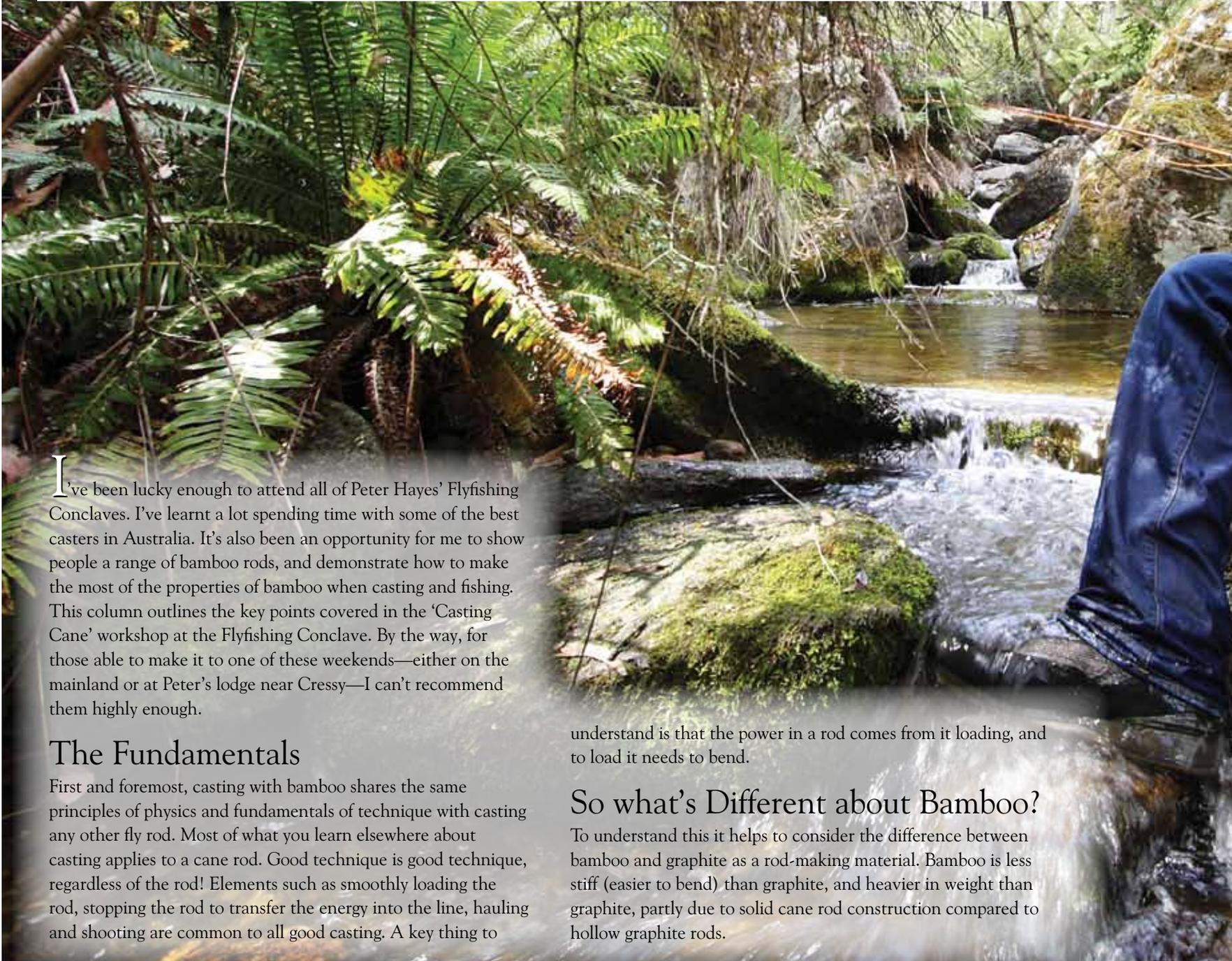




BAMBOO

NICK TARANSKY

Nick covers casting with cane rods.



I've been lucky enough to attend all of Peter Hayes' Flyfishing Conclaves. I've learnt a lot spending time with some of the best casters in Australia. It's also been an opportunity for me to show people a range of bamboo rods, and demonstrate how to make the most of the properties of bamboo when casting and fishing. This column outlines the key points covered in the 'Casting Cane' workshop at the Flyfishing Conclave. By the way, for those able to make it to one of these weekends—either on the mainland or at Peter's lodge near Cressy—I can't recommend them highly enough.

The Fundamentals

First and foremost, casting with bamboo shares the same principles of physics and fundamentals of technique with casting any other fly rod. Most of what you learn elsewhere about casting applies to a cane rod. Good technique is good technique, regardless of the rod! Elements such as smoothly loading the rod, stopping the rod to transfer the energy into the line, hauling and shooting are common to all good casting. A key thing to

understand is that the power in a rod comes from it loading, and to load it needs to bend.

So what's Different about Bamboo?

To understand this it helps to consider the difference between bamboo and graphite as a rod-making material. Bamboo is less stiff (easier to bend) than graphite, and heavier in weight than graphite, partly due to solid cane rod construction compared to hollow graphite rods.



Tight, overgrown creeks are perfect for short rod and leader only casts.

Loading a Rod

The amount a rod loads is basically determined by:

- The application of power in the casting stroke.
- The weight of the line through the guides of the rod and outside the tip.
- The natural amount of flex in the rod.
- The physical weight of the rod material.

For a given length of cast, bamboo will have more inherent load from its natural flex and weight. What this means is that bamboo rods in general require less force in the casting stroke to load them, and have more momentum due to their weight. This results in what many people describe as a fluid, 'easy' casting feel. Long-time Snowy Mountains guide Paul Bourne calls this 'swing'. It also means that bamboo rods generally respond better to a more relaxed, smoother casting stroke than stiffer rods.

Getting to Know a Rod

Here are some points that will help you get started with bamboo.

START SHORT AND SMOOTH

If you are new to bamboo, start with a shortish line, say 1 to 3 rod lengths, and experiment with the timing and amount of power you apply in your casting stroke. See how much you can back off the power and still form a smooth, efficient loop. This doesn't mean go sloppy or limp. Still maintain the correct technique – just relax a bit, let the rod do the work, and try to feel it.

Particularly with these short casts, it can help to think of the backcast as an up-cast. Of course, if the backcast goes up, the forward cast should be aimed down as well as forward, to keep the back and forward casting planes parallel.

This up-cast concept can really help those new to fly casting, as there is a tendency for beginners to almost subconsciously throw the back cast down at the end of the back stroke. Like many good ideas, this one is not new: Charles Ritz discussed it in detail in his book 'A Fly Fisher's Life'.

LIFT OFF SMOOTHLY

When picking the line off the water into the initial backcast, a smooth lift loads the rod smoothly. Ripping the line off the water overloads the rod immediately and puts the caster in recovery mode right from the start. Of course, there are many times on a stream when wiggle, roll, snap or spiral lift-offs may be used for various reasons, but never with an overpowering violence that disrupts the flow of the cast.

WORK YOUR WAY OUT GRADUALLY

When slowly working into longer casts, or using more speed/power, focus on a smooth accelerating application of power – pull the load into the rod rather than pushing the power all at once from the start. When you lose feel and control in the cast, shorten the line and cast short again. Keep your form, technique and smoothness. Try to execute a fishing length cast perfectly, rather than the longest cast you can manage raggedly!

STAY SMOOTH

Power and speed are great, but not at the expense of staying smooth. As an exercise, do some casting with your eyes closed and focus on

the feel of the rod loading smoothly. Mel Krieger used the term ‘oily’ to describe the smooth feeling you should create in your casting stroke. When really tuned to a rod, there seems to be a constant connection and flow between your hand and the fly, and it is hard to tell where the rod ends and the line starts.

Leader-only Casting

A significant feature of a bamboo rod is its ability to self load, created by the natural flex and weight of the rod. The rod is going to flex and load with or without the line. This means that bamboo can be used to deliver a leader on its own, with no line at all through the guides.

This self loading is best achieved with a fairly short up-cast and a firm (but still smooth) casting stroke. Without the aid of line to load the rod, you will have to do a little work to get the rod loading under its own weight. A smooth stop on the up-cast is important in creating this load. With no line, it will feel like you’re stopping early—even before 11 o’clock—in the casting stroke. Of course, with a short cast like this and the firm stroke, there won’t be much of a pause at the end of the up-cast.

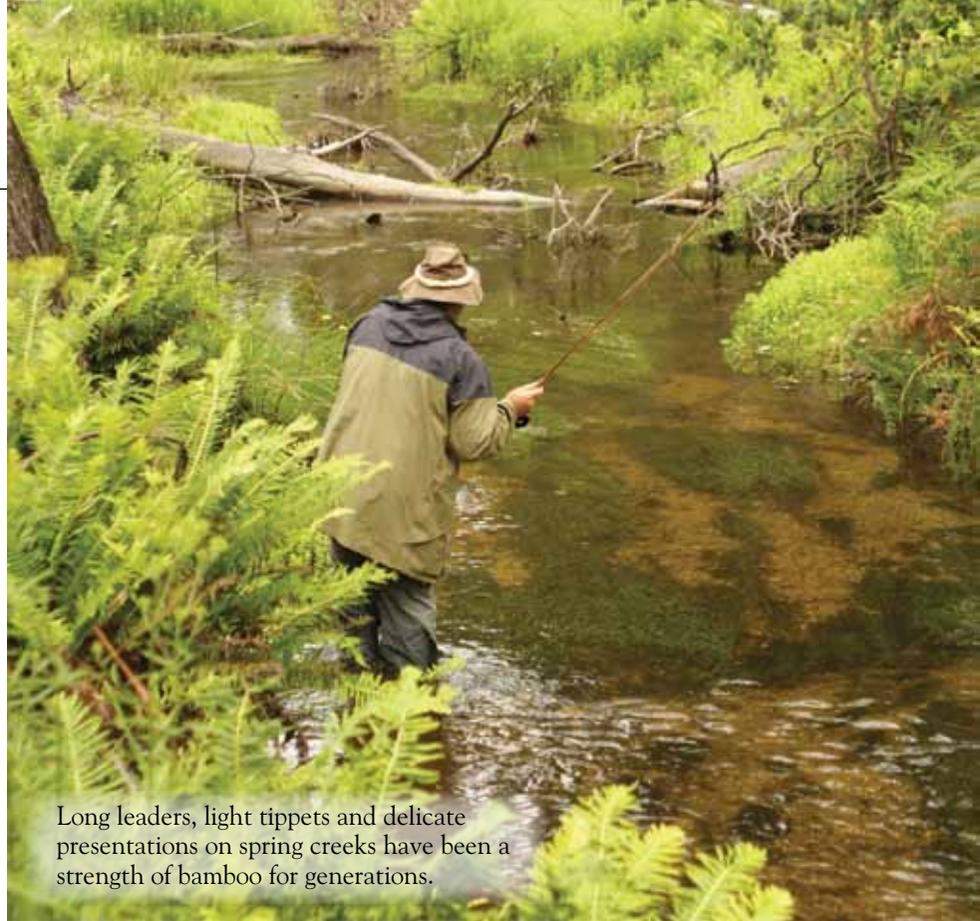
It can take a little practice to get used to the feel of the rod loading rather than line loading the rod. If you’re used to the feel of the line loading the rod, there can be a tendency to ‘search’ for the feel of the line by making your stroke longer and longer and harder and harder, resulting in a casting arc that’s too large. This can result in throwing the backcast down at the end, and generally flailing away with wasted, ungainly effort. Keep it short, smooth, tight and compact.

Really try to connect with the feel of the rod loading. The aim is to hold the load in the rod at the end of both the forward and up-cast.

One good way to practice the leader-only cast is without any line through the guides at all. Watch the rod load and unload while you practice your casting stroke back and forth. Focus on watching and feeling the rod staying flexed at the end of both the forward and up-cast. Wait too long at the end of the stroke, and the rod will unload/straighten. Too fast and there won’t be enough time for a leader to unroll/turn over in a fishing situation. Try a variety of different strokes, while maintaining the same tight, heavy, oily, loaded feel—small stroke, larger stroke, tiny stroke; slow, medium, fast tempo...



Short line accurate casting works well in pocket water.



Long leaders, light tippets and delicate presentations on spring creeks have been a strength of bamboo for generations.

The Open Power Loop and Constant Load Casting

You’ll notice when casting with cane that the flex and weight means it’s natural for the tip to deflect more than on stiffer rods. This results in slightly wider loops, while still containing plenty of power and control for presentation. With this open loop (‘U’ as opposed to ‘V’-shaped) particularly on short to medium length casts, it feels like you can hold the load in the rod all the way through the cast. This constant load casting is being discussed more widely in casting with all types of rods.

Note however that it’s still possible, through control and technique, to throw little ‘candy cane’ loops with the softest of cane rods should you want to or need to.

Rod Lengths

One consequence of the weight and flex of bamboo is that it’s best suited to rods that are a little shorter than those made from stiffer materials. I’ve mentioned in earlier columns that I believe rods in the 6½ to 7½ foot, 3 to 5 weight range bring out the best in bamboo. Good technique still applies in casting these rods, but for most of us who’ve come from a background of 9 foot graphite rods, they take a little getting used to. This is another reason to gain the feel of the rod while casting a shortish line, and then gradually working out to longer casts.

One thing to note when fishing shorter rods is the height of your backcast (up-cast) for clearing obstacles behind you. Once you’ve made this adjustment, the advantages of fishing a short rod, particularly along tight streams, can really revolutionise the way you fish.

Short rods can still turnover long leaders if required. I use a knotless superglue leader connection that passes easily back and forth through the guides and tip.

In my view, with rods much beyond 8 feet in length or above 6 weight, the weight and flex of bamboo starts to work against them. Casting fatigue can become a factor, particularly when blind casting for long periods with these rods.



Grip Location and Casting Balance

A point worth touching on is how far up or down the grip to hold the rod. In general, ‘crowding the reel’ with your rod hand (keeping your hand as close as practical to the reel) aids casting stroke integrity. If the reel is too far from the hand, the reel weight works as a pendulum in the cast, which in turn causes unwanted rotation of the rod, or unneeded effort fighting against it. This is one reason why many rods are now fitted with up-locking seats.

My personal choice of grip/reel seat configuration is a 5½” cigar grip with a simple down-locking cap and ring reel seat. This allows me to squeeze the maximum length out of a short, 6½ foot rod, by dropping the rod hand down off the back of the grip onto the reel seat, almost on top of the reel.

As an exercise, try some different hand positions on the grip and notice how this changes the balance of the rod and feel of the cast. Some proponents of longer, heavier rods do like a little separation between hand and reel to offset the top-heavy nature of the rod.

Bow & Arrow Casting

Bow & arrow casts are perfectly okay with a cane rod if performed properly. Always separate the rod hand and fly hand before loading the rod. Angle your rod arm forward and down towards the ground. Cock your wrist with the rod angled up and the fly held up high, to create a wide angle between the rod and flyline/leader. Try to get the initial rod/line angle close to 90 degrees if you can. This loads the rod evenly and allows for a more accurate, controlled presentation. (NEVER pull the leader straight back along the rod, which can overload the tip and break it.) Follow the rod down to parallel as you release the fly. This adds a little lever to the spring of the cast, making it more like a standard forward cast.

First-time bow & arrow casters will notice how you don’t need to load the rod much at all in order to roll over the leader and deliver the fly. If you haven’t tried this cast before you may initially find you have too much leader out—your arms won’t seem long enough!

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

While there are few better teachers than a spooked trout, it’s far less painful to do some practice at home or down at the park.

AT HOME

A good place to work on the fundamentals of casting is in an open area, so you can focus on the basics without obstacles. In addition though, I really recommend scenario-based practice. If you fish small, bushy streams for example, practice around trees or other obstacles. Do some casting from a kneeling or even lying position. Set out or choose targets at different angles as well as different lengths. See how quickly you can change from one target to another, with little or no false casting. Curve some casts around your car, and do some slack line /mend/dump casts. Try some casts starting with the line reeled up as you would on the stream. Cast at all sorts of angles to the wind—short to medium casts into the wind seem to challenge a lot of people, despite often being required on the water.

ON THE STREAM

If you’ve made a poor presentation and missed a chance at a fish, probably the last thing on your mind is to try the cast again once the fish is gone! However, this is an ideal opportunity to practice a cast to the same lie, and to give you a better chance next time.

Key Points

- Good casting fundamentals are universal. All the elements of technique apply to whatever type of rod you use.
- Bamboo is a little heavier and more flexible than graphite.
- Bamboo rods load easily—less effort is needed to load the rod.
- Apply power smoothly. If in doubt, back off the brute power.
- Most modern bamboo rods are shorter (6½–7½ feet) than you may be used to.
- Focus on short, stream fishing-range casts, particularly to begin with. Think up-cast, not backcast.
- Try to get the feeling of keeping the load in the rod at all times.
- Practice, practice, practice, and come to a Conclave!