

Quotes on avoiding rod flash – ideal blank colour and finish

Ed Herbst

Camouflage is a vital element of success in small stream fly fishing and, while mirrored sunglasses and a bright red scarf might enhance the photos taken of yourself while fishing, they will certainly not enhance your catch rate.



The author, wearing olive trousers and an olive-mottled shirt blending into the background on a trout stream near Cape Town. Rod flash negates these efforts at camouflage.

The reflection of light from a glossy and constantly moving fly rod has long been recognised as an impediment to fly fishing success – multiple coats of varnish turn split cane fly rods into six-sided mirrors and many carbon fibre rods are almost as lustrous.

One way of countering rod flash on synthetic rods is to simply spray them with matt-finish aerosol paint



A 2010 prototype centre axis fly rod built by Stephen Boshoff. The brightly-chromed reel and the blank have been spray-painted with matt, battleship-grey aerosol paint to reduce fish-scaring reflected sunlight.

Here are some of the quotes that I have collated showing concerns about rod-reflected that have been expressed for more than three centuries:

John Dennys

Secrets of Angling, 1653

His rod or cane, made darke for being seen,
The less to feare the wary fyshe withal

Lord Baden Powell

The Fishing Gazette, 18 June 1904.

“Here is what I said on the subject in the ‘Field’ of March 28, 1903. ‘Why startle the fish with yellow or brown or shiny steel? He is not accustomed to heliographic signalling, but he is accustomed to green, waving boughs and tall bending reeds. Why have a bright varnished rod with silver rings within his sight? Go on to a salmon water and see the heliograph rods. You can count the rods a mile off by the glisten and flash. Many a man goes to the chalk stream and flashes a rod like a streak of lightning.

“I had my rods painted green. Fashion says that a dull green paint is not a shop finish, but I buy tackle to catch fish, not to advertise the tackle dealer.”

G E M Skues

The Way of a Trout with a Fly, A & C Black, 1921

"It would not perhaps be the worst guess that could be made if one were to hazard that blue was the colour to which trout are the least sensitive.

"It is the colour of sky and cloud, the background against which they see their food.

"The reference to a neutral grey recalls a greenheart rod of mine made by Farlow and painted heron-blue, and its extraordinary invisibility to the trout. Again and again I have held it over a trout lying under my bank, and have waved it to and fro without scaring him until I showed myself, and it certainly seemed as if it were of a colour to which the trout was almost insensible. I remember speculating at the time whether it was by reason of his scheme of coloration that the heron was able to get within striking distance of the fish. I afterwards had a split-cane Test rod built by Messrs. Hardy Brothers, and I got them to colour it similarly, but the varnish put a flash upon it which discounted its invisibility, and that and the fact that the colouring matter under or in the varnish added not a little to the weight of the rod led to my discontinuing the use of heron-blue colouring for my rods."

Alan Pearson

Catching Big Trout, Stanley Paul, 1979

"One thing I am quite adamant about, and that is that the rod shall have a non-reflective finish. Some manufacturers will persist in ruining an otherwise excellent rod by dressing it up with gold or silver foil, lurid whippings and scintillating varnish, so that it bears an unholy resemblance to Christmas decorations in a Buenos Aires brothel. The amount of reflection from such rods is quite remarkable, and they give off brilliant flashes of light when the sun catches them. It is essential that the flash is removed from your rods, and nothing could be simpler than applying two or three coats of matt varnish. It can make the difference between failure and success. Why go to the trouble of advertising your presence to the trout?"

Brian Clarke and John Goddard

The Trout and the Fly, Ernest Benn, 1980

"In every case, when a gloss-varnished rod caught the sunlight, it heliographed its presence to the observer below water. There can be no knowing how many fish are not caught not because they have been 'spooked', but simply because they have been put 'on guard' by something as simple as the flash from a highly-varnished rod, even when it is being carried low-down by the angler. In all our experiments concerning the reflective powers of rods, the matte-varnished rod was much less easily seen.

"It is quite clear that the reflection of bright sunlight off gloss varnish must alert many trout, whether or not the angler is aware of it at the time."

John Sautelle

Champagne Fly Fishing, Tas Trout Publications, Tasmania, 1990

"When confronted with my fly rods, which are invariably camouflaged, a lot of my acquaintances are adamant that that I carry the camouflage too far. I paint the rods with a khaki-colour paint. Then, when that coat is dry, I carelessly dab them with an olive-green

colour in the same paint. Finally I coat the whole rod with a clear, matte-finish paint. I have often noticed that the first sight of another angler on a sunny day is a glint of sun on the rod. Being aware of the acute eyesight of trout, I decided to begin the camouflage exercise. I expect the two colours may not be really necessary. Probably just a coat or two of the matte-finish clear paint would be all that is required, but somehow I like the look of the two-coloured job. I feel sure this precaution has gained me a number of fish that would otherwise have been spooked by the rod flash. In any case it is really cheap insurance."

Gary LaFontaine

The Dry Fly, New Angles, Greycliff Publishing Co, 1990

"There are no perfectly finished rods available to the flyfisherman.

"This has been known for a long time, at least since 1653

'His rod or cane, made dark for being seen,

The less to fear the wary fish withal.'

Secrets of Angling, by John Dennys, was the rarest book in Harry's library. He showed me the above passage one day to explain why he painted all of his bamboo rods, Paynes and Leonards mostly, a flat battleship grey.

"To make a perfect stalking rod the fly fisherman has to start with a blank, preferably with a slower, softer action than one of the popular fast designs, finish it a flat gray instead of a glossy polish and fit it with non-reflective guides and reel seat instead of bright metallic ones.

"The angler who has just paid many hundreds of dollars for a shiny new rod has a dilemma - does he want to look pretty or does he want to catch trout? If he chooses the latter there is still a way for him to get his money's worth out of the rod. Right in the shop, right after paying for the rod, he can take a piece of steel wool and lightly rub the shaft.

Peter Hayes

Fly Fishing outside the Box – Emerging Heresies, Coch-y-Bonddu Books 2013

What is not easily understandable, and certainly not forgivable, is the way in which fly fishing tackle manufacturers conspire to provide us with rods, lines and other appurtenances which are guaranteed to scare fish unnecessarily.

And the way in which they do not give us a choice. If you want to buy one of the top performing rods, it will almost certainly be necessary for you to buy it coated in varnish that will flash like a heliograph both across the river and up and down it. In the wilder and more open river valleys of New Zealand, where you can be easily separated from your companions by a mile or more, I have often relied on rod flash to rendezvous with absent friends. (But they cannot rely on my flashing rod to locate me, because I have de-flashed all my rods).

Worse still, these manufacturers, if you rub down the flash-producing varnish with fine grade wire wool, will insist that you have invalidated the guarantee.

From the trout's point of view, which you may remember we looked at in chapter six and found that they could easily see behind them, the flash generated by a rod with which the angler is casting starts at the butt and travels up the rod to the tip with incredible speed as

*the rod's power is released. It shoots towards the fish like a missile. Not one angler in twenty does anything to prevent this happening, and it is a very rare rod manufacturer that doesn't prioritise flash to catch the angler over flash that will scare the fish rigid. Brian Clarke and John Goddard drew clear attention to this in *The Trout and the Fly* 25 years ago, but virtually nothing has been done. So de-flashing rods is essential, and if you do not want to invalidate your rod guarantee, I recommend the use of artist's removable matt varnish. This can be removed with white spirit should you need to claim against your guarantee, and is effective as long as it is sprayed in warm, dust-free conditions and allowed to dry fully. Mask the rod rings with masking tape before spraying on the rod varnish, or your line will fail to shoot as well as you would like.*