

# Favoured tools for small streams: an 'interim' hypothesis

Stephen Boshoff

I think all small stream enthusiasts restlessly search for favourite tools; for go-to things, whether rod, reel or fly container. Avid catalogue prospecting and collecting merely portrays successive interim hypotheses – and the frustration – related to searching for the ideal. We are engaged in a continuous hunt, aimed at stripping down until we come as close to nature as we can get, rather than consciously hoarding fishing instruments for every occasion just for the sake of it.

My search for the ideal rod and attendant paraphernalia has not ended.

I am proud of my Medved 'Pup' interpretations in bamboo – 6' for a 3 weight double taper. Al Medved is an esteemed rod builder – even though he does not sell the rods he makes – and is probably best known for his router-based, bamboo roughing beveller design which is available from many internet sites. The Medved Pup is a short, six foot, small stream rod designed for two or three-weight lines. I found the original taper on Clark's Classic Forum (<http://clarksclassicflyrodforum.yuku.com/>) where several makers and users voted it as one of the best small stream tapers available. My version contains a tweak here and there – the normal rod maker's interpretation of what they believe would work best.

In my rod making, painful self-criticism is ever manifest, particularly in my quest for a finish that is both practical and yet aesthetic. My early austerity of finish has stuck, so for now the rods come with the guide feet dressed in black. I have proudly mastered the single thread decorative wrap, but these trimmings serve no purpose, and as Everett Garrison's wife once remarked, result in 'behaviour from the maker that's unfit to live with'. As the rods are not expected to be exposed for long periods to rain or to be dunked in streams unnecessarily, the finish is ultra thin, in oil and hand-rubbed polyurethane.

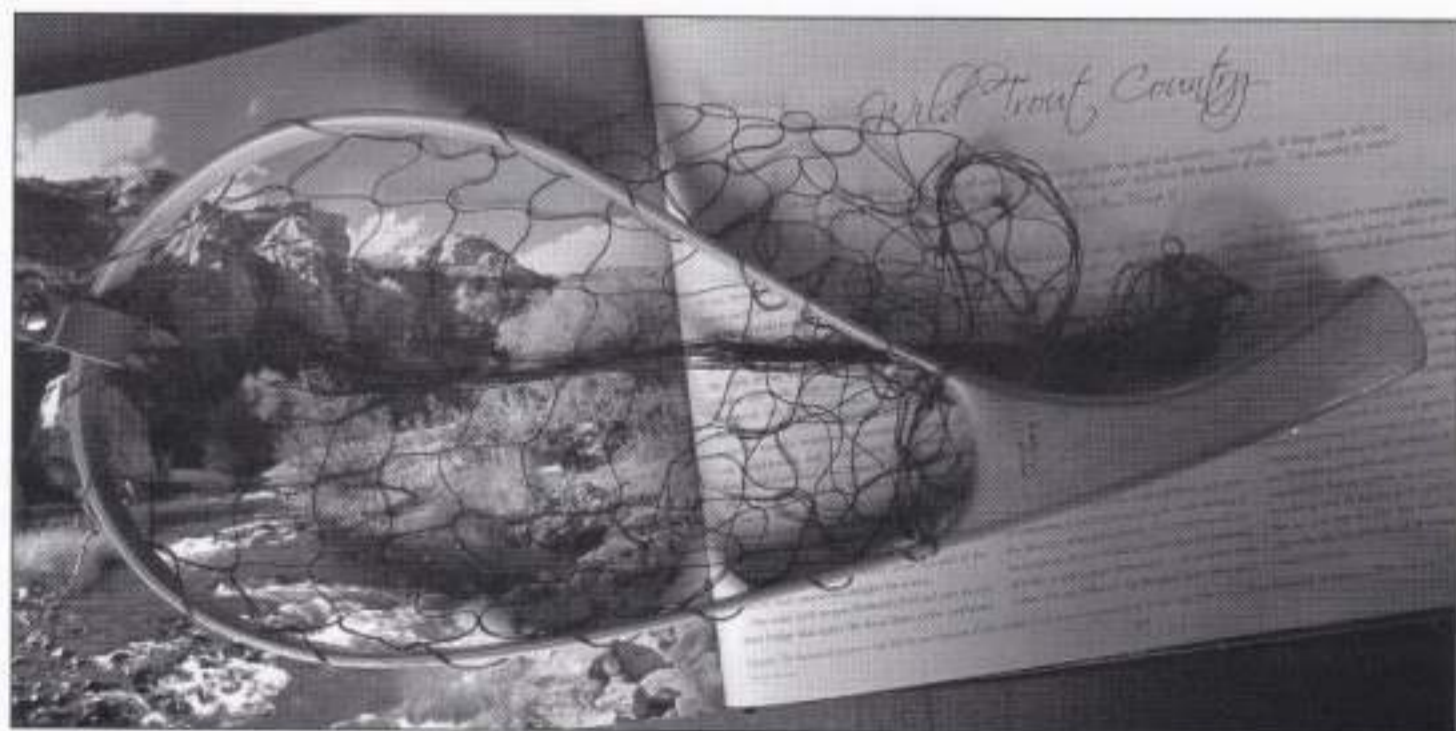
The 'palm grip' that eventually evolved from the discussions Ed Herbst and I had in building what we felt would be the ultimate small stream fly rod provides a sense of hand, rod and reel fusion and, because the hand is positioned towards the butt, it effectively extends the working length of short rods. Reel seats are in aluminium. It beats nickel silver for lightness, and has a sort of blue collar integrity.

But somehow I don't fish my own bamboo much yet; the peculiarities and challenges of making them predominate, along with experiencing the satisfaction and appreciation of other users. Perhaps there's also the fear of an on-stream accident, knowing what the making takes out of me.

These days, I am most often drawn to the Sage SPL 'ought-weight' – Ed Herbst's personal original – of which I am custodian now and which I left un-fished for a season or two. For me, it is complete, the best small stream rod Sage ever made, and the last of a kind prior to Sage's apparent commercial decision to treat a 000 and 6-weight similarly in their component needs. If one thing detracts, it is the abundance of sloppy epoxy covering the guide feet and



*Stephen Boshoff attaches his trademark logo to the door of his Scarborough workshop.*



*A net made for the editor and weighing little more than one ounce. It has a two strip bamboo frame with a Jelutong (*Dyera costulata*) grip. Jelutong, a wood similar to balsa, is commonly used for woodcarving.*

running from the wraps onto the blank, so characteristic of commercial Sages - but I will not rebuild this one.

The Sage replaced an Orvis One-Ounce in unsanded graphite (remade with a palm grip). I parted with it, and as these decisions often go, regretted it later. Ten years on, a text message from the new owner reporting a breakage brought momentary excitement as I have secured, by chance, an extra tip from John Yelland's rod pieces bin (or rather, owner-neglected rod bin). Problem is: he sat on the butt. Somehow that dealt with the loss once and for all.

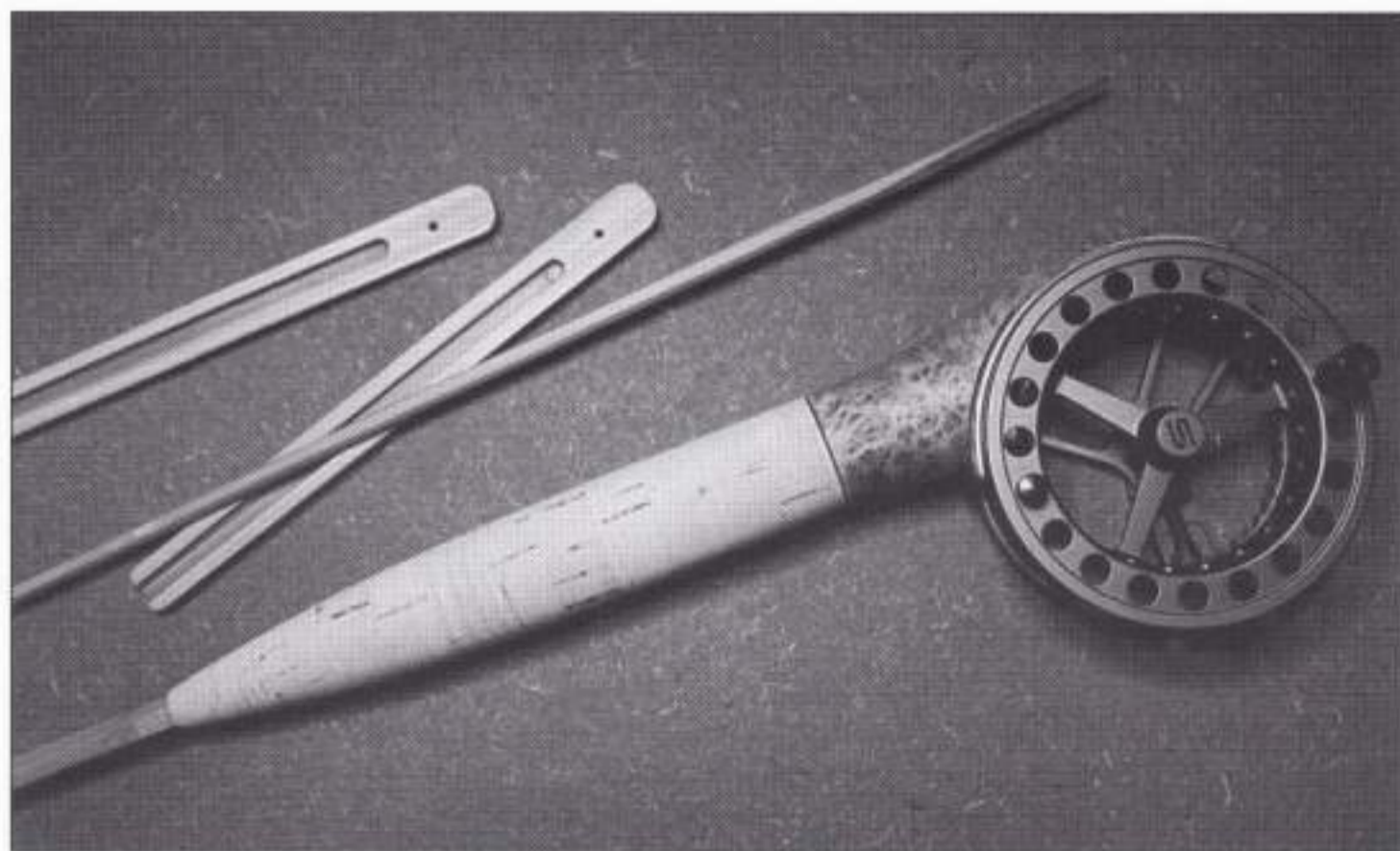
I couple the ought-weight with an original Waterworks Purist fly reel, the remaining one of a pair Ed purchased when the model was first released (the other, legend has it, resides in its neoprene pouch on the Birkhall beat of the Sterkspruit in Barkly East after it fell off the back of Basie Vosloo's truck.) I have a new Sage Click 1 fly reel (special in itself because it is payment for the sweat that went into making a bamboo wand), but the Waterworks remains the one I'll pick if I have to.

Lately, my wooden prototype centre-axis rod-and-reel configuration, where rod and reel are married in one seamless unit, presses for go-to status. I won't begin to defend its merits. Rather, I have firm ideas on why this kind of arrangement – where the reel is integral with the rod handle and an extension of it, rather than conventionally mounted beneath the handle - has not in the commercial world, survived against others, and these have little to do with either form or function. To me, in use, it provides for a sense of 'oneness' in hand and rod, and some small-stream high priests have since become converts. What no one can argue about is that there is one less item to misplace, and less worry about line and weight. Just don't dent the reel, because then you mess up the rod as well (or alternatively, don't break the rod).

A centre-axis bamboo – 7' 2-weight with reconfigured Sage Click 1 – reel has been made for the editor, scarf jointed rather than utilising the conventional metal ferrules in pursuit of less metal, less weight, less clutter. Scarf joints replace the traditional ferrule with precisely tapered male and female slots that are bound with tape when the tip and butt are joined. It is based on Chris Bogart's Shenandoah Yellow Rose taper, a seven foot, two weight (<http://www.shentel.net/canerothtml/RodsIndex.html>).

My new rod of choice could be its sister, but with a reel in wood, or African wire-craft applied to reels (a burgeoning idea, again not entirely new if you consider Billingham's brass birdcage reel), and fitted with micro-guides (why have standard guide recommendations not been adjusted for new 'whisper' lines, in plastic or silk?). These rods will come with two tubes: one in wood for looking at (at home), and the other in plastic for transport to and from stream.

The Richardson chest box is the centre of my on-stream operations; a fully equipped small stream workshop of 160x100x55mm, including space for storing flies, other materials and aids; a platform for knotting and leader building, adding floatant, and 'arm's length' eye-sight compensation (through a flip-out magnifier by Bausch and Lomb). It is hand made in Vincent Marinaro, Charlie Fox and George Harvey's Pennsylvania; its modest price cannot begin to compensate for the brilliance of ideas that begot it; or the handcraft and personal



*The author's latest rod built on the centre-axis reel theme. The 'reel seat' connecting rod and reel is made of locally-harvested besembos. The two pieces of grooved bamboo at the top of the picture protect the splice joints which are used for lightness and sensitivity rather than the conventional metal ferrules.*



*One of Stephen Boshoff's customer split-cane rods, a seven foot 3-weight, equipped with an Ari Hart reel.*

engraving that precedes delivery to the new owner.

More confident in working wood than metal, and with a good stash of priceless besembos briar, (*Clotalario spartiodes*) dug up by master rod builder, Mario Geldenhuys of Aliwal North ([www.customflyrods.co.za](http://www.customflyrods.co.za)) and transported to Cape Town by Tom Sutcliffe, I am pursuing the idea of a wooden chest box. Rather than weight, the overarching challenge here is making tiny wooden hinges.

Should the need arise to shed more weight I'll reach for the smallest of the black anodised Wheatley fly boxes; special because Tom handed it to me once, an unexpected gift. I think he got it somewhere on an English chalk stream, probably from an appreciative reader.

Both these boxes fail as adequate storage for my RAB variants, essential tools without which I feel homeless and lacking in connection with authentic Cape stream dry fly tradition and inescapable history. So, a small round plastic container (like those carrying bath salts and such in the 'don't think just buy' gift section of Woolworths) providing 50mm vertical leg-room for RABs has become indispensable.

I prefer furred leaders – made with a brass leader twirl – from 8/0 olive-coloured UNI-thread. Tiny silver leader-links are furred in for easy tippet replacements. I can't say that furred leaders perform better than carefully structured, knotted monofilament ones; and they can get messy because their suppleness promotes snarling and tangles. But I like them; I never fail to be mesmerised by the softness of their decent, nor the feather light feel of the pick-up, and they have the same naturalness as bamboo. They present my RABs (tippet-tied with a Fullerton's Surgeon's Swivel) faultlessly through the air and in the water, and aid them in the drift.

Albeit not needed, I carry a landing net because it is a thing of beauty. I probably look at it, touch it, and am generally aware of it, more often than I use it. Mine is the first I made, in cherry, the netting itself salvaged from a piece spat out by the sea close to my workshop. Its purple colour has resisted the best of dies. But a fabric softener has worked wonders on how it feels, and on my conscience, as I prefer traditional netting to those dubiously 'trout friendly', track-suit-type linings often seen on modern landing nets.

*Editor's note: I met Stephen Boshoff in 2000 when I booked a cottage for the weekend on Ernst and Anchen Stofberg's farm, Dwarsberg ([www.trouthaven.co.za](http://www.trouthaven.co.za)) so that I could fish the Holsloot stream.*

*I was told that a fellow Cape Piscatorial Society member had also booked a cottage and strolled across to suggest we share a beat as I am always wary of fishing on my own. It was the start of a valued friendship but also the beginning of a search for the ultimate small stream fly rod.*

*I was to discover that not only did Stephen share my interest in low-flash, low-mass 'Whisper Rods', but that he was also a consummate and visionary craftsman when it came to building them.*

*The rods subsequently built by Stephen, dubbed the 'Small Stream Special', had an up-locking, reverse half wells handle made entirely of cork. The front reel seat was hooded*

within the cork grip. A shelf of cork extends along the top of the handle almost to the butt so that the transition from the handle to reel seat does not involve the abrupt gap that conventional fly rod handles with wooden reel seats have. The front of the grip tapers all the way to the blank, again avoiding the abrupt transition that characterises mass-produced fly rods. When Scott importer, David Levine, heard about our experiments, he contacted the American company's designer, Stephen Bartschi, who effectively agreed to sponsor further research by kindly sending us some superb Scott 1 weight blanks – alas no longer made.

The rods Stephen built on these blanks are now treasured by small stream fanatics such as Peter Brigg and Leonard Flemming. Photographs of Peter's Scott, custom-built by Stephen, can be found on pages 71, 91, 171 and 192 of Peter's book, *Call of the Stream*.

For an article which encapsulates the basic parameters to which we felt the ultimate small stream fly rod should conform see: *The One-Off One Weight*, (Piscator No 134, November 2002).

Stephen's latest rods have their genesis in a concept by Kurt Danielsson, the Dane whose Loop reel introduced the currently ubiquitous large arbour reel to fly fishers. In the mid-eighties Danielsson built a rod in which the reel was not slung beneath the rod but was made an integral part of it and attached to the back of the rod butt. He sent some photographs to Sage who produced a very limited run of rods based on this concept. (There is nothing new in fly fishing however, Abraham Coates of Watertown, New York patented a similar concept in 20 March, 1888.)

The new rod features spliced joints rather than the traditional metal ferrules, which – unless they are blued – are very reflective. There is a growing belief in split cane rod building circles that such rods offer significant advantages in terms of feel and weight reduction. Type "spliced joint rods" into your computer's search engine and visit the split cane rod websites of Gary Nicholson of Nicho Bamboo Rods and Per Brandin for more detail. (<http://nichobamboorods.com/Spliced-Bamboo-Rods> and <http://www.brandin-splitcane.com/development.html>).

I have never fished with a rod that is better balanced or experienced a rod handle that is more comfortable. The reel sits flush against the junction of the hand and wrist facilitating the 'squeeze cast' – the best method for small stream accuracy – which was developed by Joe Humphries and is well demonstrated on his DVD's, most specifically *A Casting Approach to Fishing in Tight Brush*, which Craig Thom of [netbooks.co.za](http://netbooks.co.za) has in stock.

Stephen has a link on Tom Sutcliffe's website: <http://www.tomsutcliffe.co.za/index.php/my-friends-pages/stephen-boshoff-fly-rods> and can be contacted at [stephen@oda.co.za](mailto:stephen@oda.co.za) or 082 376 7381.

Karl Weber and Bob Hegedus of Bellefonte, Pennsylvania make the Richardson Chest Box (<http://www.chestflybox.com/>) and their product is hand-made, time-tested and rich in tradition. They will build it to your specifications, engrave your name on it and, given the number of man-hours that go into each one, the price is exceptionally reasonable and the value for money outstanding.