



CHAPTER 5

The Delicate Fly Fisher's Reel

“Using the lightest reel possible makes some sense, since you're constantly moving the reel while casting. An ounce of weight carried through the casting motion all day makes pounds of difference.”

Scott Roederer, *The Compleat Angler's Catalogue*, 1985.

“Reels for trout and other fish of that size should be lightweight yet strong, have a capacity for the line plus 50 to 100 yards of backing, employ a rim-control spool and have a simple, adjustable, tooth-and-pawl drag system. I also demand a reel foot that is securely attached and a low-flash finish.

Gary Borger, *Presentation*, Tomorrow River Press, 1995.

The design parameters of the ideal small stream fly reel are defined by small stream trout and the circumstances in which you fish for them. In the trout streams near Cape Town a ten-inch trout is about average and a 16-inch trout a once-in-a-season triumph – if you are lucky.

This is typical of small stream trout everywhere. In the streams of the Smoky Mountain National Park, rainbow and brook trout average between five to eight inches, browns can grow bigger than that.

In his seminal study, ‘Foraging behaviour of free-ranging brown trout in a stream’, fisheries biologist Robert Bachman states that the average size of a brown trout in the USA is 13 inches. In the rocky, freestone streams of Britain, they speak of trout being ‘four to the pound’.

In his wonderful film ‘The Great Shaku Hunter’, Rolf Nylander documents the fly anglers who spend a lifetime on small mountain streams in Japan pursuing Iwana and Yamame measuring bigger than 11 inches – an elusive goal.

Occasionally, in early spring when the streams near Cape Town were still high after our winter rainfall season, a hooked trout would get downstream of me and, using the current, take line off the reel. A click and pawl drag system was more than adequate to cope with this situation.

I focused on pocket water and, in those confines, trout did not have the room to make long runs. My only experience of a small stream trout taking line from the reel on local streams in summer when the water levels are low occurred under unusual circumstances.

I was fishing from the tail of a long pool. On the right bank there was a high rock face and the pool was densely bushed on the left. There had to be a fish lying where the current tongue at the head of

the pool flattened out, but it was beyond the reach of my best double haul even if I had had the wind behind me. Furthermore, the head of pool was as tightly-bushed as it was lower down.

I spent about twenty minutes hacking my way through dense bankside undergrowth with my trusty Gerber folding blade saw to get to the top of the run. I was fortunate that, where I exited the brush, the water was just starting to run into the pool.

Even when I got to the water I could only crouch and I flicked an Elk Hair Caddis downstream. It was probably the first fly that that particular trout had ever seen. It weighed about a kilogram and, because it had the length of the pool to run, it surged downstream while my little Orvis CFO2 reel let out an unfamiliar yelp. I'll swear that trout looked bewildered when I released it.

In short, the small stream fly angler does not need a large-arbor reel with a counterbalanced spool and a complex cork or carbon fibre drag system. The average double taper floating fly line is about 80 – 90 feet long, but you will be using less than half that length in your average small stream cast.

It therefore made sense to me to cut a double taper line in half and fill up the rest of the spool with Dacron backing. The way I fished the trout streams near Cape Town was with probing casts and short drifts i.e., multiple casts in an hour. The heat, particularly around midday, can become enervating leading to a lapse in concentration.

One of fly fishing's most innovative thinkers, Vincent Marinaro, eloquently articulated the benefits of lightweight reels in his second and last book, *In the Ring of the Rise*:

In 1889 R.C. Leonard, a tournament caster, stepped to the platform without a reel on his rod and simply coiled the line at his feet. With that abbreviated rig he proceeded to smash all distance records, including his own by a wide margin. It was a shocking thing to competitors and spectators alike. It was a momentous discovery from which not only tournament casters but fishermen as well should have profited.

That early-day pioneer discovered an extremely important principle in rod dynamics. It amounts to this: That the caster has to move the useless weight below his hand as well as the useful weight above the hand and that the removal of dead weight below the hand helped to overcome inertia more quickly, increasing tip speed, thus imparting greater velocity to the fly line. I should have been a valuable lesson to everyone, but it wasn't. It remained only among tournament casters for many years.

"With the lightest reels the casts are sharply and cleanly delivered flat out and with enough velocity to turn over the leaders. As the reels get heavier there is a noticeable lagging in the forward loop until, finally, with the heaviest reel there is a decided dropping of the loop and probably a failure to turn the leader over properly."

"You can suit yourself about these matters but for me there is only one sound system and that is: Use the lightest possible reel of good quality and adequate capacity no matter how long or heavy the rod may be."

Today's delicate small stream models had their genesis in the reel patented by Charles Orvis in 1873.

It was mounted upright rather than sideways on the rod, was narrow and perforated, all design elements which are echoed in the fly reels we use today.

In the early 1960's aluminium alloys were developed which allowed the manufacture of substantially lighter reels, the smallest of which was the Hardy Fly Weight which came in at just under three ounces. It lives on in the Oracle Baby Trout made by Tiemco.

Hardy then improved on the design of this series in 1971 by incorporating, at the behest of Orvis, an idea of famed US custom reel maker, Stanley Bogdan.

Bogdan simply eliminated the outer rim of the reel frame, producing a lighter, cageless design. This one-sided 'half- frame' enabled spool changes to be quickly made and its two-and-a-half-inch diameter held half a double taper three weight line and a few yards of Dacron backing.

To further remove weight, the reel foot was ported.



A beloved combination for 40 years. The author's Orvis CFO2 reel combined with Henry Haneda's Archistrial fly rod

The CFO2 - which is no longer made - weighed two and a half ounces and my only criticism was that it was not a uniform matte black but had a reflective silver reel foot and similarly reflective components on both the front and back of the reel.

With the advent of computer aided design programmes and computer controlled multi-axis lathes and drills, we have seen a plethora of new reel companies enter the market with models carved from solid ingots of high-grade aluminium alloys.

In 1996 Mark Farris - an industrial designer who holds sixteen patents and who is best known for his role in designing the Waterworks reels - improved on the CFO2's click and pawl overrun mechanism when he introduced a small polymer wishbone that impinges on indentations machined into the inner rim of the spool.

Sage used this design when it introduced its Click series of reels in 2011, the lightest of which weighs two ounces, thus shaving half an ounce from the CFO2.



A Sage Click on a Stephen Boshoff centre-axis split cane fly rod

It is a three-inch reel, though, and incorporates a counterweight opposite the reel handle and an adjustable drag which, in my opinion are unnecessary features when you are fishing for 'four-to-the-pound' trout.

In 2013 British manufacturer, Wychwood, used the polymer wishbone to produce another three-inch model, the RS 2/3. It weighs 1.7 ounces, making it 20 grams lighter than the CFO2 which had been introduced 42 years earlier. One of its advantages was that the only chrome fitting was the screw that connected the handle to the reel and I coloured it with a black permanent marker. Its handle though, is overlarge and, in my opinion, lacks aesthetic appeal.

The much smaller handle on the Orvis CFO2 sufficed for thousands of fly anglers over decades and a handle of this configuration would be just as utilitarian on the Wychwood and look far more elegant. Fortunately, the Japanese company Retro Rod & Reel makes an exquisite replacement in marble ebonite – <https://www.retro-rod-reel.com>.



The Wychwood RS 2/3 on a Palm Grip Sage Circa 3-weight built by Koos Eckard

Around 2005 I bought a Danielsson Midge which I think was then sold under the Loop name. I did not keep it for long as there was a lot of friction from the three rollers and, to me, it was not as attractive as the CFO2.

The cited advantages of the 'large arbor' Danielsson – 'low start up inertia' and less coiling of the fly line were irrelevant to me because the trout I caught were controlled not from the reel but from the line hand. I accordingly did not need a high-efficiency braking system and the silk lines that I used had no memory anyhow.

These incremental gains in lightness by small fly reels over decades make it obvious that only a change to composites such as carbon fibre will see my dream of a matte-finish, two-and-a-half-inch small stream reel weighing just one ounce realised.

Certainly, the expertise exists within the motor racing industry to create such a reel.

(Hardy introduced its two-ounce Ultraclick UCL reel in 2020 but it is a caged reel designed for competitive angling with ultra-thin lines and not specifically for small stream fishing.)



Two small stream reels chosen by customers who have bought split cane centre-axis rods from Stephen Boshoff – the Ross Colorado (top) and the Wychwood RS2/3

Stephen Boshoff chooses the elegant click and pawl Ross Colorado LT 3-4 for his beautiful centre axis split cane rods. Although it weighs an ounce more than the Sage Click and Wychwood RS2/3, he feels the Ross is a stronger and thus more durable reel and that the trade-off of an extra ounce in weight is a worthwhile compromise.

These three reels and the Hardy Ultraclick UCL superbly complement today's small stream fly rods.

