



Fly Fishing

From Scratch



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Part 1: Introduction

This is a book about the art of catching a fish with a fly. It is for people of all fly-fishing abilities. Even if you have never seen a fly rod before, this book is for you: it will teach you everything you need to know to get yourself started with fly-fishing and progress towards that amazing moment when all your efforts pay off and you catch your first fish.

This book will concentrate primarily on fly-fishing for trout. Of course, there are all sorts of fish species - both freshwater and marine - which can be caught with fly-fishing equipment. But the great majority of fly-anglers ply their trade in pursuit of the wily trout. In fact, fly-fishing was invented as a method of catching the native brown trout of small chalk streams in England, and since then it has simply been applied to other kinds of fish in other places around the world.

But this book is not intended to be exclusively about fly-fishing for trout. So in the course of the following chapters I will try as much as possible to provide information about the other kinds of fly-fishing that people practise around the globe. As well as giving you plenty of technical information about fly-fishing, it is also my aim to give you a "feel" for what fly-angling is all about. Thus I have included personal anecdotes and descriptions of example situations where possible. I have also tried to explain what I mean when I use certain words that have a unique meaning in relation to fly-fishing. By the end of this book you should also have a good grasp of the special "lingo" of fly-fishing!

Why fly-fishing?

Sometimes people ask me why I fly-fish, when spin-fishing for the same kinds of fish is so much easier and just as successful. Well, it's true that spin-fishing is easier than fly-fishing. It really doesn't take too much skill to cast a metal lure with a spinning rod. And it's also true that spin-fishing can be a very productive way to catch trout and other species of fish. I do not think fly-fishing is a "better" or "more sophisticated" way to catch fish. I have a lightweight Shimano spinning rod and reel, which I often use on the lower reaches of big rivers for catching fresh run sea trout in Springtime.

However, I would never be able to use my spinning set on a small stream in the highcountry. Nor would my spinning gear be much use to me on a high-country river when the trout are merrily rising to cicadas. Nor would it be very

useful around the shallow edges of a lake when the trout are feeding on green beetles. In all of these situations, the only fishing method which would consistently produce results is fly-fishing!

So when people ask me why I fly-fish, the best answer I can give them is that, although it is a good and enjoyable way to catch fish, spin-fishing has serious limitations, whereas fly-fishing gives me the chance to catch trout in a much wider range of situations.

Fly-fishing for trout is also an extremely *exciting* sport. The angler has to pit his skills against the highly-tuned survival instincts of the trout, which is one of the most cautious and easily-spooked of all wild animals. The angler stalks the trout, approaching it with great stealth, and then presents the trout with an artificial fly. If the presentation is delicate enough - and if the fly looks life-like to the fish - then there's a good chance the fish will take the fly into its mouth. The angler must then strike, with a sharp upwards jerk of the rod, to set the hook into the trout's mouth. And then, if the strike is successful, the battle begins!

Fly-fishing can also be a profoundly relaxing and therapeutic pastime. Many seasoned fly-anglers will tell you that they go out onto the river to enjoy the scenery and escape the stresses in their lives as much as they do so to get a fish on the bank! And indeed it is true to say that trout, when it comes to scenery, have good taste! Wild trout tend to inhabit delightful rivers and lakes with clean fresh water, which often lie amongst hills and valleys of breathtaking natural beauty.

It is perhaps this mixture of excitement and outdoor relaxation that makes fly-fishing such a unique and popular hobby. But then again, fly-fishing is unique for many reasons. The equipment used by fly-anglers is quite unlike any other kind of fishing gear. And the way the fly-fisherman approaches his quarry is also quite different from the approach taken in any other form of fishing. There are also certain kinds of water which can only be fished with a fly rod. As mentioned, fly-fishing was invented on the small streams of the English countryside. And it is no coincidence that trout which live in small streams can really only be caught on the fly. No other form of fishing will afford you the delicacy required to fool a wily trout on a tiny, slow-moving, crystal clear, spring-fed waterway.

About the author

My name is Henry Holderness. I have been a fly-fisherman for over 20 years now. I cannot honestly describe myself as anything other than a fishing fanatic! I love all forms of fishing, including land-based game fishing for marine species such as yellowtail kingfish and snapper, deep-sea fishing, spin-fishing for Chinook salmon, and, of course, fly-fishing for trout. Over the years I have caught a great many trout, and in this book I want to share the things I have learnt about these wonderful sports fish and how to catch them.

I live in the city of Christchurch, which is the largest urban centre in the South Island of New Zealand. However, even though I am a New Zealander, this book is not intended as a guide to fly-fishing in New Zealand. This book is designed

to help you learn more about fly-fishing wherever you are in the world. Of course I will make reference to New Zealand conditions and examples in the course of this book more often than I will to conditions in other places. But always my main aim will be to provide generic information which will be applicable no matter where you are going to be fishing.

A note on style:

You may notice as you read through this book that I use the word “fisherman”, and not “fisherperson” or “fisher”. I write like this because to me it sounds more natural. There is no intention to imply that fly-fishing is some sort of exclusive, men-only sport. The fact is that some of the very best exponents of fly-fishing around the world are women. There is nothing about being male that gives a person any inherent advantage whatsoever in fly-fishing. I would thoroughly recommend fly-fishing to women of all ages who enjoy leading an active life and exploring the great outdoors.

You may also notice that I use British spelling, and perhaps even the odd idiom which may sound unfamiliar to North American readers. This is because I am a New Zealander, and in this little country, whether by unconscious habit or deliberately, we still write “colour” and we still call that dot at the end of our sentences a full stop. (Although I do think that in future “New Zealand English” will display more and more of the linguistic influences already seeping in from Canada and the US.) Anyway, I trust that readers in North America will be entirely used to British spelling and so on, and that thus I hardly need to say any more on this matter!

Part 2: What kinds of fish can I catch with a fly?

This is not an exhaustive list of the fish you can catch with fly-fishing equipment. Every year someone uses fly-fishing gear to catch a fish species never before landed by the fly-fishing method. I would be impressed, but not surprised, if one day soon some enterprising angler manages to catch a Great White shark on a specially designed heavy fly-rod

What follows here is a list of the types of fish commonly targeted by fly-anglers:

Rainbow Trout and Steelhead – *onchorhynchus mykiss*

Rainbow trout are easy to recognize because they have a red horizontal streak running down each side of their bodies (this streak can vary in intensity). They have a back which can vary in colour from dark green to yellow-brown, and their belly is a pale white-silvery colour. They also have a generous smattering of dark spots on the upper half of their body and on their dorsal and tail fins. Have a look at this picture of a typical rainbow trout:



Rainbow Trout

Sometimes the red streak on a rainbow trout is quite a pale, pinky colour. But even if it's very pale, every rainbow trout will have at least some red or pink colouration on each side of its body. This is the primary way to identify a rainbow trout.

Rainbow trout can be found in lakes, rivers and streams. Like the Chinook salmon, they are native to rivers of the Pacific North-West coast of the USA and Canada. However, the rainbow trout has been introduced into other parts of the world, such as New Zealand and South Africa.

Like most species in the trout genera, rainbow trout feed on a wide variety of natural organisms, such as aquatic and terrestrial insects, and small fish.

Rainbow trout are great as sports fish. Large numbers of fly-fishermen regularly target rainbow trout because they are aggressive feeders and generally fight extremely hard once hooked.

Steelhead are rainbow trout which spend 1-4 years of their lives in the sea. Steelhead run into rivers from the sea to spawn in the same manner as salmon, and are a very popular species for fly-fishermen in Canada and the US because, like rainbows, they are relatively easy to hook and tough fighters. In Australia, steelhead are also known as 'ocean trout'.

Both rainbow trout and steelhead are very good table fish as well.

If there is a good rainbow trout or steelhead fishery in your area, don't waste any time. Get out there and start catching them!

Brown Trout – *salmo trutta*

It is generally assumed that brown trout are native to Great Britain and mainland Europe. There are in fact two types of brown trout: the first type lives entirely in fresh water (lakes and rivers), and is shown below.

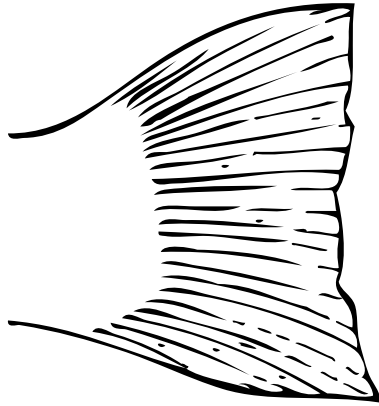


Brown Trout

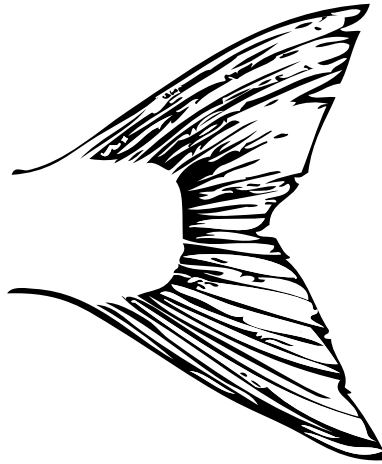
The second type of brown trout lives mainly in the sea, like steelhead and salmon, migrating to fresh water only at certain times of the year in order to spawn. This type of brown trout is often called the 'sea trout' and individuals of this species have been known to migrate over huge distances. Sea trout are silvery in appearance and can be easily confused with the Atlantic salmon, which is often found in the same river systems.

Both types of brown trout are now found throughout the world, having migrated or been introduced to many countries, such as New Zealand and Australia.

Fresh water brown trout are usually a much darker, yellow-brown in colour. One way to tell a brown trout apart from another species of fish is to have a look at its tail. Brown trout have a very 'square' tail fin, whereas salmon species – both Pacific and Atlantic – have a much more 'forked' tail fin:



A Trout's square tail



A Salmon's forked tail

Both fresh water and marine brown trout are hugely popular with fly-anglers. They feed on the same things as rainbow trout, but brown trout are generally more cautious than rainbow trout in their feeding habits. Thus they offer a greater challenge to the angler – although admittedly sea-run brown trout behave far more like their aggressive, red-striped cousins, probably because survival in the marine environment requires more of a 'bite-now-think-later' attitude towards feeding! Fly-fishermen target sea-run brown trout on tidal river estuaries and in the lowland reaches of bigger rivers, generally using quite heavy tackle and large sinking lures. Sea-run trout can be particularly active (and easier to catch!) at night.

Brown trout resident in lakes and rivers in the high-country are a different thing altogether. Anglers generally approach them during daylight hours with light-weight tackle and small dry flies and nymphs.

As with rainbows, brown trout – and especially those fresh in from the sea – are a very good eating fish.

Other trout species

There are various other kinds of trout, all of which can be caught on fly-fishing equipment at various times and places. A good example is the golden trout, which is the official state fish of California. Another species, the brook trout, is a popular target for fly-fishermen in British Columbia and Ontario.

It must be noted, however, that in reality the majority of trout fly-fishermen around the world spend most of their fishing time chasing brown trout, rainbow trout, or both. Brown and rainbow trout seem to be the two most robust and successful of all the trout species, and in many waterways they co-exist happily.

Salmon

Various species of salmon can be caught on fly-fishing tackle, with the Atlantic salmon found in Britain and Europe being perhaps the most commonly targeted by dedicated fly-anglers. Pacific salmon species, such as the Chinook, Chum and Sockeye, are more often targeted with other sorts of fishing tackle, although fly-

anglers do chase them.

The fly rods used by fishermen targeting the Atlantic salmon in Great Britain and other parts of Europe are specialized and generally far longer and heavier than fly rods employed by trout fishermen. If you live in the UK or Ireland, learning to fly-fish will give you the opportunity to catch not just trout, but beautiful big Atlantic salmon as well!



Atlantic Salmon

Bonefish

Bonefish are a marine species which live in tropical parts of the world. They spend a lot of their lives feeding in the shallow lagoons around small islands. They are aggressive feeders and offer extremely good sport to fly-anglers prepared to travel to the tropics.

Other sea species

It is not a very common practice, but some people do use fly-fishing equipment to catch tuna, marlin and other kinds of large, pelagic (sea-dwelling) species. These tend to be career fishermen who for some reason have become obsessed with the idea of catching a certain species of large sea fish with light fly-fishing gear and spend hours on the water in pursuit of this goal. Once the mission is complete, these fishermen invariably submit a detailed story about their achievement to a local fishing magazine, complete with photos of the enormous fish and the lightweight fly rod which was used to catch it.

But don't think I'm being too disparaging! Fly-fishing for sea fish can be a marvelous experience. In the sea around New Zealand, for example, there is a species of fish known locally by its Maori name 'kahawai'. This fish regularly grows up to 10 pounds – the same size as a fairly large trout – and big schools of kahawai are easy to find off the coast right around the country. The kahawai is an aggressive feeder and an extremely strong fighter for its size – much stronger than even the most energetic trout – and for this reason alone it has become very popular to target kahawai with fly-fishing gear. Hooking a 6 pound kahawai on a light fly rod is easy and produces a spectacular battle!

If you live near the sea, especially in sub-tropical parts of the world, there's a very good chance that there will be some kind of local marine sports fish which you can

target with fly-fishing equipment. My only recommendation is not to go too light with your gear. Sea fish are generally more confrontational than trout!

Coarse fish

Coarse fish such as perch and rudd are sometimes caught on fly-fishing gear, although again this is not a common practice. Generally, anglers who target coarse fish will use highly specialised tackle which does not really resemble fly-fishing tackle. Coarse fishing typically involves the use of baited hooks. It is not common to cast bait with a fly rod, for the simple reason that the bait tends to get flicked off the hook during casting!

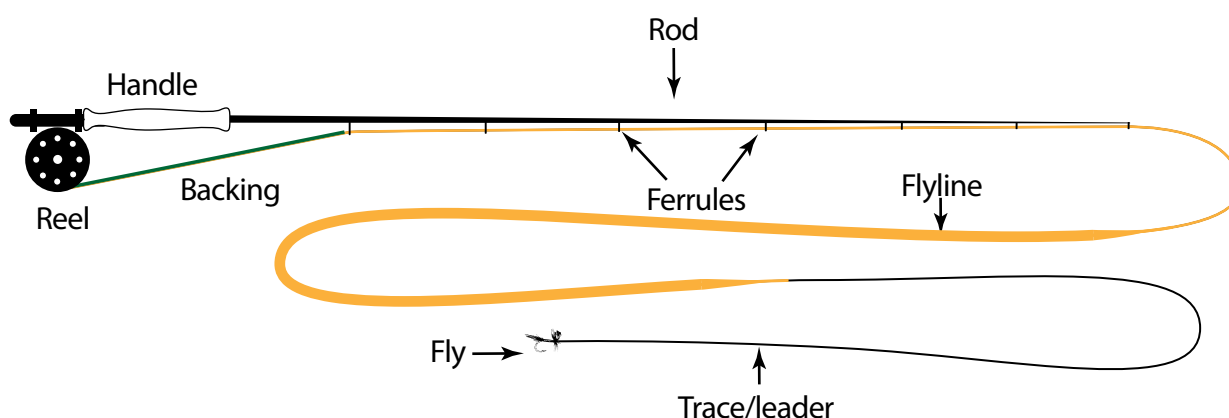
Part 3: Basic fly-fishing equipment

Before you can attempt to catch a fish with a fly, you need to get hold of five essential pieces of equipment:

- a fly rod
- a fly reel
- some fly line to fill the reel (plus backing)
- a length of nylon trace
- an artificial fly

Take away any of these basic elements, and fly-fishing instantly becomes impossible. Of course, there are many other bits and pieces of tackle that your average fly-fisherman will probably carry with him on the river. But without a rod, a reel, fly line, trace and a fly there is no chance of getting even *close* to landing a fish. Don't worry if you are unfamiliar with any of the things I've mentioned - the purpose of this section is to explain each of these vital pieces of equipment in detail, using diagrams and illustrations where necessary.

Here is an artist's drawing of the five basic pieces of fly-fishing tackle, assembled together into the standard rig:



The Standard Rig (rod, reel, flyline, trace and fly)

As you can see, the reel is attached right at the bottom *end* of the rod, and the rod's handle is positioned just in front of where the reel sits. With other types of fishing rod, the reel is fitted further up the rod shaft. Also note in the drawing that between

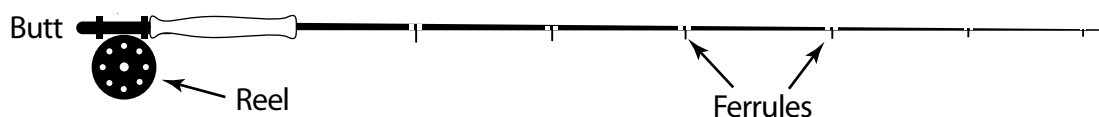
the end of the fly line and the fly itself there is about 2 metres (2 yards approx) of thin nylon, which is called a 'trace' or 'leader'.

Everything you see in the drawing above is vital to successful fly-fishing. You simply cannot do without them! I'll now talk about these 5 essential pieces of fly-fishing tackle in more detail.

1: The Fly Rod

Apart from flies themselves, the fly rod is perhaps the most basic piece of equipment in the fly-fisherman's arsenal. It is the instrument which propels the fly line, trace, and fly forwards through the air and onto the water, thus allowing the angler to get the fly to the trout without being seen. The rod is also the thing which, above all else, enables the angler to get the fish, once successfully hooked, to the bank of the river or edge of the lake, where it can then be netted. The role of the fly rod in "playing" a fish will be dealt with conclusively in a later section of this book. Here I am concerned to explain some of the basic 'technical' things about fly rods - such as the way they are measured and described.

First, take a look at this drawing and familiarise yourself with the different parts of a fly rod and the names we have for those parts:



Fly Rod

Fly rods are unique

You can't just use any old fishing rod as a fly rod. Fly rods are unique. The length, metric weight, shape and action of a fly rod are all quite different from those of any other kind of fishing rod. When I talk about the "action" of a fly rod, I mean the way it responds to pressure put on it over its entire length by the line running through it. To the uninitiated, this concept of the "action" of a fishing rod may seem hard to grasp. Thus I will dwell more on this later when I deal with the details of casting technique. Suffice it to say at this juncture that if you wish to have a go at fly-fishing you'll need to get hold of a genuine fly rod!

What are fly rods made of?

In the old days, all fly rods were made of split cane. Split cane rods are still available today, but they are heavy and have an unfortunately slow, cumbersome casting action. Their popularity has waned because of the increasing availability of much lighter rods made of carbon-fibre (graphite), which have faster actions allowing greater ease of use and accuracy in casting.

These days the vast majority of fly anglers use hi-tech carbon-fibre rods. Split-cane rods are now the preserve of only a handful of eccentric fly-fisherman romantically attempting to preserve a small part of a by-gone era in trout fishing. For someone

currently thinking of taking up fly-fishing, a carbon-fibre rod is the only realistic option. Carbon-fibre is extremely strong but also very brittle. To those who haven't seen or touched one before, a fly rod may seem improbably thin and fragile. And indeed if the wrong kind of pressure is applied to a fly rod, it will quickly break. Slamming a car door on a fly rod, for example, will be instantly fatal to it, as will standing on a fly rod with your foot.

But a good fly rod will be capable of withstanding an enormous amount of the correct kind of pressure - that is, pressure put on it over its whole length by the fly line running through it. It is almost impossible to break a good fly rod by pulling on the line it is holding. That is why in New Zealand, for example, fly-fishermen regularly land trout weighing well in excess of 10 pounds (4.5kgs) using carbon-fibre fly rods which themselves weigh only 9 or 10 oz. (250 or 300 grams).

Length:

Most fly rods are about 8 or 9 foot long. 9 foot means about 2.5 metres. Some anglers who fish for salmon using a fly rod and feathered lure use rods which are as much as 10 or 11 foot long. But, almost invariably, people who fly-fish for trout in rivers and lakes employ a rod which is 8 foot 6 inches or 9 foot long. This seems to be the perfect length for generating enough power to cast the fly anywhere between 5 and 15 yards (4.5 to 13.5 metres) in front of the angler, while at the same time allowing the rod makers to keep the product nice and light. The lighter a rod is, the more pleasant it will be to fish with.

Also, with a 9 foot rod, the angler is still reasonably close to the rod tip at all times. Being close to the rod tip can help significantly when the angler is playing a hooked fish. Sometimes you will end up playing a large trout in a small stream with all sorts of vegetation and rocks and logs strewn along the bank. In this kind of situation, you don't want to have some huge long rod in your hand!

Some anglers who fish exclusively on very small streams use rods which are only 7 foot 6 inches or 8 foot long. This is because on a small river, a short rod is all that is needed to make a long enough cast to reach the fish. However, most fly-fishermen will use a longer rod. This is because most fly anglers fish a wide variety of different types of water during the season. The longer your rod is, the more distance you can get in your cast and the more versatile it will be because you'll be able to use it in a greater range of situations. A 9 foot rod will easily produce a 10-12 metre cast, which is the kind of distance required in most fly-fishing situations. Thus a 9 foot rod is perfect for the angler who wants to fish rivers large and small, but also lakes, tarns and estuaries. A 9 foot fly rod is the 'everyman' of fly-fishing. It will handle 90% of fishing situations with minimal fuss.

Weight:

Fly rods are measured not only by their length in feet and inches, but also by their "weight". A 3-weight fly rod is very light, while a 9-weight fly rod is much heavier.

But, be careful! The "weight" of a fly rod doesn't mean its actual weight in grams or ounces!

The weight of a fly rod is determined by the weight of the fly line it can cast comfortably. For example, it is almost impossible to cast a heavy 10-weight fly line with a 3-weight rod. But a good quality 3-weight rod will perform beautifully with a 3-weight line. Similarly, a 10-weight rod will not cast well with a 3-weight line. This is because the 3-weight line is not heavy enough to load up the 10-weight rod and produce the rod's correct casting action.

When purchasing a fly-fishing outfit, it is absolutely crucial to make sure the rod will perform properly when casting the fly line spooled on the reel. However, this does not always mean that there has to be an exact match between line weight and rod weight. A very high-quality 5-weight fly rod, for example, will easily handle a 6-weight fly line. Of course, it will cast a matching 5-weight line with perfect ease as well! But many expert anglers now prefer to use an outfit featuring a fly line which is one weight category heavier than the rod. The basic result of this is that the slightly heavier fly line loads the rod up a little more - and thus produces the rod's strongest possible action. This combination of the rod's maximum action plus heavier line means that the fly line shoots forward through the air with greater speed and accuracy than a slightly lighter fly line would.

Why are there different rod weights?

If you are fishing on a delicate small stream, you don't want to be casting with an 8 or 9 weight rod! What you want in this situation is a 4 or 5 weight rod. The fact that rods come in different weights reflects the fact that people fly-fish in a great variety of different places and conditions. Generally, people use heavy rods in big heavy water or water where huge casts are required. In small streams or in places where small casts are the norm, people will opt for much lighter rods.

Important point: Rod weights are not related to fish weight! You don't need a heavy rod to catch a big fish! I know lots of fly-fishermen here in New Zealand who use light 4 or 5 weight rods and regularly land trout weighing over 10 pounds.

Action:

The concept of a fly rod's "action" is a tricky one for the uninitiated. But it is crucial to gain an understanding of what is meant when someone tells you that he has a "fast action" or "medium action" fly rod. Basically, the stiffer the rod, the faster its action. And accordingly, the faster the action of the rod, the greater the casting distance it will afford to the angler. A very stiff rod will be able to handle larger amounts of fly line, and thus allow the angler to make longer casts. A medium or slow action rod - which is 'floppier' than a fast action rod - will only handle so much line, and if the angler tries to push the rod into casting more line than it's capable of handling, the rod's action will fail and the fly line will crumple into a pathetic heap on the water.

You might now be wondering why anyone would buy a medium action fly rod! Well, the fact is that a medium action fly rod will cast a shorter amount of line beautifully, without requiring the angler to put a big effort into the cast. A fast action rod will not flex much at all until it is loaded up with a large amount of fly line. Thus to cast a short amount of line on a fast action rod, the angler has

to do all the work. But a medium action rod with greater flexibility will load up nicely with only a small amount of line, and thus the angler won't be required to push the rod so much to get the fly onto the water. So if you know that in an average day's fishing you're not going to need to make any particularly long casts, a medium action rod is perfect, because it will achieve short casts well and won't take much effort to operate.

The action of a fly rod is not related to its weight or length. Take, for example, the Sage XP fly rod. Sage makes both an 8'6" and a 9' version of this rod, and it comes in a variety of different weights. You can buy a 4-weight Sage XP if you want to - or you can buy a Sage XP for casting 8-weight fly lines. But the Sage XP is always a medium action rod. It will start to flex nicely under the load of only a short amount of fly line. However, the XP's cousin - the Sage RXP - is, by contrast, a fast action rod. It is stiffer than the XP and will therefore start to perform well only under the load of a larger amount of fly line. Of course the RXP is also available in different lengths and weights.

Pieces:

Like many styles of fishing rod, fly rods usually come in more than one piece. In other words, before you can use the rod you have to assemble it. Most fly rods are two-piece, but it is possible to buy fly rods which are divided up into as many as 6 pieces. The photo below shows a Scott A2 905 four-piece fly rod, separated into its pieces.



Four-piece Fly Rod

Some experienced anglers will tell you that a four-piece medium action rod is better than a two-piece version, because the three separate joints in the four-piece rod give it that extra little bit of stiffness needed to make slightly longer casts. This may indeed be true, but the real advantage of a four-piece rod is simply that it is much easier to store! A four-piece rod will be housed in a rod-case which is only about 30 inches (76cm) long, whereas the rod-case for a two-piece rod will be more like 70 inches (1.77m) in length. Thus, four-piece rods are favoured by anglers who like to combine fly-fishing with hiking. In fact, many anglers refer to their four-piece fly rod as a "Backpacker" because it fits so easily into a hiking pack! A two-piece rod is much more troublesome to go hiking with.

The handle:

All fly rods have a handle, which is located just above the reel seat. (The reel seat is the small graphite or plastic groove combined with a screw-in catch