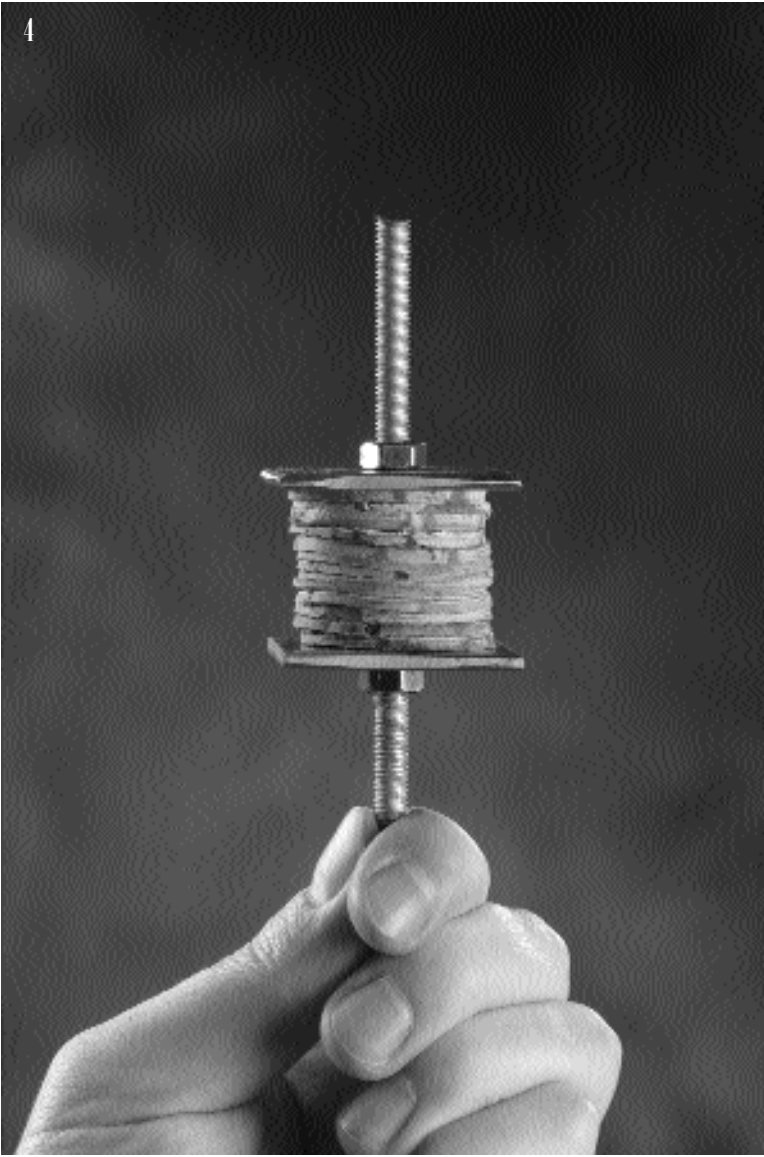
After all rings are glued and stacked, put the second washer on the other end and tighten the packet with another nut so that all excess glue will be squeezed out. Wipe the excess glue off and let the assembly fully cure. Keep the packet unopened for a couple of days (leave it clamped). If you need to make additional 20 ring sets, do it now. An example of ready set is shown in picture 4. This example set is not glued, but it is here to show the approximate size of a bark ring set that you can glue up together at one time. Also pay attention to the size of your end washers - they need to be larger than your bark rings in order to apply the proper pressure on the entire surface of each bark ring.

After all the bark ring sets are dry, remove the 20 ring packets from the threaded rods and glue them together into a single unit. Let the packet dry again under adequate pressure on the threaded rod just as you did when assembling the individual rings earlier.

### Putting A Handle Together

If you closely examine the structure of a bark ring, you can see that it is made up of layers. So use caution in handling the sections. Even after the bark rings are glued together, bark sections can easily break in layers if you bend them. Hence neither should you start or end handles or grips with bark. There needs to be something solid on both ends. I





suggest using impregnated wood or cork at both the handle ends.

Now that you have all the sections of bark rings ready, it is time to put the whole handle together. You can use the same threaded rod or mandrel for this. I use mandrels from Andy Dear. Glue all parts together with slow cure epoxy and allow to fully set and cure.

After drying it is time to put the mandrel on the lathe and start turning it. Start with rough (coarse grit) sanding paper to get close to the look and shape you prefer. As you approach the desired shape and size, start using finer and finer papers. The grip in this article was finished with 1000 grit paper!

### Finishing

Once you have achieved the final desired shape and size, it is time to put some protection on the grip. Although bark is water resistant to a point, it is better to add some extra protection to it. I use Birchwood Casey's Tru-oil to add additional protection to the handle. Two thin coats will suffice.

After sufficient drying it's time to mount your new handle on your custom rod.

### Reaming the Handle

When the Tru-Oil has dried, remove the handle from the mandrel. Keep in mind that when you remove the handle from the mandrel, the bark section has no interior support. There's some risk of snapping it in two if you bend it too much. Keep this in mind when reaming the handle to fit your blank. 🪚

*Editor's Note: While this article deals with using Birch Bark to make a fly rod grip, the same technique and materials can be used to construct grips and handles for any type rod. Because the end product is a beautiful, tough, relatively light grip, it is equally suitable for use on casting, spinning, boat and trolling rods.*

*In addition to using bark as a grip material, it could also be used via this same technique for reel seat inserts. Other rod parts could conceivably be made with these instructions as well. Let your imagination work on this one and consider the many possibilities this technique offers.*

*If you cannot source birch bark locally, it can often be purchased from specialty lumber/wood supply stores. There are also other type barks and some veneers that can be used with the same technique to construct similar grips and handles.*