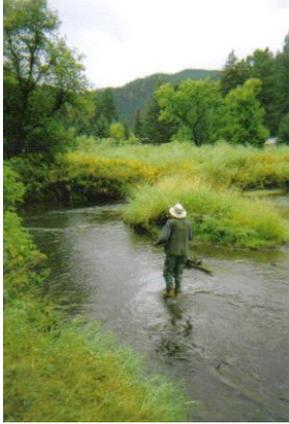


August 2008

Driftless Days . . .



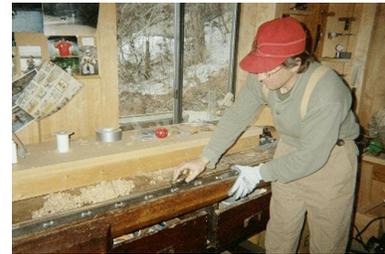
Not long ago I was fishing a nearby stream with a new split-cane rod made by Chris Wasta, the second rod he's made for me to date. Just to clarify things, if clarification is needed, there's going to be at **least** one more rod. The third one will mainly be for winter fly-fishing and throwing streamers, and I have a pretty good idea as to what that rod will be like, unless Chris changes my mind. Which is entirely possible. The recently completed rod I just picked up is a nine-foot three-piece two-tip rod, fashioned after a lighter "Leonard" owned by fellow Trout Unlimited member Tim Fleming of Chicago. After much discussion and deliberation, Chris made a few minor adjustments to the taper, mainly to second-guess the measurements he made on Tim's rod. Rod measurements are made with a micrometer, which is a handy little tool for measuring things down to thousandths of an inch. But as accurate as it is, it still leaves a little room for thought. One question that arose was whether a couple of concave spots in the taper were originally intended by Leonard as "hinges", which can accelerate the forward cast, or whether they were simply the result of an aging gluing process, which can get weird over time, for various complicated reasons; in this case after about eighty-eight years. Chris can explain this to you much better than I can, possibly, but regardless of that we've certainly had a number of great "winter storm" conversations concerning rod tapers. And fishing books. Sometimes I'm not exactly sure what we're talking about, but that's generally a mark of good conversation, at least to my way of thinking.

This particular rod is the finest split-cane rod I've ever seen. You have to see it to really appreciate it. It's no surprise that Chris is an artist among his many talents, and the artwork comes astoundingly though subtly through with this rod, especially in the hardware wraps, the intermediate wraps and the signature wrap, all done in an alternating dark and lighter "plum" color scheme. Add top-of-the-line hardware, his best cane cut and hand-split from the culm, a custom-designed cork grip, a beautiful hand-sewn rod bag, a very distinguished signature and an extremely sharp rod case and you have yourself an incredible rod to fish for as long as God wants you to land trout.

Which brings up **one** of the reasons I love split-cane rods. You simply cannot make or purchase a graphite rod that looks as attractive as the rod I've just attempted to describe, and I like that. It adds a lot to my fishing experience. If the trout aren't biting, I can sit and stare at my rod and still have a good time. You can pick up almost any fly fishing catalogue available and find

graphite rods that cost approximately as much as this particular rod cost me. Well, **almost** as much.

The first rod Chris built for me, based on a Granger “Aristocrat” taper, is a heavier all-around rod that throws a DT-6wt line very well. “DT” lines are doubled-tapered, and “WF” lines are weight-forward. With the heavier rod I can cast a #24 dry fly on 7X tippet as well as a small streamer on 4X tippet, so it covers a lot of territory. The new “Leonard” rod is much lighter and throws a DT-5wt line well for me; I would deem it a true 5wt. The rod tips are considerably smaller in diameter than the “Aristocrat”, and in my case I would not throw a



Chris at work

streamer with the finer rod, although Chris said it would be OK to do so. This rod might be of interest to anyone who thinks that split-cane rods are too “heavy” to cast all day long, which incidentally I’ve never found to be the case. The perceived problem of added rod weight tends to dissipate once the fisherman grows accustomed to casting cane rods. This rod will be reserved specifically for dry fly fishing, although it throws large mayfly imitations very well; it will also throw larger terrestrial patterns such as crickets and hoppers. Both rods throw WF lines well too, but I like the DT lines for two reasons, the first being that I can reverse the lines and get double the usage out of each line. The second reason is that I like the way both rods load for longer casts with the DT lines, out to fifty or sixty feet let’s say. It’s the typical paradox in line size for split-cane rods; some fishermen find WF lines better at very short distances and DT lines better at longer distances. In my case, I can make the DT lines work to my satisfaction at the shorter distances, mainly in “roll” and “pile” casting, and still get the distance when I need it; the shorter casts need a bit more practice to perfect and can vary from rod to rod. One slight disadvantage I have as a fisherman, if one could call it that, is that I have a knack for figuring out how to cast about any cane rod I have in my hands. As long as I can throw a straight line out to sixty feet, I’m relatively comfortable. Some fishermen are a bit more specific in their requirements; they want all of their rods to fish identically, perhaps similar to a golfer or baseball player’s requirements. There’s nothing wrong with that at all. For me, I think fishing a lot of imperfect rods over a number of years, mainly for financial reasons, gave me a slightly unusual flexibility in rod preferences.

Why a preference for nine-foot rods? I guess that’s a bit unusual as well. Many split-cane rod builders don’t like nine-foot rods, as they require three sections rather than two and are thus more difficult and more expensive to make. I like the way a nine-foot rod loads the line; it just “feels” right to me. Generally speaking, the cast must be slowed down considerably, and I let the rod do the work rather than my arm. That’s why I don’t consider a cane rod “heavy”; if you allow the rod to throw the line rather than your arm and shoulder, it will be light as a feather and you’ll catch your fair share of trout. Or perhaps more than your fair share now and then. A nine-foot rod can give a fisherman quite a bit more range at shorter distances when “roll” and “pile” casting as opposed to a shorter rod, and I clearly find this to be the case. Another advantage to the nine-foot length is that it handles a long leader much more smoothly. In dry fly fishing my leader lengths generally run in the fifteen-to-eighteen foot range, and a nine-foot rod allows me that length more comfortably and more accurately than it does with a shorter rod. Some day I

would love to cast a good ten-foot split-cane rod, which was the **shortest** trout rod the great fisherman and author Roderick Haig-Brown owned.

There's something unusual in the setting of the hook, especially with a dry fly, when fishing split-cane rods. It's rather inexplicable, though many writers have tried to explain the phenomenon. With a slight raising of the rod tip when the trout takes the fly, cane rods have a



The "Leonard"

subtle tendency to hook the fish themselves. One does not have to strike so hard with a cane rod; the weight of the rod and its degree of flexibility or "give" over a graphite rod allow for a more gentle yet solid setting of the hook. There are two areas in which I find this difference quite dramatic. One is that I do not break off as many flies in trout with split-cane rods. Secondly, I don't break off as many flies in **big** trout, in addition to being able to handle them with less difficulty. In both instances, very light tippets are much more effective and forgiving with split-cane rods rather than graphite. When I first began to fish split-cane rods some years ago, I thought they would be a handicap and would give the trout the greater advantage. Cane rod builders really get a good laugh when I tell them that, mainly because they know very well what their rods can do. I began to catch more trout as I shifted to split-cane rods, but the thing that really amazed me was my ability to hook and land very large trout much more successfully with split-cane rods. By "large" trout, I refer to those in the sixteen to twenty-five inch range, fishing a dry fly. My largest trout to date on a split-cane rod was a twenty-five inch brown trout

taken on North Bear Creek; that trout hit a #16 Adams and was my only strike of the day.

But getting back to fishing the new "Leonard" rod recently on North Bear Creek; at some point I spotted a fly fisherman upstream of me about two hundred yards and after a short while he left the stream and hiked down to visit. His name was Dave, and he'd come up from Missouri to fish in northeast Iowa for a week. The first thing he asked me was if he could look at my fly rod; he could tell I was fishing a split-cane rod from two hundred yards away. I guess most of us have never watched ourselves fish, but he said it's always easy to spot someone fishing cane.

And he said he really liked the rod.

* * * *

A few months ago, early in April, I found myself fishing the extreme upper reaches of a small stream here in northeast Iowa. I don't know why I was up there exactly, as the Hendricksons were hatching on all the larger-water streams; normally I would have chosen "better" water to fish during the heavier weeks of the Hendrickson hatch. But as it was, I was catching a lot of trout right where I'd chosen to be, and that was just fine, especially on what you'd have to call "difficult" water. I seldom run into other fishermen in this section, which was another plus as

well. Sometimes it's rewarding to do well in the tougher stretches; I find that as the years go along I'm a bit more attracted to that type of fishing than I once was. In this case the Hendricksons were helping me out considerably.

I went upstream a bit further than I normally do on this water, if for no other reason than to simply see what might be going on further above. At some point late in the afternoon as I gazed upstream, I saw something out of place along the streambank; at first it looked like a rather strange bush or branch, until a second long look revealed that I was looking at an extremely large deer rack. I quickly hiked up to examine it, and first of all noticed that it was still attached to the skull, which in turn was still attached to the rest of the deer, so it wasn't an official "shed", as cast-off antlers are generally termed. It was only an eight-point rack, but since the antlers were so broad, particularly at the base, I knew it had been a very large deer weight-wise. It was one of the largest racks I'd ever seen, either on or off a deer. Since it was early April and the rack was still firmly attached to the skull, I surmised the deer had died for some reason last fall and had lain there frozen all winter long. I wondered whether he had died a natural death, probably of old age, and had come to the water at the end, which deer often do. Or I thought perhaps he had been wounded during the autumn deer hunting season and had died there later. Directly above the deer rose a sheer towering limestone cliff, and I thought he might have fallen, particularly if he had been wounded. Accidents happen in the world of animals, too. I considered removing the rack somehow and lugging it back to my vehicle, but I didn't have a knife or saw adequate to the task, so I left him there and thought about coming up again later.

The next time I was in the area was on a Saturday's outing with my friend Chris Wasta. I'd told Chris about the deer, and he was interested in seeing it. Chris is a veteran "shed" hunter and has a whole houseful of cast-off partial and complete racks. I wasn't entirely sure I could find it again, as the bankside foliage had begun to grow and green up, but eventually I was indeed able to locate it. We'd rather made a point of trying to do so, as the fishing had been slow after recent heavy rains and high water and we needed something else to look for besides trout. From the size of the rack and skull, Chris thought the deer might have approached two-hundred pounds. I'm not a deer hunter, but I know that's a big deer. And then Chris saw something I'd missed before. There was another skull a few feet from the buck's, this one a doe's. A little more searching revealed the skeletal remains of the doe. Why would two deer die in the exact same location? That may never be known for certain, but Chris wondered if the two deer had been in rut above the limestone bluff last autumn, lost their footing somehow, and tumbled to their deaths below along the stream. Looking at the lay of the land and the positions of the deer, that could have been entirely possible.



Chris had a knife-style camp saw with him and managed to remove the skull and rack from the deer's spinal column, and I brought it home that night. We carried it back about a mile and a half to his truck, trading off on the carrying chore. At Chris' suggestion, I buried the skull underground in the woods behind the house to let nature clean up the skull, and I put two large garden containers over each side of the rack to keep the squirrels from gnawing on them. He had

suggested I put five-gallon buckets over each side of the rack, but they wouldn't fit over either side. I left it there for about two months before I took it back out of the ground and cleaned everything up with a brush and the water hose. This method takes longer than boiling a skull, but it's certainly easier and less unpleasant if you're not in a hurry to get the job finished.

Chris says the best places to find "sheds" are in open fields. The squirrels won't venture out so far into the open to gnaw on the racks; they prefer not to deal with hawks, eagles, coyotes and dogs without a tree handy. You can certainly find "sheds" in the woods but they might be chewed up if they've been there for even a short while.

For the record, as I near as I could tell we had eight strikes between us in six hours of fishing that afternoon, landing three trout under ten inches. But aside from having a great time giving the stream our best shot, we ended up bagging a trophy deer rack as well.



Coffee Time

Be Vigilant!

"Red" Canoe

*Trout Unlimited
Iowa Driftless Chapter*

**"Only today
I heard
the river
within the river."**

**"Trees stay in place.
Fish spend a lifetime under water.
Our last track is a skull."**

from Braided Creek, by Jim Harrison and Ted Kooser

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