

Landing Large Fish with a Tenkara Rod

The streams and rivers in Northern California, where we mostly fish, or even places we might travel to fish, knowing how to deal with “large” fish with a tenkara rod is worth knowing about. In particular, common places to fish, like the Upper Sac and East Carson, are known to plant rainbows in the 4 lb. range. Other rivers with large trout are the Truckee and Putah Creek, as well as all the major rivers. A rainbow in the high teens and lower 20’s in length cannot be landed with a tenkara rod just winging it on the spot! A tenkara rod, although it can be quite strong if used correctly, can be damaged if improperly used.

A technique that was suggested some years ago, with some videos on the web, was to throw your rod in the water, let the fish run a little and calm down (since there is no longer a resistance), then retrieve the rod and pull in the trout. There are several problems with this: 1) depending on the river configuration, you might lose your rod; 2) you could very well need to swim out to retrieve the rod; (3) the fish may head into logs and other structures; and 4) the fish gets rested up, so in the end, you have to fight it anyway. It all makes a good story back home and you may have retrieved the fish; but it doesn’t really work very well and has risks.

In the past, in the clinics that I have taught, I have described a general approach that works fine for streams; that is, keeping the rod above about 45 degrees in front and back when playing a fish. This prevents breaking the tippet (usually #5-6) from lowering the rod in front too much, or breaking the rod from too tight a bend from lowering it in back. That plus moving the fish around to calmer water to net and release it.

However, for trout in the upper teens or low twenties, found in rivers and larger streams, a different approach is needed. The method that I use is the one used by Masami Sakakibara (“Tenkara no Oni”), recognized as the top tenkara angler in Japan. When first hooking a fish that feels like something in that size range, you immediately move the rod forward and move the handle down towards the water, while keeping the rod vertical and moving yourself towards the fish, if that is possible. The rationale is that the rod’s power curve is vertical or a little forward, depending on the rod; as the fish starts to run and bend the rod towards it, one needs to take quick action to restore that power position of the rod. Moving the rod forward and down allows you to get back to the ideal power curve of the rod. If the rod is positioned correctly, it has more “bounce”, meaning it can cushion the variations in pull from the fish.

You hold the rod by the handle; but to help give better leverage, you can hold the rod up on the handle and brace the handle against your forearm, and put your index and middle fingers of your other hand at the upper end of the first section of the rod. Keep your elbow next to your side.

In playing the fish, it is also important to not encourage the fish to be on the surface, where the current is fastest. If the fish is lower, the current is slower and you do not need to fight any more current than necessary until it is in calm water. So keep the rod down to the side near the water, rather than up where it would keep the fish on the surface. Changing the rod from side to

side, while maintaining the power curve, redirects the trout (normally they will pull against the line), and in that way you can maneuver it to calmer water. In fact, if there is structure you wish to avoid (e.g. log), you might pull towards it, perhaps moving the fish away from it. It is good to keep strength and weakness in mind: pull the fish when it is weak or calm, do not when it is stronger. At all times, avoid any slack in the line, lest the fish jump and break the tippet.

If you are using a line length that is about the length of your rod, which is fairly common, then as you maneuver the fish to calm water it will be easy to net and release it. However, if your line is longer, you may need to hand line it in for a few feet. After bringing the fish to calm water and it is quieted down, hold the rod out and back, and grab the line as far away from the rod as you can with your thumb and one or two fingers to minimize the bend in the rod when you grab the line. It is important to firmly grab the line, but not tightly, taking the place of the rod. The fish may get excited again, and a tight grip will break the tippet. Instead, let the line slide through your fingers and then go back on the rod to play the fish. Also, be particularly careful if you have to hand line some tippet. The technique to hand line is to pull in a section of line, and then pass it to the rod handle hand to loosely hold it, while you pull in some more line with the other hand.

An important consideration is the tenkara rod you have. Most of the tenkara rods that GBF members have (many are TenkaraUSA rods) can handle fish in the upper teens and lower 20's. If, however, these are the size of fish you are commonly catching, it might be wise to consider a tenkara rod designed with larger fish in mind. There a number of possibilities and places to find reviews for them; please contact me if you are interested in seeking such a rod.

Well, that's a long discussion about an aspect of tenkara that happens quickly in the moment; but these are details that are important in dealing with large fish with a tenkara rod.

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