

## THE FLY REEL - RIGHT OR LEFT?

By Alan Jackson

Both of the new arrivals came on the same day. One from the US and the other from Britain. Both were prestige national flyfishing journals and both would depict the many facets of our sport in photographic form. There would be photographs of flyfishermen, caught in the act, so to speak, of fishing in highly desirable locations in many parts of the world. Some shots would show glorious scenery, streams and lakes with their quota of lucky fishermen hard at work (work!). Others would depict the smiling faces of the successful as they displayed their catches for the camera. Still others might be close-ups of beautiful salmon or trout with a casually placed fly box alongside for colour and the butt section of a rod in one corner of the print.

Apart from a natural, and I hope forgivable feeling of envy in the first instance (why can't I have a couple of days in Hampshire and then move on to Scotland and... but you know those thoughts too, I'm sure) my initial interest focuses on a particular aspect of each photograph. I have a sort of specialised interest you might say. The pages are turned and I do the usual count and add to my existing data base of knowledge. Not all of the photographs will show the subject of my interest but some will, and it is surprising for instance what you can work out from even middle distance views of anglers netting their catches.

Right handed or left handed, that is the question, but one must bear in mind that a percentage, although a small percentage, of all fishermen are left handed, and that is taken into account. But what on earth is this "specialised interest" you might be saying - at least I hope you might. Well, it's really quite simple (and harmless too) I happen to be a compulsive observer of fly rods and reels either in use or at rest, whether attached to fishermen or not. And the object of the exercise is to ascertain the number of people who use the fly reel in the right- or left hand wind position. I have this thing, you see, about how a fly reel should be mounted on a rod and I gather statistics from all over the place. You might be interested to know that tentative figures show that 70-80% of British flyfishermen who are right handed mount their reels for right hand wind and my own observations show that a similar situation exists in this country. A glance at literature of South African origin will confirm that a surprising number of anglers, including well-known flyfishing "personalities", are wedded to this very strange practice. Have a close look at action photographs of well-known gurus of fly casting fame and you may be surprised at what you turn up. Its no concern of mine of course if Mr Average angler chooses to mount his reel in this quite illogical way but my hackles start to rise (appropriate phrase) when I realise that people who instruct professionally in the gentle art are probably guilty of passing on their bad habit to unsuspecting beginners.

When a person fishes with a rod in the right hand and the reel is mounted for right hand wind he will inevitably have to change hands at some stage after a fish is hooked if he wishes to wind in line. There is a risk, and to me an unacceptable risk, entailed in messing about like this at such a crucial stage in the action especially when it is quite unnecessary to take the risk at all. The flyfisherman's casting arm muscles are finely tuned and co-ordinated to handle the rod efficiently and the other hand, the line hand, is a highly trained manipulator of line, leader and fly at all stages of the cast and in the retrieve process. Why on earth then should this educated combination of catching hand and arm, be suddenly relegated to the simple task of winding a little handle at precisely the stage when its greatest sensitivity may be required?

Similarly, why should the line hand be made to take over as rod controller at a moment's notice when it is not schooled for that task? This hand which is so expert in the subtlety of line control is surely capable of turning that little handle too? The right hand wind adherents therefore make little sense to me and I remain puzzled to put it mildly and this possibly explains my continuing fascination with the subject.

In my own fishing infancy in England, after using the usual centre pin reel of that era I graduated to fixed spool reels such as the Ambidex and Mitchell and in using these came under the influence of one Alexander Wanless, a prolific author and High Priest of the "thread line" as he called it, or fixed spool reel. Wanless, who was also a keen flyfisherman always stressed the importance of the right handed angler using his reel in left hand wind mode and I still have one of



his books in which he is positively scathing about any of his readers who might be what he termed "Right handed, can't-wind-with-my-left-hand anglers". He further wrote, just to rub it in no doubt, "A right hand angler *can* learn to use a reel with a right hand wind, casting with his right hand, then transferring the rod to his left and vice versa. He could in time become fairly facile in that kind of casting but I don't think he could ever become sufficiently expert not to have to leave unfished many places where he would be able to fish IF HE MASTERED HIS DISABILITY" (my italics).

The Wanless logic wore off on me and by the time I came to fish for trout I never dreamt of mounting a fly reel other than for left hand wind. What could be simpler anyway and one does not require above average ambidexterity either. That I do know and none of the adults and children I have introduced to the sport over the years have had the slightest difficulty with left hand wind.

But perhaps Wanless is somewhat dated and you may think too pre-occupied with the fixed spool reel to be impressive as a quotable authority but I can offer a contemporary authority on fly fishing matters who also has definite opinions on right or left hand wind.

Dave Whitlock will be well known to many readers as one of America's best known and respected flyfishing and fly tying experts. An author, illustrator, photographer and lecturer in flyfishing and recipient of several prestigious awards, he writes:

"Most single action fly reels can be used with right or left hand wind. Traditionally, right handed casters also reel right handed, but I feel this is the wrong method in most circumstances. The rod hand and arm should be used for that purpose; the other hand and arm are used to manipulate the loose line and operate the reel. Changing hands back and front is awkward, time consuming and inefficient. I use the rod with my right hand and handle the line and reel with my left".

You may be of the opinion that the subject is academic and of small importance, a matter of personal preference, traditionally based as Dave Whitlock observes. Perhaps it is, but I for one feel that the overall quality of flyfishing depends on many "small importance" factors and this one deserves your consideration if nothing more. A "disability" such as this really is very easy to master. And I think that the "personalities" I referred to earlier who directly influence beginners and the younger generation have a special responsibility. Do have a look at those photographs I mentioned when you can spare the time. Most of the locally published books have lots of them and they are most interesting. But now you must excuse me. There are those new magazines you see and ...