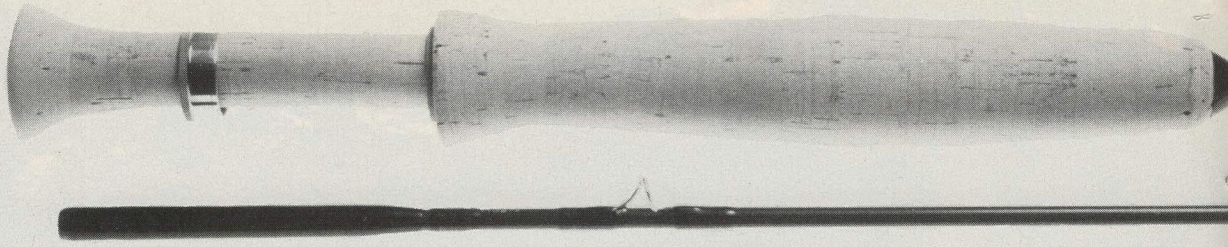


In Defense of **Short Rods**

Many anglers scorn a 7½-foot fly rod as a mere toy, but when it's used in appropriate situations the "toy" becomes a tool of superb efficiency

BY SKIP MORRIS

In the Pacific Northwest, where I live, the long rod is a hot item. This makes good sense in a country where fly fishermen frequently go out after steelhead and salmon, and where the rivers are often broad and wild. I make more 9-foot rods than any other length for local anglers, and rods up to 10 feet are not uncommon.

But even some of our Northwest anglers want little rods—fly rods of around 7½ feet or less that handle light 5, 4, 3, and even 2 weight lines. Many of the people who like the 9-footers also like these little rods. Some of the long-rod enthusiasts, however, consider short rods playthings, unsuitable for "real" fishing.

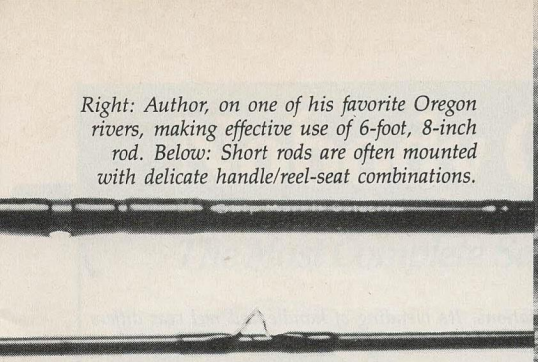
Admittedly, the long rod currently enjoys dramatically greater popularity than the short rod but, I believe, the reasons have little to do with the characteristics of smaller rods.

In the 1950s, there were two principal rod materials: bamboo and fiberglass. And during the '50s someone discovered the obvious: short rods are lighter than longer ones. Some angling writers gave short fly rods a lot of exciting press. Many anglers were happy to abandon the sheer weight of 8- to 14-foot rods weighing anywhere from about 4 ounces up to 20 ounces or more. A fad had begun in the fly-fishing community. As fads progress, they usually reach extreme limits. Eventually, it became not only fashionable but sporting to use short rods for almost any kind of fly fishing—up to and including Atlantic salmon fishing! Such fly rods were no longer restricted to light lines and delicate angling, and 6-foot rods showed up for 6 and even 7 weight lines.

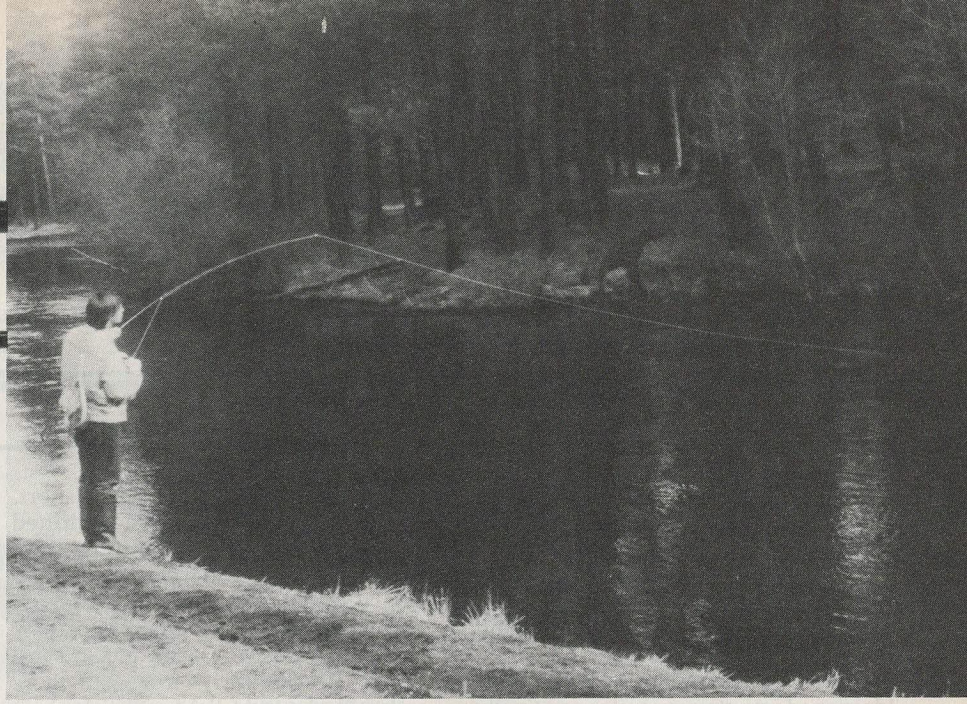
But this fascination with the new and unusual began to fade as big-fly, big-river nymphing and the high-back-cast requirements of brush-lined streams made evident the short rod's limitation. When graphite rods came along, the fly-fishing community was a bit soured on the short rod. Manufacturers advertised graphite—fast response, light weight, tight loops. And because it was easier to make a good *long* rod of light, stiff graphite than a good short one (at least this is my contention), long rods were more actively promoted than short ones. The strategy seems to have worked; many anglers are, even today, favoring the lightest, fastest-responding long rod that tends to create the tightest casting loops with the highest line speed—sometimes even for use where and when a shorter rod, open loops, moderate line speed, and a close casting range are more appropriate.

If we accept the credibility of rod makers whom history has made legends, then there can be little doubt that short rods have genuine merits. Would such great makers and designers as Jim Payne, Russ Peak, and Lew Stoner have directed their time and skill to create playthings? Not likely. Yet each of these men has produced fly rods of 5½ feet or less—and that's *really* short, to my thinking.

Some short-rod models have clearly established themselves as part of our fly



Right: Author, on one of his favorite Oregon rivers, making effective use of 6-foot, 8-inch rod. Below: Short rods are often mounted with delicate handle/reel-seat combinations.



fishing history and tradition. The Leonard Model 36L may have been the first really short ultralight fly rod of prominence. This rod, also known as the Baby Catskill, constitutes a mere 6 feet of bamboo. It's a delicate tool for light lines and gentle presentations.

Another famous little cane rod is the Midge, designed and built by the late Paul Young. It is 6 feet 3 inches long and handles 4 weight lines with authority and delicacy. The Midge has earned praise from many, including such distinguished anglers as Ernest Schwiebert and Arnold Gingrich. In time, the term "midge rod" became a generic description for all short, light-line fly rods—a tribute to Young.

One of Jim Payne's models stands out as unique, even among other short fly rods: The Banty is a tiny cane rod stretching only 4 feet 4 inches. Jim Payne also offered a number of rods from 6 to 7½ feet. Some of the well-known Payne "parabolic" rods were 7½ feet and under; these were inspired by author and rod designer Charles Ritz.

Orvis has offered many short fly rods over the years, but their best-known was probably the Superfine, introduced in 1954. The Superfine was a popular bamboo rod of only 6 feet.

The Winston Company and rod-craftsman Russ Peak certainly deserve mention here. Winston's "Little Fellers" included cane rods from 5½ feet to 7½ feet for 3 and 4 weight lines. California maker Russ Peak works strictly with synthetic fibers—fiberglass, boron, and graphite—and has created many short fly rods in all three materials.

Let's take a look at some of the short rod's characteristics, applications, and merits. First, the question of line control. Here in steelhead country, the line-control advantages of the long rod are well known. Steelheaders typically cast long lines and do a lot of line mending to produce long, carefully manipulated drifts. But what of smaller waters and short casts? Here the short rod shines.

A big advantage of short rods for short casts is that more line can be used to load the rod and form a casting loop. To illustrate, let's make a 20-foot cast with an 8-foot leader. A 9-foot rod would allow only about 3 feet of line to extend beyond the rod's tip— not much help in turning over the fly on the cast. A 6-foot rod would allow closer to 6 feet of line off the tip—much better.

Another consideration is leader protection: short rods are good insurance against breaking fine tippets. When a fish takes, the angler sets the hook by putting the rod in motion; the line comes taught and the hook is set. The difference is that the long rod has greater mass and weight than the short rod. When this mass and weight are in motion, then stop suddenly against the resistance of a fish, the tippet may part under the strain. The lighter short rod could make the difference between a broken leader and a landed fish. This long-rod disadvantage is compounded by the fact that a long rod's tip will move farther and faster than a short rod's tip for the same amount of wrist movement. I'm aware that other factors enter into this, but in a defense of short rods I think it's valid to say that the average angler's technique (given a situation where a short rod is appropriate) may break fewer tippets with a short rod.

A common argument against short rods is the one about distance casting—the longer the rod, the longer the cast. But it seems to me that high tip speed (and therefore line speed) tends to be more difficult to achieve with long rods than with short. And for some casters, long rods evidently create broader loops. Tight loops and high tip and line speeds are the foundation of distance casting. On the other hand, the long rod certainly offers a longer stroke or trajectory at the tip than a short rod. An important consideration is the caster's technique and wrist strength. You may find that you can cast as far with a short rod as with a long one. Try comparison casting with long and short rods of similar actions suited to the same line size and see if the results surprise you.

I consider the short rod for any angling that involves a primarily short-to-moderate casting range, medium to tiny flies, and light tippets; this would include spring creeks, small streams, close-to-the-bank fishing on rivers, and the low flows in late season.

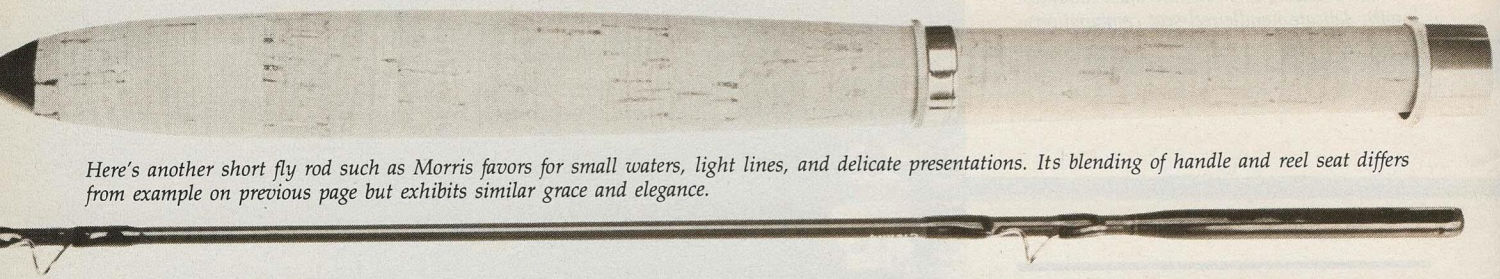
Casting a short rod requires a different technique—a stroke that is short and rapid. A good way to learn to cast a short rod is to start with the shortest, most rapidly accelerated stroke possible, then gradually stretch out the length and acceleration of the stroke until it and the rod are in harmony.

I suppose the short rod has no universally accepted definition. Well, here's mine: 7½ feet or less. At 7 feet or over, a rod can be fairly versatile, but under 7 feet, and especially under 6, I believe the practical range of usefulness becomes quite narrow. Of course, the limitations are largely those of the caster.

Not long ago I took a 7-foot rod out, curious to explore its potential on a favorite river.

Although I have many times tested short rods on substantial rivers, it was usually to see how the rod would perform within its normal parameters. The difference was that this time I set no parameters; I simply put the rod and myself up against an evening of real Northwest river fishing.

The river is a favorite of mine for rod testing because of its variety: lots of riffles, pocket water, broad pools and runs. The fish are almost as varied as the water: resident rainbow and cutthroat trout, sea-run cutthroat, and steelhead. The river was lean and sinewy in the meager flows of August. The rod was a 4-piece 7-footer of moderate action.



Here's another short fly rod such as Morris favors for small waters, light lines, and delicate presentations. Its blending of handle and reel seat differs from example on previous page but exhibits similar grace and elegance.

I started around 6 p.m. in some pocket water and was taking trout right away—strong little rainbows and cutthroats up to 11 inches. The rod would quickly pick up the line, snap the fly free of moisture, and set both again bouncing atop the current.

After a quarter-mile or so, the pockets deepened into streamy water and finally into a pool with a slight current along the opposite side. The streamy water between the pool and pocket water gave up a couple of trout; then I noticed a quiet rise, tight against the far bank. The gentle flow and the location of the rise—in a slot offering good cover—suggested that the fish was a good one, probably a sea-run cutthroat. I put out my dry fly with plenty of slack for a long, drag-free float, but I was short. The next cast was right—the fly drifted a few feet into position, and the trout took, just as it should have. It was a sea-run cutthroat of 14 inches. I released it and went on up to a broad pool.

The pool was very wide and still and deep. The sun was setting, but there was still plenty of light so I fished up through the pool, pushing out all the line I needed to cover the good water. As I'd expected, nothing of any size moved to the fly—the fish would want aerated water with the river so low. A long, even riffle, waist-deep with a slight chop, came in at the head and gradually lost itself in the dark stillness of the big pool. I worked my way cautiously up the riffle, letting the fly drift through with plenty of slack and no drag. A little way up, another sea-run quietly took the fly; in the net it was a twin of the first. Farther up the run, a bigger sea-run took, about 16 inches. Then I missed a fish, and by then I was at the top of the run. The light was quickly fading so I decided to put on a steelhead fly and work back down.

So far, the little rod had done all I could ask of it. I'd had all the line control I needed, plenty of casting range, and an easy time drying the fly. But steelhead, damp-fly techniques are different—the fly is cast across or quartering downstream and the angler is constantly mending and maneuvering line. The trick is to keep the fly from swinging across too quickly.

The little rod made me stretch and reach and wade deeper than I wanted to, though I did manage good fly drifts.

Another 14-incher took, and I netted and released it. Soon I missed another fish, and then a good fish, 3 or 4 pounds, came right up, head first, and arched calmly over—a glint of silver in the half light. He missed the fly, and I really wanted him because I felt certain he was a steelhead. But he wouldn't come again even though I worked over him until it was too dark.

You're right, experiments like this never prove anything; fishing a short rod where a longer rod would normally be the rule is just too vague for hard conclusions. And the variables are too many—the skills of the angler, the height of the water, the changes of fly and technique to accommodate the changes in the fish's mood. But if my evening with the 7-footer reveals no hard conclusions, it does indicate that the short fly rod is no toy. Had I been out to show the *best* of what a short rod can do, I'd have fished it on a smaller stream requiring tiny flies and fine leaders—or perhaps an outing with a *long* rod on *short*-rod water would have been a better illustration. The point is, there's a valid place for the short rod in fly fishing. Some folks feel most comfortable living by accepted rules, while others prefer to question the rules or live by the rule of personal taste. Why not?