

TENKARA A YEAR ON

By Dave Southall



A Derbyshire Wye grayling

In the Autumn 2011 issue of the *Grayling* I told you about my early trials (Czech nymphing) with a 12 foot Tenkara rod. It at least doubled my winter catch rate and obviated the problems of iced up rod rings and cold hands (with no line or reel to be manipulated by the non-rod hand full mittens could be worn until a fish had to be unhooked). Now, after a year of fishing Tenkara and with over 700 grayling, brown trout, rainbow trout and brook trout having fallen to my Tenkara rods, I feel I can expand a bit on my findings (and those of friends who have also taken up Tenkara).

After being convinced of the superiority of these long, soft tipped, fixed line rods for the precise presentation of Czech nymphs/Shrimps during the severe winter of 2010/11 I couldn't wait to try them with the dry fly. Unfortunately, here in East Yorkshire we had virtually no rain after February and our rivers were desperately low until late October. Tenkara is a hyper-close range tactic and I felt these conditions did not favour this approach so my first session with the dry fly was not till the 24th April when I visited the upper Tees, above High Force, where I used my 13 foot 8 inch Tenkara USA Amago. High Sticking with a size 12 Klinkhamer I found the line control I had was far better than with my shorter 10 and 11 foot

conventional rods. I could far more easily hold all the line (10 feet of 0.35 mm/14lb bright yellow copolymer) and virtually all the tippet (3 feet of 6x copolymer) off the water, facilitating quite long drag-free drifts. Casting was an effortless flick and very accurate. It was all so elegant and simple. Despite no hatch and little fly life 36 brown trout up to 30cm fell to my dry fly. My friend, Steve Donohue, also fishing Tenkara, did equally well.

With ever shrinking waters I did not have the confidence to try it again until the 6th of July when Stuart Crofts stayed with me and had a short session on Pickering Beck. Stuart wanted to give Tenkara a bash since I'd told him of my early trials. I was very apprehensive about our chances of any success since most of the runs were little more than 8 inches deep and even the pools were mostly no more than knee deep. How would we get close enough to the fish? The 12 foot Iwana plus a line/tippet the same length as the rod gives an effective range of no more than 20 feet. I need not have worried, using a very stealthy approach whilst rod-sharing we managed half a dozen trout in an hour, enough to convince Stuart that he needed to get a Tenkara rod. Since that trip he has become a Tenkara convert and after starting with an 11 foot Iwana on his home water (the upper Don above

Penistone) he has invested in a longer rod. That day was a cathartic stage in my Tenkara conversion. It made me realise that even in severe drought conditions Tenkara has real advantages. There is no heavy fly line falling on the water and spooking fish and rod movements during casting are slow and smooth, further reducing the risk of



Stuart Crofts demonstrating Tenkara on The Derbyshire Wye Tenkara Day

spooking fish. Numerous subsequent sessions on Pickering Beck and the Yorkshire Derwent in these severe drought conditions, fishing size 20 to 26 CdCs (IOBO Humpies or Shuttlecocks) to very finicky midge and aphid feeding grayling and trout, have convinced me of the superiority of Tenkara's presentational potential. I have caught many more fish than I would normally have expected.

A trip to Austria in September 2011 really sealed my conversion. Steve Donohue, videoed me fishing the same pool on the Zembach, near Mayrhofen, first with my 10 foot #4 rod and then with my 13 foot 8 inch Amago. Watching the videos was a revelation. With the conventional gear I had to work much harder to achieve drag-free drifts (reach casting, mending etc.) and even then I was only managing quite short drifts. I was also spooking far more fish in the gin clear, shallow, water of the pool tail (4 to 1 observed). Furthermore my

catch rate on the Tenkara was about double that on the conventional rod despite having already fished the pool a few hours earlier. On the bouldery, alpine pocket water streams Steve and I absolutely annihilated the brown, rainbow and brook trout (sadly only 1 grayling) thanks to Tenkara, with up to 150 fish in a 4 hour day. Again I reckon it at least

doubled our catch rates thanks to the improved presentation.

On the 24th of October, David Percival (retired Head Keeper of the Cressbrook & Littondale water on the Derbyshire Wye) organised a Tenkara Day at which Stuart Crofts, Steve Donohue and I demonstrated Tenkara and gave club members a chance to try a range of Tenkara rods (from 11 to 14 feet 7 inches) and various set ups. Despite a windy day, it was an outstanding success, with virtually all attendees becoming converts. Many commented about their ability to present drag-free drifts in places they had never been able to fish effectively before. Good numbers of grayling up to around 38cm fell to our dry flies, plus a few out of season brown and rainbow trout up to 45cm.

On the 29th and 30th of October Steve & I had good success on the Haddon Hall section of the Derbyshire Wye, where we made several converts and where Steve had an outstanding grayling of 47cm. Then on the 1st of November I met Roger Beck (fly fishing guide) on Pickering Beck where he



Pickering Beck grayling which fell to a Size 26 IOBO Humpy on 7x tippet

rod-shared with me. 14 grayling and several wild trout fell to my 12' Iwana and yet another conversion was made.

Steve Donohue has always been fairly dismissive about 'Gear Junkies/Tackle Tarts' who are always talking about their latest rod or reel rather than the fish and fishing. However with his conversion to Tenkara he too is becoming a bit of a 'Gear Nerd'. So for those of you who are 'Gear Freaks' here are some facts to excite you.

The rods, which range from 2.5 to 4oz, are



41cm grayling which fell to size 20 Black-bead PT Nymph on 7x tippet

telescopic carbon fibre and collapse down to around 20 inches long. They are classified according to their flex characteristics. A 5:5 rod bends freely over half its length, great for protecting light tippet. A 6:4 rod flexes in the top 40% and would be considered as a general purpose rod. 7:3 and 8:2 rods are decidedly tip action. There is however a complication; a rod may be a soft 6:4 (as with Tenkara USA's Ito, which can be fished at 13 feet or 14 feet 7 inches) or a stiffer 6:4 (as with Tenkara USA's 13 feet 8 inch Amago). The Ito is great for dry fly, light nymphing, spider fishing and duo, particularly with light tippet (6 or 7x). However, the Amago is a better bet for Czech nymphing with a team of heavy flies and 5x tippet (the maximum strength tippet recommended).

There are 2 main types of line; furled (copolymer, fluorocarbon, tying thread or horse hair) and parallel (fluorocarbon or copolymer). Each type has its supporters. Furled lines/furled leaders are great for delicate casting and in situations where I am unable to hold all the line off the water I like a furled copolymer or furled tying thread line since when greased they float well and so do not impede striking and line control. Rod Dibbles furled leaders

are (in my opinion) the best and he'll make them to the length you require.

Much of the time I prefer parallel lines. These come in a range of weights, based on a traditional Japanese scale. #3 is a light line (equivalent to 0.285mm fluorocarbon or 0.35mm copolymer), whilst a #5 line is fairly heavy (equivalent to 0.37mm fluorocarbon or 0.45mm copolymer). Fluorocarbon, being denser than copolymer, casts better in windy conditions, but sinks if allowed to land on the water. My favourite line is 0.35 mm

(14lb Seastrike XT) copolymer, which is so cheap that you can afford to cut down a line which is too long when you change from dry fly to Czech nymphing. Generally fluorescent yellow, orange or pink lines are favoured to help indicate takes with subsurface flies although when nymphing I incorporate a short length of bright yellow or orange braid or curly wurly into my set up.

Line length is an important factor in achieving good presentation. Whilst many Tenkara fishers use a line plus tippet longer than the rod I prefer one the same length as or slightly shorter than the rod. This confers two advantages. First and foremost, with a short line it is possible to hold all the line and most of the tippet off the water,

significantly reducing drag. Secondly it reduces the need to 'hand line' a fish in when landing a fish by net or hand. My most commonly used line/tippet set ups are as follows:

Dry Fly:

Line 0.35mm yellow copolymer 3 to 4 feet shorter than the rod plus 2 to 4 feet of tippet

Czech nymph/Light nymph:

Line 0.35mm copolymer 5 to 6 feet shorter than the rod plus 6 inches to 1 foot of bright yellow braid or a curly wurly plus 4 to 5 feet of tippet

Duo:

Line 0.35mm copolymer or furled leader 5 feet shorter than the rod plus 2 feet of tippet to the dry fly plus 3 feet of tippet to the nymph

In windy conditions I'll sometimes substitute #3 or #4 fluorocarbon lines for the copolymer.

Casting needs to be very smooth, with soft stops and much slower than with a conventional rod. You have to let the rod do the work, even when casting into a breeze. A gentle jump roll cast works well, whilst in confined situations. Tenkara rods are



Action on the Derbyshire Wye Tenkara Day

brilliant at Bow and Arrow casting.

With a fixed line there is always the risk of being broken off by a particularly big fish. Steve and I have been experimenting with additional shock absorbers in the system. Furled Leaders give a limited amount of extra shock absorption due to their stretch. #4 Pole elastic is too stretchy and thicker elastic too heavy. 2 to 3 feet of 14 lb breaking strain Power Gum between the lillian and line provides an extra margin of shock absorption without affecting casting or control of the fish. This is particularly useful when using 7x tippet with tiny nymphs or dry flies (most of my grayling this autumn (2011) have fallen to size 20 Shuttlecocks, size 26 IOBO Humpies and size 20 Black-bead PT Nymphs, with fish up to 41cm, just short of the magic 2lb mark).

A pair of Fuji EZ clips, attached to the butt section, are essential accessories, allowing the line and leader to be coiled around them when the rod is collapsed down e.g. when walking through densely wooded paths. I tend to leave my line permanently attached when stored in its bag and tube.

Finally a word or two about hooks: Tenkara rod tips are very thin and do not exert a lot of force on



A pair of Fuji EZ clips allow you to coil up the line when the rod is collapsed

the strike so I like to tie my flies on fine wire, barbless hooks to ensure good hooking.

Tenkara has taken over my life and particularly my grayling fishing. Jump on the 'band wagon'; it's great fun and unbelievably effective.

Useful web sites:

www.tenkara.usa :- for rods, leaders/lines and lots of information, including excellent video clips.

www.tenkarabum.com :- for lots of information, rod reviews and equipment.