

Spey Method of Casting and Two-hand Rods

A Brief History

The spey method of casting and use of two-hand rods developed in the mid 19th century on the salmon rivers of Scotland. This method of casting takes its name from the River Spey where anglers developed specialized casts for swinging flies to catch Atlantic salmon. Neither the equipment nor the technique to “shoot line” existed. The only tool powerful enough to cast and control a long length of line was a long rod that required the use of two hands. These rods are commonly referred to by several names: salmon rod, double or double-handed rod, two-hand or two-handed rod, and most recently the Americanized “Spey” rod.

Today, the spey method of casting and use of two-hand rods is no longer limited to casting and fishing for anadromous species of fish such as salmon and steelhead. Trout anglers are using shorter, lighter two-hand rods on large rivers for casting big dry flies, streamers and indicators. Saltwater anglers are using stiff, powerful two-hand rods for overhead casting in the surf. Warm water anglers are wade fishing with two-hand rods to cast wind resistant poppers and streamer patterns for smallmouth bass.

What is the Spey Method of Casting?

The spey method of casting allows an angler to quickly and efficiently execute a change of direction cast that moves the fly from downstream at the end of the presentation (dead-drift or swing) back upstream to the target without making an overhead back cast. In essence, a spey cast is a change of direction with a “dynamic” roll cast.

Every spey cast is comprised of two parts, a contrived cast and a forward cast. The contrived cast is a made-up motion of the rod that initiates the change of direction by repositioning the end of the line (aka anchor) from downstream to upstream in order to form the back cast (aka D-loop) directly opposite the target. The forward cast is similar in appearance to a roll cast except it is dynamic; the D-loop is much bigger, the anchor is much smaller and the fly is delivered to the target in the air like an overhead cast.

Spey casts are often named for the movement(s) of the contrived cast. For example, a Single Spey cast has one motion of the rod that repositions the anchor and forms the back cast; Double Spey requires two separate motions. Not all spey casts have intuitive names for the contrived cast, for example: Snake Roll, Perry Poke, Wombat Cast, Jelly Roll, etc.

Similar to a roll cast, properly positioning the anchor and D-loop to the “safe” side of the body, depending on the direction of the wind, is critical to a successful spey cast. Each spey cast will reposition the anchor and form the D-loop either *UPSTREAM* or *DOWNSTREAM* of the caster.

Why learn to Spey Cast?

- Requires less effort to achieve greater distance than a dead line or “static” roll cast.
- Ability to cast in tight quarters or with obstructions behind the caster opens up more water for fishing.
- Ideal for indicator fishing, picking-up or quickly repositioning a dry fly, setting up an overhead cast.
- Spey casting is a *METHOD* of casting. Spey casts can be made with *ANY* fly rod.

Why learn to use a Two-Hand Rod?

- Less effort is needed to repetitively cast longer distances.
- Easier to cast large or heavy flies on heavy sinking lines and in windy conditions.
- Longer rods make mending line easier and increase line control.
- Ability to fight and land large fish quickly reducing stress of fish in catch and release fishing.

Choosing Equipment

Rods

Selecting a single or two-hand rod for spey casting depends on the size of the fishery and the casting and fishing techniques that will be used to present the fly. Generally, the longer the rod is the better it will be for casting, mending and controlling longer head length lines; the heavier the rod weight the better it will be for handling heavy sink tips, larger flies and big fish.

A newer type of rod, called a "switch" rod (a hybrid single and two-hand rod) is becoming very popular. Switch rods have a longer top grip than a single hand rod and a shorter bottom handle than a two-hand rod to facilitate use with two hands. They are designed to overhead, roll, and spey cast and fish with either one or two hands on the rod.

Spey Casting Rod Selection for the Great Lakes Region				
<i>Size of River</i>	<i>Species</i>	<i>Terminal Tackle</i>	<i>Rod Length</i>	<i>Line Weight</i>
Small	Trout, smallmouth, steelhead	5-10 ft sink tips	10 ft single-hand 10.5-11.5 ft switch	5-8wt
Medium	Trout, smallmouth, pike, steelhead, salmon, stripers	5-10 ft sink tips 5-15 ft sink tips	10.5-11.5 ft switch 12-13.5 ft two-hand	5-8wt 6-9wt
Large	Steelhead, Salmon	5-24 ft sink tips	13.5-16 ft two-hand	8-10wt

Reels

When selecting a reel for spey casting select a reel that has sufficient capacity to accommodate the fly line and backing. Keep in mind spey lines have a much larger diameter than standard single-hand lines. Also, reels for two-hand rods must have enough weight to properly balance a longer rod.

Lines

For spey casting with a single-hand rod, a good caster can make almost any line work. There are several line tapers, however, which perform best for this application: 3M Scientific Anglers' Nymph and Steelhead, Royal Wulff Product's Steelhead Triangle Taper and Rio Product's Salmon/Steelhead.

Two-hand rods require a specialized spey line that is much thicker in diameter and heavier than a single hand line to properly load the rod so that it will cast well. For example, a single hand 8wt weight forward line weighs 210 grains, an 8wt spey line can weight between 360-710 grains depending on head length.

NOTE: Switch rods are designed to be cast with both single hand (listed above) OR spey lines. Because switch rods are relatively short compared to two-hand rods, as a general rule they require a shorter head length line.

Spey lines, similar to single hand fly lines, are available in a variety of densities: full floating, full sinking, sinking tip and multi-tips. Spey lines can be divided into four categories by head length: shooting heads, short belly, mid belly, and long belly. Listed below are the most applicable head lengths for the Great Lakes region:

- Shooting Head - 20 to 48 foot head length. Skagit (pronounced ska-jit) and Scandinavian heads are short shooting heads for short to moderate distance casts in tight quarters with little back casting room. Best for heavy sinking tips and larger flies. Must shoot line to achieve distance. Good choice for beginning casters.
- Short Belly - 50 to 60 foot head length. Versatile line for most spey casting styles and fishing techniques. Good control over moderate distances without needing to shoot line. Handles sink-tips well. Requires some room for the back cast. Multi-tip configuration good choice for beginning casters.
- Mid Belly - 60 to 70 foot head length. Versatile line for most spey casting styles and fishing techniques. Very little stripping and shooting line needed when casting long distances. Longer head length better for mending and control at long distances. Handles sink-tips OK. Requires a fair amount of back cast room and intermediate casting skills.

Resources for Practice and Further Study

A good casting stroke takes practice, practice, and more practice!! Since there's no point in creating "bad" muscle memory it's best to start with some form of instruction from a reliable source such as an experienced casting instructor.

Instruction

Midwest Spey School
Will Turek
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www.midwestspey.com

In addition, there are several excellent books and videos that will aid in quickly mastering the principles and mechanics of spey casting and fishing with a two-hand rod.

Spey Casting, a book by Simon Gawesworth
Two-Handed Fly Casting: Spey Casting Techniques, a book by Al Buhr

Spey to Z, a DVD featuring Way Yin and friends.
Rio's Modern Spey Casting, a DVD featuring Simon Gawesworth



Will Turek received his FFF Basic Casting Instructor Certification in 1998 and has 10 years experience teaching both single and two-hand casting and fishing techniques. He is particularly passionate about casting and fishing with two-hand rods and actively promotes spey casting and swung fly techniques throughout the Great Lakes Region. He is a frequent presenter at fly fishing clubs, fly shops, consumer shows, and spey claves. Will is a full time guide with Greg Senyo's Steelhead Alley Outfitters specializing in spey/swung fly steelhead trips on Lake Erie's tribs and contributes regularly to their web blog at www.steelheadalleyoutfitters.blogspot.com. He is the founder and head instructor of the Midwest Spey School www.midwestspey.com.