



Nick discusses bamboo rod care.

A question I'm asked frequently is 'how tough are bamboo rods?' As well as being an important consideration for anyone contemplating buying a rod, it's probably a slightly loaded question on two counts.

Firstly, there's a perception that bamboo rods are a little quaint and fragile. The counter to this is there are many well cared for bamboo rods still being fished regularly that are around 50 or even 100 years old. My good friend and fishing guide Paul Bourne has caught well over a thousand fish on a 4 weight seven footer I made for him, and it's still going strong. He's not the most light-handed angler in the world, though he knows how to treat a rod.

Secondly, there's the influence of the 'no questions asked' replacement warranties offered by many graphite rod manufacturers. This has led to some people being a little lax in the care or treatment of their rods. And of course, accidents do happen!

Bamboo compared to Graphite

Comparing the characteristics of cane to graphite is a useful exercise, with most of today's flyfishers familiar with the latter at least.

In terms of similarities, graphite and bamboo rods both tend to break for the same reasons. Besides basic abuse, breakages occur due to overloading either the whole rod or part of the rod when high sticking, when executing violent and poorly-timed casts, when yanking at a snagged line with a bent rod, etc. Then there are accidents which are equally lethal to both materials, like falling on the rod, or the car door closing at the wrong moment! However there are also some significant differences between how graphite and cane respond to mistreatment.

Overloading

Graphite rods are incredibly tough. Even with their hollow, thin-walled construction, many of these rods will permit quite extreme loading before anything untoward happens. The combination of graphite fibres and the resins around them allow for repeated high stress to be placed on the rod, with little or no effect on its appearance or action. When a graphite rod is overloaded to the point of breaking though, it usually breaks completely—and sometimes quite spectacularly!

In general, bamboo rods are solid not hollow, being constructed from a lamination of six triangular segments of cane. Bamboo fibres are quite stiff, though not as stiff as graphite (Tonkin Cane is between

graphite and fibreglass in modulus). The fibres in a cane rod run parallel along the length of each section. While glue holds each of the laminated sections together, the 'resin' between the fibres in each bamboo rod section is lignin and other natural compounds.

When a cane rod is overloaded, the natural fibres can be overstretched. The rod may not break totally, but the rod may develop a permanent bend or 'set' in it—particularly if this is done repeatedly. The good news is that unless the rod is overloaded to the point of breakage, a slight set won't generally affect the fishability of a rod. Sets can be negated by avoiding overloading the rod (or part of the rod), and by loading the rod evenly.

Chips, dings and surface cracks

The stiffness and thin hollow walls of graphite rods expose them to impact damage from bead-head flies or other sharp knocks. These can fracture the hard but slightly brittle blank wall and lead to the rod snapping immediately, or at a later stage while casting or playing fish. As with overloading, when a fracture does occur in graphite, it generally leads to a complete break.

One consequence of the solid construction of bamboo rods is that they tend to be somewhat resilient to impact damage to the rod's surface. A hook ding, bead-head ding, or other hard knock may cause a visible injury to a rod. However, if noticed soon after the impact occurs, minor damage can be repaired by a rod maker by applying glue, and over-binding with fine white (clear) silk to reinforce the bamboo. The rod can then be fished again as normal.

Moisture

One slight difference between graphite and bamboo is the effect of moisture. Graphite rods are pretty much waterproof and can survive long periods in water or being put away wet—although I have seen a couple of graphite rods stored wet for a long time that became mottled in appearance.

Bamboo as a material is more water resistant than waterproof. Raw bamboo will wick up water to a degree, though if left in a warm, dry place, most of this will evaporate and leave the material dry again. Bamboo rods are either varnished or impregnated, providing an additional protection against moisture, and so exposure to water under normal fishing conditions is fine. The occasional dunk in a river or lake, though best avoided, isn't a major problem. Leaving or storing

a rod wet is the biggest concern. Water can find its way through minor chips or scratches in the finish, soak into the bamboo, and eventually rot and weaken the material. Thus, cane rods should be wiped dry after use. When stored, the cap should be left off the rod tube for a few days. Even better, hang the rod somewhere safe in its cloth bag.

Ferrules

Graphite rods are fitted with either integrated sleeve ferrules, or spigot ferrules. Advice on assembling these connections is generally to twist the rod sections into alignment as the joint is pushed together. This works because the ferrule is part of the rod, there is some taper in the fit, and also some inherent flexibility in the graphite ferrule itself.

Modern bamboo rods are usually fitted with nickel silver ferrules, while many older rods have brass ferrules. The ferrules are attached to the rod sections by fitting and glueing the bamboo inside the ferrule. At the transition point there are usually fingers or 'tabs' on the ferrule, which are tapered, and bound over. This allows a short area of flexibility between the bamboo and the stiff metal ferrules. Nickel silver ferrules are parallel in fit (as opposed to tapered graphite ferrules) and engage for the full length of the slide. Twisting a cane rod ferrule into place is not a good idea, because it causes stress to the short section of bamboo between where the rod is held and the connection to the ferrule. It also places unneeded pressure on the glue between the bamboo and nickel silver.

The simplest way to assemble a bamboo rod is to line up the rod sections first with your fingers as close as practical to the ferrules, and then slide the ferrules together smoothly. When pulling the rod apart, a straight pull is the way to go, but this time with your hands further apart—this encourages a straight pull on the rod.



Nickel silver is a self-lubricating material, so keeping the ferrules simply clean and dry is best. The male can be wiped with a cloth, and the female cleaned with a cotton bud or barrel of cloth twisted in.

Warranties and Spare Sections

As mentioned previously, many graphite manufacturers offer very generous warranties. Without going into detailed economic analysis,

it's obvious that the initial purchase price is partly inflated to factor in likely replacement of a section or more over the life of the rod (or angler!)

The large amount of work in making a bamboo rod precludes the possibility of bamboo rodmakers offering unlimited warranties. This is offset by the traditional practice of making cane rods with a spare tip. As well as providing insurance against the breakage of one tip, it also permits sharing wear across two tips.

FACT FILE

BAMBOO ROD CARE TIPS

Below are some tips I provide on a care sheet to people buying a cane rod or asking advice—these summarise most of the points I've covered above. Many of these tips are a good starting point for graphite rod care as well. I am also in the process of putting together a short video on rod care for YouTube.

GENERAL

Major threats to a bamboo rod include:

- Severe over-bending, or placing a sharp bend over a small section of the rod.
- Striking the rod against rocks, branches or with bead-head flies, causing dings or chips in the bamboo.
- Sustained contact with moisture (caused for example by storing a wet rod in a sealed tube after fishing).

Keep these points in mind when using and storing your rod. The following are some specific instructions which will minimise the chances of damaging your rod.

STORAGE

- When not in use, the rod should be kept in a cool, dry place. As mentioned earlier, before placing the rod back in its tube after fishing, wipe off any excess moisture. After returning from your trip, either hang the rod in its bag in a safe place using the loop of the bag, or leave the cap off the tube for a few days to allow moisture to leave the tube. Never store the rod out of its tube, leaning against a wall.
- Never leave the rod in the sun in the back of a car.
- While placing the whole bag and rod sections back in the tube, form a ring around the top of the tube with the thumb and forefinger of one hand (slightly smaller than the opening). This protects the rod and guides from catching on the lip of the tube as the bag is inserted. Never try to force the rod back into the bag and tube.
- If the rod has ferrule plugs, when not in use, keep the plugs in the ferrules to keep dirt and moisture out.
- **Never** store the rod assembled. The ferrules may fuse and get stuck forever!

ASSEMBLING THE ROD

- Do not lubricate the ferrule. Give the male ferrule a wipe with a clean cloth (or your shirt) before assembly.
- Align the guides from the two sections before seating the ferrule. Never assemble the rod with the ferrules misaligned and then twist it into place. Never force the ferrules together if they feel too tight. Take the rod apart and clean out the female ferrule with a cotton bud or barrel of tissue or cloth.
- When seating the ferrules, keep your hands as close together as practical (adjacent to the ferrules) to avoid placing the rod under undue pressure.
- When setting up, avoid bending the tip when pulling line through. Pull the line straight out from the tip. Never hold the rod near the tip and pull line out at an angle.

TAKING THE ROD APART

- When taking the rod apart, hold the butt section low down with your right hand (if right handed) with your hand close to you, and hold the tip section with your left hand just above the ferrule, keeping your arm out relatively straight. This will promote a straight pull on the rod.
- Never use the guides to brace your grip on the rod while assembling or disassembling the rod.
- Remember the basic rule **'together-together, apart-apart'** (putting the rod together – hands together; pulling the rod apart – hands apart).

FISHING

- If your rod is a two tip rod, alternate the tips on fishing trips.
- While playing a fish, try to turn the rod over periodically to balance the pressure on the rod.
- Avoid 'high sticking' the rod while playing fish. High sticking is pointing the rod straight up, or even back behind you, when exerting pressure on the fish. This can over-stress the rod, leading to breakage or a 'set' in the rod. Because of the fuller loading nature of bamboo over stiffer materials, a more effective way to tire and play fish is to keep the rod lower, at 45 degrees.
- When landing a fish, try to avoid high sticking by holding the rod back behind you with the butt up and the tip down a little. Use a net, or grasp the leader for the final phase of landing the fish.
- Sometimes the rod may show a slight bend after playing a large fish. Give the rod a wiggle as soon as you notice this and it should straighten out. Keeping (and storing) the rod straight will reduce the chance of the rod taking a permanent set.
- Never use the rod to pull a fly out of a snag or bush. Take some slack line in front of the tip, and carefully pull the fly free (or break the tippet) by hand.
- When picking the line off the water to cast, lift off smoothly before accelerating into the casting stroke, rather than violently ripping into the backcast. This results in a better cast and avoids overloading the rod.
- When storing the fly while fishing, if the rod is not fitted with a hook keeper, pass the leader under the reel foot, and hook the fly on a convenient guide on the rod. Keep the line tight enough to hold the fly in place, but never so tight that the rod is kept bent.
- If your rod is accidentally damaged in the course of fishing, stop fishing with it immediately to avoid further damage. A small crack in the rod can sometimes be repaired without the requirement to replace the entire section.

Even with care, bamboo rods can eventually take a set (usually in the tip section, in a downward direction). This does not affect the fishing properties of the rod, and can even be seen as a sign of character!

*Bamboo rod maker Nick Taransky lives in Queanbeyan, near the streams of the Monaro and Snowy Mountains.
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