



Testing out  
tenkara last winter.

# Eastern promise

DAVE SOUTHALL finds out for himself how effective the Japanese tenkara technique is on the UK's rivers

Readers who have followed my previous articles in *FF&FT* will know that I believe presentation is nine-tenths of the game when it comes to catching trout and grayling. It was early in 2010 that I first read (in this magazine) about tenkara, but although finding it interesting I dismissed the technique as irrelevant to my fishing. However, last autumn a friend asked what I knew about the method, which was virtually zero! Checking on the internet, I discovered a style of fishing which focuses nearly exclusively on presentation.

This traditional, Japanese method believed to date back to the 9th century BC, uses a long rod (11-13+ft), with a very delicate line (furled leader) of about 11ft attached to the tip, plus a 5 to 7X tippet of about 2-6ft. It evolved as a very efficient method for the capture of the small native salmonids (Ayu, Yamame and Iwana) from the mountain streams of Japan. It is said that, on such waters, a good tenkara fisher can out-fish an angler using modern techniques 5 to 1. The method is so efficient that commercial Japanese fishermen used it. Traditionally, the line was furled horse-hair, whilst the rods were bamboo. In the UK Charles Cotton used a long rod and fixed horse hair line in the late 1600s, whilst in northern Italy the ancient style of Valsesiane fishing with a long rod, fixed line and team of spider-style wet flies is still carried out by a few anglers.

Modern tenkara rods are made from carbon fibre, weigh a mere 2.5 to 3.5oz, are telescopic and pack down to just 20 inches long. Rod actions are very soft in the tip and are graded, 5:5, 6:4, 7:3 and 8:2. 5:5 rods are soft, slow-actioned in which the top 50% of the rod bends easily, whilst 8:2 rods are fast,

tip actioned in which only the top 20% bends easily. Modern lines are furled synthetic materials (such copolymer or fluorocarbon) from 7-11ft long, with a loop at the top and a loop or small metal ring at the tip. If the top loop is stiff then a short, soft, braid loop is used to attach the leader/line to the braid (Lilian String) permanently attached to the rod tip. I should point out that in modern tenkara fishing some anglers use parallel lines from 7-15ft (or more) long consisting of 10-15lb fluorocarbon, which facilitates extra-delicate presentation. Hi-viz, bright yellow or orange lines help detect subtle takes when fishing subsurface; alternatively attach a short section of hi-viz braid or coiled hi-viz 15lb Stren between leader and tippet.

## ULTIMATE CONTROL

Tenkara is certainly an ideal way of presenting flies in the typical pocket water of mountain streams. In my recent article on pocket water (*FF&FT*, October 2010 issue) I mentioned the use of high sticking with a 10ft #3/4 rod, 12ft leader and virtually no fly line out of the rod tip. Well, tenkara is even better suited to this style of close combat fishing. The longer rod makes several things easier: reaching over conflicting flows to avoid drag, casting the fly precisely into any seam or small pocket of calmer water, then holding virtually all the line/tippet off the water whilst tracking with the rod so that no drag occurs when fishing with dry flies. Line/tippet combinations much longer than the rod hinder holding most of the line off the water (1-2ft longer than the rod is about ideal).

As for other methods of presentation, the induced take, *a la* Frank Sawyer/Oliver Kite, can be very precisely controlled using a short, tight line unimpeded by drag from way- ➤



A Derbyshire grayling taken on a heavy nymph fished Tenkara style.



ward flows. In addition with soft hackle wet flies, nymphs and bugs it allows the fly to be given tiny, controlled, lifts so that the fly pulses with simulated life (very similar to the way that some pole fishers constantly lift and drop their bait so it sinks naturally in order to entice a take from roach and other coarse fish. Traditional tenkara, Reversed Kebari wet flies are similar to our traditional spiders and the Italian Valsesia flies. Both Kebari and Valsesia flies are tied more heavily dressed than North Country Spiders and with the hackle reversed so the fibres slope over the hook-eye (like Neil Patterson's Funnel Dun). This reversed hackle facilitates the maximum movement of the hackle fibres when the fly is 'worked' by the current or by repeated, subtle lifts of the rod tip.

Another, interesting tenkara technique for tempting fish is suteburi (which means throw away the fly) where the fly is 'quick fire'



Woodcock & Orange tied with reversed hackle.

cast in an arc, close to the fish, never letting it settle more than a second or two on the water and then the final cast is made to the 'sweet spot' directly in front of the target, which if suitably excited will take without hesitation. I can't wait to try out these techniques.

#### MELDING TECHNIQUES

With tenkara, presentation is much more important than fly choice and patterns are suggestive rather than imitative. Apparently, some tenkara fishers use only one fly pattern all year round. Presentation may be nine-tenths of the game but, as Dick Walker used to say "You can't catch nine tenths of a fish", so unless your fly is appropriate for the particular fishing situation you won't catch. I certainly would not restrict myself to such a limited range of flies. I could not imagine not using my size 24 and smaller CdC dries, or small bead head nymphs and shrimps. A melding of traditional tenkara with modern techniques is the way I intend to go. Just as modern materials have improved on the old in the construction of tenkara equipment so techniques can be evolved and adapted. Versatility, plus an open mind, is the best recipe for consistent success.

Casting with a tenkara set up is not dissimilar to casting using a conventional out-

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fit with a few key differences. Firstly, there is no line to shoot so the left hand is obsolete (except for the final landing of a fish). The standard hand grip is with the forefinger extended along the top of the handle which facilitates precise, accurate casting and the casting stroke is the normal 10 to 1 o'clock - 1 to 10 o'clock sequence, with stops to allow the line to extend fully (too sharp a stop causes recoil vibrations from the soft top), although its execution is a bit slower than with faster actioned, shorter, conventional rods. Roll casts are easily performed and under-arm jump-roll casts are great for casting under overhanging branches. The latter cast is very similar to a tennis player sweeping up a low ball.

Having purchased a 12ft, Tenkara USA, Iwana, 6:4 rod just as the November 2010 blizzards hit East Yorkshire my first chance to try it out was not until December 5, when daytime temperatures rose to an elevated 2°C and local roads became passable. I headed for the upper Yorkshire Derwent, which was clear despite some melt water. On arrival I carefully hitched my 10.5ft furled leader/line to the braid tag (Lilian) attached to the rod tip, then extended the eight telescopic sections, after which I added 5ft of 6X (0.12mm) tippet, with a tiny pinch of pink float dough at its junction with the leader, plus a size 14 UV Shrimp Pink Ice Dub Shrimp at the terminal end. At less than 30z the rod felt like a wand and a slight flick pitched my offering into the head of the near-side seam in a pool which nearly always holds grayling.

First cast and the leader tip pulled away

All you need for a day's tenkara fishing. Rod, line/leader, tippet, floatant, snips, forceps, monomaster (to store used tippet), box of flies and net (optional).



after drifting about a metre. A lively 25cm brown trout quickly came to hand. In the following hour-and-a-half, three similar sized grayling were landed and another three dropped off. I learnt several things on that first day: casting was very easy and highly accurate, but, having a fixed line length, I had to make sure I positioned myself carefully to cover each potential lie/holding spot: tracking with the rod held at 45° was essential to ensure a drag-free drift and to keep in close contact with the fly: playing fish without the ability to take in line or give it took a little longer than with a conventional set up, as a result some fish dropped off my barbless hook (not a problem since I was going to release them anyway).

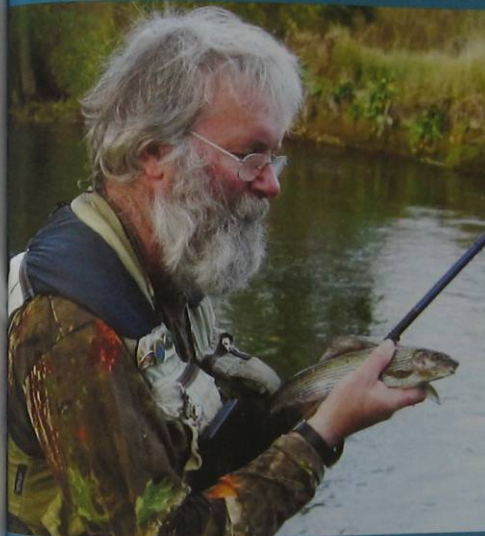
#### NYMPHING SUCCESS

My second trial was on December 7. The sub-zero temperature was no problem, with no rod rings to freeze up. Also with no reel or manual line manipulation required I could wear my mittens, only needing to fold back the ends of one when unhooking a fish. A slightly shorter leader set up, consisting of a 7ft furled leader with 1ft of bright yellow braid attached and 5ft of tippet proved to be perfect, allowing me to track the rod with the flow whilst holding the yellow braid just above the water surface. Casting up and across the flow facilitated good presentation. In less than two hours seven grayling up to 30cm and a 46cm brown trout fell for the charms of my Pink Shrimp. The shorter line made playing the fish straight forward and I was particularly impressed with how well the set up handled the sizeable brown trout: the soft action of the rod and stretch in the furled leader just soaked up the fish's power. Subsequent winter trips, with temperatures down to -7°C, have convinced me how effective a tenkara set up is for nymphing/bugging. Roll on April and the dry-fly fishing.

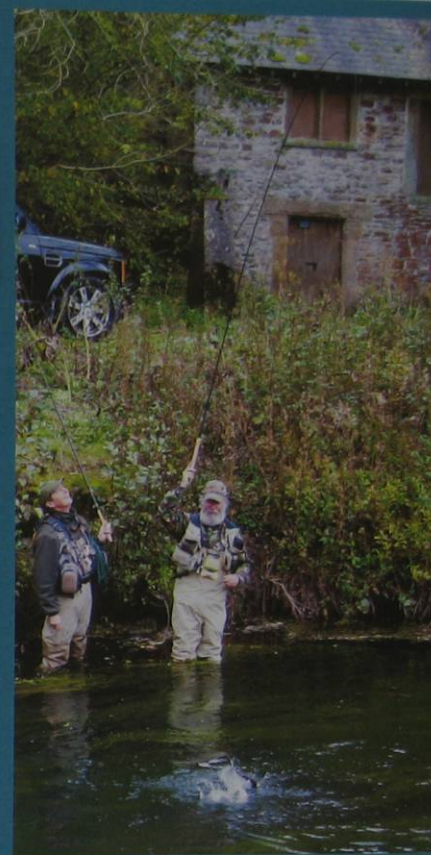
Tenkara has really taken off in the USA,



A quality Derwent trout.



The author with a grayling taken during a 'Tenkara day' on the Derbyshire Wye.



Stuart Crofts watches the tenkara rod absorb the pull of a good fish.

with anglers like Ed Engle, John Gierach and Yvon Chouinard extolling the advantages of this simple method, and it is starting to get a following in the UK. It is certainly an ideal means of introducing youngsters and beginners to fly fishing on rivers since casting and line management are easy and it is a brilliant way of presenting flies.

Its only drawbacks are that it is not ideally suited to the catching of large fish, such as the oversized stockies which are so often introduced into our rivers to compensate for poor spawning habitat, over-fishing or to satisfy the desire of anglers who want big fish which are easy to catch. It is also unsuitable for heavily overgrown, tree enshrouded small streams and the very light line is easily affected by the wind. Furthermore the ultra-light tip is not suited to the use of large, thick wired hooks. On the other hand, it is very well suited to fishing with small, weighted nymphs and bugs, Spiders and dry flies. The cost of a complete

set up ranges from about £90 to £140, which is very reasonable compared with conventional gear. Although it will never take over from my more conventional equipment I've had great

#### Useful websites

- [www.tenkara.usa](http://www.tenkara.usa) - for rods, leaders/lines and lots of information, including excellent video clips.
- [www.flytyingboutique.com](http://www.flytyingboutique.com) - Phil Holding, will supply Rod Dibble Furled Leaders. He provides several standard lengths up to 7ft but can get longer ones custom made.

fun with it and will continue to use it in the right places and at the right times.

If you do give tenkara a try - and you should - remember that you will be working at very close range so absolute stealth is paramount, particularly with trout which usually tend to spook more easily than grayling.

Dave Southall started fly fishing on the Yorkshire Rye and Driffield Canal in the 1960s. He latest progressed to the south Midland reservoirs. He is a member of the Derwent Anglers' Club and has fished all over the world for a variety of species. Grayling remain his favourite quarry. Contact Dave on the Forum at [www.flyfishing-and-flytying.co.uk](http://www.flyfishing-and-flytying.co.uk)

