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Looking to simplify your fly-fishing? This traditional Japanese angling style brings elegance, ease to the end of your line

By Kelsey Dayton



The tenkara fly rod can be twisted down, making it a perfect companion for those who like to hike in to fish backcountry streams. (Adobe Stock photo)



We might not catch many fish, George Hunker cautioned. It was early on a March day and the Little Popo Agie was foot-numbingly cold. He didn't need to warn me; I never catch many fish.

I am a perpetual beginner when it comes to fly-fishing, finally mastering a cast, only to wait a year or more before I fish again and must relearn everything I was last taught. Today, Hunker thought, might be different. He grabbed what looked like a baton and began to spiral it out until it took the form of a fishing rod. He was going to show me tenkara, a traditional Japanese fly-fishing method notorious for its simplicity and, according to Hunker, its success in helping beginners catch fish.

A tenkara rod is longer than a traditional Western fly rod, and the line, usually a braided monofilament, is attached directly to the rod's tip, hence no reel. The last 3 feet or so of line is the same kind of tippet used by traditional fly anglers. The design makes it easy to hold the line off the water and allows the fly to float downstream naturally, perfectly mimicking an insect. There's no need to manipulate the line.

"Instinctively everyone gets a good drift," he said.

I was skeptical that "everyone" would include me.

Hunker grew up fly-fishing in New Mexico and taught himself to tie flies from books when he was

about 10 years old. He moved to Wyoming in the 1970s to learn to climb and eventually became a fly-fishing instructor with the National Outdoor Leadership School. He started the Lander-based Sweetwater Fishing Expeditions in 1977. Six or seven years ago, he heard about tenkara during a stop in a West Yellowstone, Montana, fly shop.

"I'd been doing the same old thing for long enough. I thought I might as well try this out," he said.

He bought a rod, rigged it and immediately caught a brown trout.

"I thought 'Oh man, this is the coolest thing on Earth,' " he said. "In the hands of someone who is really good, it should be illegal."

Then Hunker decided to nymph with it.

"It was the exact same thing, perfect drift, no line on the water to influence the fly," he said. "Tenkara was made for it. The cool thing is, you don't have to get all sophisticated about it. You can just throw the fly out there, and it works."

'FROM THE SKIES'



Tenkara was developed in the mountain streams of Japan, and the most commonly accepted meaning for the name tenkara is "from heaven," or "from the skies," because of the way the fly descends and softly lands on the water.

According to the Tenkara USA gear company, the

George Hunker guided the author, a perpetual fly-fishing beginner, to her first catch with tenkara, a traditional Japanese angling method that emphasizes simplicity.
(Photo by Kelsey Dayton)





Even though she was skeptical, the author managed to catch a brown trout on her first outing using the tenkara fishing style. Her guide wasn't wrong when he said the learning curve was almost nonexistent.
(Photo by Kelsey Dayton)

first written record about it appeared in the 1870s in a British diplomat's diary, but the history of tenkara likely goes back much further. There are several origin stories, the most plausible being how anglers realized they could imitate bugs with feathers or silk to catch fish. The single fly was efficient, taking seconds to tie and catching several fish before needing replacement.

In 2009, Tenkara USA became the first company outside Japan to sell the specialized rods for the sport. Founder Daniel Galhardo stumbled across the method when researching fishing and fell in love with its simplicity on a trip to Japan. Not long after, Yvon Chouinard, founder of Patagonia, discovered the method and became so enamored that Patagonia created its own rods.

"Tenkara holds a certain amount of mystery," said Bill Klyn of Jackson, a tenkara enthusiast who learned the style from Chouinard. Klyn led Patagonia's international fishing business development before he retired and tells the tale of how Chouinard received a tenkara rod as a gift on a business trip to Japan. It sat untouched and forgotten in his home until he saw a man fishing with a similar, simple-looking rod on a trip to Italy about eight years ago. Intrigued, Chouinard returned home, picked up his tenkara rod



George Hunker spirals the tenkara rod out of itself to extend into a full-fledged fly-fishing rod. The tenkara style dates back to the 1870s in Japan, but is a fairly recent phenomenon in the United States, with the first tenkara gear company opening in the U.S. in 2009. (Photo by Kelsey Dayton)

and began to experiment. He immediately loved the control he had over the fly.

Chouinard's passion was infectious. Klyn loved the simplicity of the design and its effectiveness. He's used it everywhere from Wyoming's backcountry to small rivers in France, though he still regularly uses a traditional fly rod when he's fishing big water, using a drift boat, or angling for big fish.

"But I can still bring the tenkara rod, it's so small. And if I come to a riffle, I can pull it out," he said.

SIMPLICITY IS KEY



Such portability is partly what drew Joseph Quiroz of Lander to tenkara. Hunker introduced him to fly-fishing in 2005 and tenkara a few years after Hunker discovered it. Quiroz immediately took to it.

"Simplicity — that was the key," he said. "I tend to like simple things. Simplicity is elegance. And to me, function is beauty, and this thing functions so well — I thought it was really something special."

Quiroz carries a tenkara rod with him in his backpack, even on day hikes. He takes it with him when traveling — it easily fits in his carry-on bag and he'll try to find a creek wherever he's staying. On a recent trip, he even cast in the pond behind his hotel.

Hunker likes that he can take the 3-ounce rod and three flies with him wherever he goes, but as a fishing guide what he likes most is how easy it makes fly-fishing. He encourages kids and beginner anglers to try



tenkara rods on trips he's guiding. It's that intuitive.

"Really, there is no learning curve," he said.

Standing there on the edge of the Little Popo Agie, I wasn't assured.

Hunker has the calm, patient, positive demeanor of an experienced guide, but I was nervous as I made my first cast. It landed near the spot Hunker had pointed to and received a "perfect-almost," grade.

Within a few casts, I felt a tug and jerked the rod up. My first fish of the day, a brown trout, the same as my guide caught his first time tenkara fishing.

A tenkara rod is a little more flexible than a traditional one, Hunker said.

"So even if a fish is only 8 inches, it feels like a big one," he said.

I don't have much to compare the feeling to — catching anything is exciting for me.

Tenkara does have its limitations — and plenty of critics rolled their eyes when I said I was going to try it. It isn't conducive if the water is deep or you can't move easily in it. Fish also can spook if the water is

clear and you get too close. Landing a big fish on the rod would also be a challenge. It's a method best used when fishing short distances.

But there are disadvantages to the long casts critics say they miss with tenkara, Hunker said. The additional line impacts how the fly moves. Hunker normally carries both a traditional rod and a tenkara rod when fishing streams around Lander. Using a tenkara rod makes an angler more of a hunter. Anglers have to figure out where the fish are and move in on them.

On our outing we used only the tenkara rod. In less than two hours, we caught several whitefish and brown trout. To be fair, Hunker caught most of the fish, but the fact that I caught any is astounding. Hunker's guidance and the ease of the tenkara rod made it the most successful few hours of fishing I've ever experienced. It turns out fishing is pretty fun when you actually catch fish.

— Kelsey Dayton is a freelance writer and editor of *Outdoors Unlimited*, the magazine of the *Outdoor Writers Association of America*.

What separates the tenkara rod from a traditional fly-fishing rod is not only how it spirals out of itself to full length, but also that the line is attached directly to the rod's tip, negating the need for a reel.

(Adobe Stock photo)

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