



Ninja Fly-Fishing

by Walt Fulps

Exceptionally long tenkara rods give the angler the ability to reach a distant fish while keeping the line almost completely off the water to help control the drift. Photo Credit: Tenkara USA

After wrapping up my fall fishing season this year, I immediately began thinking about two things: eating myself into a turkey-fueled coma while four football teams I don't care about beat each other up on TV, and fly-fishing in the snow. What can I say? I have a problem.

When it comes to being cold, I must admit I'm a bit of a wuss. However, I know how to dress in layers, so a freezing-cold fishing trip or two is bound to happen sometime during the short days. In fact, as I finally sit down to start working on this article, I have a guide trip booked for tomorrow — a day with a forecast high of 35 degrees. I tried to talk him out of it — I swear. I don't like shivering, and I'm not a huge fan of putting my freezing-cold hands into icy water to release a fish, but my number-one frustration related to wintertime fishing is dealing with ice building up in my rod guides. There is a solution I haven't yet tried, and it sounds like it's right up my alley.

Almost three years ago, I taught a man to fly-fish shortly before he was transferred to Japan. He later emailed me photos of his fishing trips to the mountain streams he encountered there, mentioning as an aside that many Japanese fishermen used telescoping fly rods and no reel. Hmmm... sounds like my mother-in-law's bamboo catfishing rig, I thought. The following spring I had the opportunity to guide a Japanese surgeon who had come to the states to learn some new medical techniques at St. Louis University, and I asked him about this. "Oh, yes! Tenkara! Very traditional fishing!"

The way he used that word — "traditional" — really struck me. He used it with an air of reverence, like I imagine a kung fu master would speak of honor. And when I began my research, I was surprised to learn that this traditional Japanese form of fly-fishing was just beginning to gain in popularity among a certain type of fisherman here in the U.S. You know the type — "journey people": the folks who care less about the outcome than the method. If you're more into backpacking than parking next to your campsite, then you're probably a journey person, too.

I only managed to track down a few folks here in the states that really seem to know what they're talking about in regard to tenkara, and Daniel Galhardo, in particular, turned into a wealth of information for me in my quest to make my fishing life more difficult. Galhardo is the

founder of Tenkara USA and the first to introduce tenkara outside of Japan — no kidding. He has made several trips to Japan, studying and building friendships with several of the country's tenkara masters. If your mind works like mine, you're probably thinking about the Karate Kid right now — "focus Daniel-San." After speaking with Galhardo, I must admit I'm fairly excited to give this a shot.

The first Japanese fly fishermen are thought to have been peasants trying to earn a living by selling fish to local villagers and innkeepers, with the oldest style being an inelegant form of dapping, or sinking a heavy fly or bait into deeper water and hoping for a hit. There is a theory that the early dapping style of fishing was eventually exported to the more mountainous regions and adapted into tenkara to suit the new waters. And there are also some romanticized stories of samurai warriors developing tenkara fishing as a method of training during peacetime, when swordplay was forbidden. As cool as that would be, I'm sorry to say, it's not the case. Galhardo assures me that geography and the social status of the samurai make that one impossible. The straightforward truth is there is no way to know for sure how tenkara originated, and the most likely scenario is that the mountain people simply developed the style from scratch.

Since tenkara originated before fishing reels were invented, it obviously uses just a rod, some line and a fly. When fishing steep-gradient, turbulent little streams, a reel doesn't really come in handy anyway. And while various forms of fly-fishing can be found documented in historical records and artwork from almost 2,000 years ago, it appears Japan was the first to use extremely long rods and longer-than-normal lines, requiring more modern and artistic methods of casting and landing the fish than those required in other parts of the world.

Many anglers are attracted to tenkara because it gives them a sense of history in much the same way that hunters are drawn to black powder rifles and archers convert from graphite arrows to cedar. The real selling point, though, is the simplicity. Over the last 35 years, I've taken the same path that many fly fishers have taken — adding more and more gear to my fly vest until I begin to worry that someone wanting my extra spool of sink-tip line that almost never sees the light of day might mug me. A properly geared-up tenkara fisherman can fit everything in one pocket. I don't know about you, but I think I could get used to that.

One reason tenkara excels in quick mountain streams is because the turbidity of the water helps to hide you from the fish, allowing you to make a closer approach. A more important reason is the extra-long rod, which typically ranges in size from 11–14 feet or more. The added length enables the fisherman to simply raise his rod tip to keep the line off the water, allowing the fly to tumble naturally in the current. Tom Sadler, a Virginia-based tenkara guide who also helped with this article, calls this “the exceptional drift” and is very persuasive when he tells me I’ll simply catch more and bigger fish. His experience suggests that you can expect a natural drift 3- to 4-times longer than by traditional American-style casting and mending. And while Sadler agrees that tenkara is tailor-made for swift mountain streams, he reports great success on larger more western-style rivers like the Madison and the Yellowstone. (You can reach Sadler through his website at www.MiddleRiverDispatch.com.)

While the rod’s length is the most prominent advantage, its unbelievable sensitivity provides the ability to feel even subtle takes, adding a non-visual cue to trigger your hook-set. If you think that sounds a bit like Czech nymphing (see inset), there are a great number of similarities. There are many differences, though, including the fisherman’s practice of using a slow pulsation of the rod tip to give a wet fly a “throb” that mimics a nymph swimming to the surface for emergence.

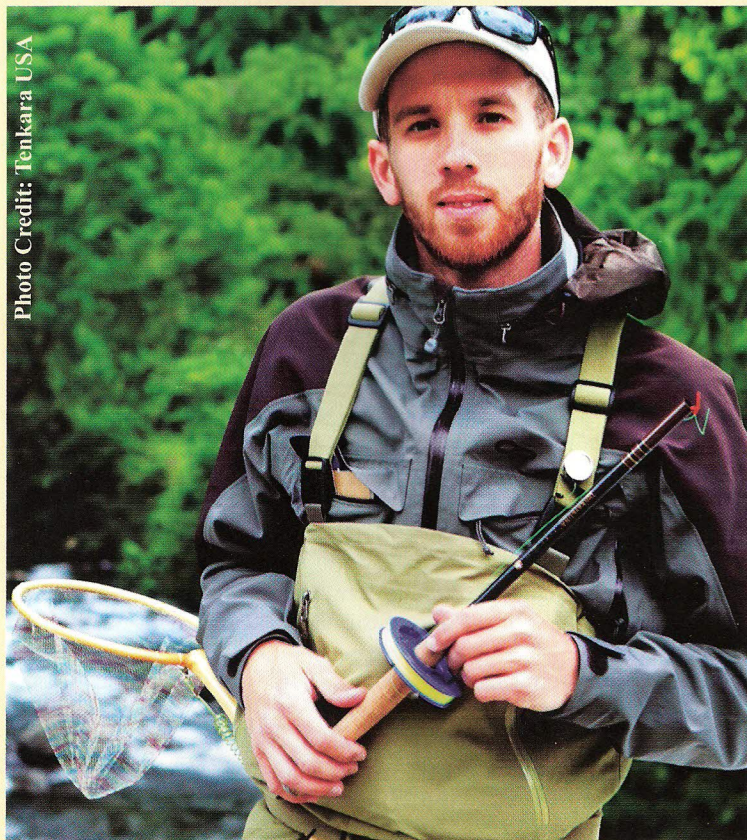


Photo Credit: Tenkara USA

Daniel Galhardo is the founder of Tenkara USA, a fully independent US-based company. Visit his company’s website at www.TenkaraUSA.com or email him at info@TenkaraUSA.com.

Galhardo swears that a traditional Western-style fly fisherman can easily learn tenkara, simply by slowing down the casting stroke and tightening the back cast to noon rather than the more traditional two o’clock. While recognizing the hit without the benefit of a strike indicator may prove challenging, I’m betting my primary difficulty will be emotional. I’ve grown attached to carrying 10 pounds of stuff in my vest, and I’m not sure how to leave it behind. I might have to carry it with me, just to avoid feeling naked on the river.

Tenkara may not be well-suited to all of our local trout streams, but I can think of 20 fishing spots on a dozen different Ozark rivers off the top of my head that are screaming for this style of fishing to be employed. In addition, since the rods are telescoping, it’s possible to take one along on your next trip, only bringing it out when the conditions warrant.

Sounds interesting, doesn’t it? Here’s the final enticement. You can put together a top-quality tenkara outfit for around \$200. By the way, I have a birthday coming up soon. Just sayin’.

Ask Missouri Trout Hunter

This month’s question submitted via my Facebook page is, “What’s the deal with Czech nymphing?”

Holy cow, is this a complicated question! Czech nymphing is really only one of several European styles of fly-fishing developed to win international competitions. If you’re not already aware, there is a group called the International Federation of Sport Fly-Fishing that sanctions the World Fly Fishing Championships, an annual competition between 28 countries. The championship has taken place annually since 1981, and Team USA has been participating since 2003. France and Czechoslovakia tend to kick everyone’s butt, but the U.S. did manage to come in sixth a few years back. The important thing to note, though, is the rules of the game. No weight or strike indicator may be placed on the leader, and the most fish wins — size does not matter in this case.

The competitors have innovated various styles of fishing according to those rules, including using leaders of 25 feet or longer in some cases, fishing straight downstream with tension, high-sticking with a greased leader, and fishing 3- and 4-fly rigs with complicated tying systems, not to mention the more American-style sink-and-swing wet fly fishing. Of course, there are the extra-long and slow-action rods that are almost a requirement for casting these long complicated rigs. The most common feature among these competitive fishing styles is the ability to both see and feel takes, and the best individual fishermen will admit to setting the hook on fish, even though they weren’t consciously aware of the hit — maybe it was their spider sense.

I have been known to experiment with some of these styles, but to be honest, I enjoy the American style of casting upstream with a mend to obtain a natural drift, setting the hook based solely on visual cues like the flash of the fish or the hesitation of the strike indicator. And, at least in my personal experience, I catch larger fish using that style. While I’m sure my catch numbers are not at the level of international competition, they’re pretty darn good and my spider sense tingles, too.

Sorry I can’t be more comprehensive in my answer to this question, but it’s just too complex for the available space. If you’re serious about learning these European techniques, there are plenty of DVD’s available for purchase, and a quick internet search will provide a fairly long list of fishing guides out there ready to hook you up!

Send your trout-related questions via Twitter to @MoTroutHunter or post at the Missouri Trout Hunter Facebook page.

Walt Fulps is the owner of Trout Hunter Guide Service, Trout Hunter Fly-Fishing School, and Trout Hunter Replicas. You can reach him through his website, www.MissouriTroutHunter.com.