



BORON IIIX ROD FROM WINSTON ROD CO.

Fly Fishing

By Todd Tanner

The author puts six exceptional fly rods through extensive on-the-water testing for accuracy, distance and overall fishability.

Let's say you're looking for a new trout rod; an all-around model that will handle dry flies, nymphs, even streamers. And let's stipulate that price is no object. Assuming that you can pick any rod from any major manufacturer, which one would you choose?

That's the same question I pondered a few months ago, and since I didn't know the answer, I e-mailed every major high-end fly rod manufacturer I could think of and asked if they'd send me their top trout rod (or rods). I wanted to see if there was a true "best all-around rod" in the bunch.

My parameters were pretty simple. To be in the running, a rod had to be versatile enough to cast and fish all the trout flies in my arsenal. It had to display good touch in close while still excelling at average distances and making very long casts (70 feet or more) when necessary. It had to mend line, protect light tippets and handle big fish. Oh, and it had to look good, and feel good in my hand. In other words, it had to be a truly exceptional fly rod.

So, after all the UPS and Fed Ex packages arrived, I did a lot of casting, and a lot of fishing, and

I picked what I thought were the six nicest rods for this column.

There's one more thing I should mention before we get started. I recorded all my casting measurements and I'll include the data so you have something to compare. Just keep in mind that numbers rarely tell the entire story, and you should always try a rod before you buy it.

G Loomis NRX 1085-4 FLY (\$720) – This new Loomis 9-foot 5-weight is a rising star. It's lightweight and accurate, with plenty of reserve power for reaching the far bank or pushing hoppers into the wind. At the same time, it's smooth and sensitive enough to fish small dries in close. The NRX is a great nymph rod, and it holds up well when it's throwing streamers. The cosmetics are bold, even brash, with powder blue wraps over gray graphite, and the fit, finish and quality of components are exceptional. In short, the new Loomis NRX is an outstanding option, and it's definitely in the running for our top prize.

St. Croix Legend Elite EFW905-4 (\$440) – Going in, I didn't think there was any chance I'd have a rod under \$500 in this column. Boy, was I wrong. The "updated for 2011" Legend Elite 9-foot 5-weight proved itself head and shoulders above rods that cost hundreds of dollars more. The LE throws an extremely nice line with very little effort, and it's quick, precise and fun to cast. The fit and finish exceed industry standards, and the

components and materials are obviously top quality. Even better, this particular rod will make just about any cast you ask of it – it's a wonderful fishing tool. Kudos to St. Croix for their handsome new LE.

Orvis Helios 905-4 Mid Flex 6.5 (\$775) – My first reaction when I picked up this rod was "Wow!" The Helios is a gorgeous rod with incredible cosmetics, and it's amazingly lightweight. It's also one of the quickest models around. So how do speed and good looks translate to the water? The Helios is the consummate sub-surface rod. It will handle nymphs both large and small, as well as the majority of streamers you're liable to throw for trout. In fact, if you're a "down in the water column" angler, the Helios may just be your dream come true. It's not quite as impressive with dries – the rod's sweet spot was noticeably smaller than some of its competition – but it still put my dry fly on a dime at most reasonable distances. Bottom line, the acclaimed Orvis Helios is a serious rod for serious anglers.

Sage Z-Axis 590-4 (\$695) – Picture Eric Clapton playing the blues or Michael Jordan soaring in for a dunk or Humphrey Bogart saying, "Here's looking at you, kid." in Casablanca, and you'll get a pretty good feel for how the Z-Axis handles a dry fly. The rod doesn't reach quite that same level with nymphs and streamers, but it more than holds its own. If you've ever fished this particular Sage, you know it's one of the finest trout rods on the

market. Your casts are precise, the rod loads easily and the line forms effortless loops. Unfortunately, the news just arrived that Sage is discontinuing the Z-Axis in late 2011. If you want to grab one, now is the time.

Mystic M-593-4 (\$399) –

Okay, I know it's heresy. I'm writing a column on the world's best all-around production trout rods, and I'm including a \$400 model from a company most folks have never heard of. But forget about the price. The Mystic 9-foot, 3-inch 5-weight is a stellar fly rod. It will boom out casts to the far side of the river, high-stick a pair of nymphs, mend a ton of line and put your dry fly on target at whatever distance you happen to deem necessary. And it will do all those things, and more, with enough panache to put a smile on your face. Nymphs, dries, streamers; near or far – this rod does it all. The Mystic feels a hair heavier in the hand than the other rods here – probably a function of its extra length – but it's a serious fishing and casting tool.

Winston BIIIx 9-foot 5-weight (\$755) – This is the second time I've looked at the BIIIx since it came out last fall. Back in December I wrote, "It's hard to imagine a rod pitching a nicer line." If anything, I enjoyed casting and fishing the new Winston even more this time around. It's a solid nymphing rod, with more than enough backbone to control split-shot and indicators, and it does a decent job throwing small to medium-sized streamers. As for dry flies – well, the BIIIx just shines with dries. It handles everything from midges to hoppers with ease, and depending on the situation, it will make a delicate 20-foot cast or throw a 70-foot laser into the wind. It's also superb at normal casting distances. I don't think you'll find a smoother, more accurate 5-weight than the new BIIIx.

So here's the thing. It's literally impossible to design the perfect all-around trout rod. Every tweak that accents your performance in one area takes something away from another. An incredible streamer rod will have a hard time making a

perfect dry fly presentation, and vice versa. That's just the nature of the beast. All we can hope is that the necessary compromises are minor, and the rod's overall performance matches our fishing and casting styles as closely as possible.

With that in mind, my top rod honors go to the Winston BIIIx. It handled everything I threw at it with grace and style, and it's a superb casting tool. It wasn't an easy call – the competition was fierce, and I had to pass over some rods that I really loved – but for now the Winston BIIIx wears the crown. 🏆

CASTING DATA

(I used the same new RIO Gold WF-5-F line for all my casting measurements. My thanks to RIO for helping out with fly lines.)

SHORTEST EFFECTIVE CASTS

(The shortest distance I could cast with a dry fly and still feel the rod begin to load.)

- 1) Winston BIIIx – 17 feet
- 2) Sage Z-Axis – 18 feet
- 3) St. Croix LE- 19 feet
- 4) G Loomis NRX – 20 feet
- 5) Mystic – 20 feet
- 6) Orvis Helios – 21 feet

LONGEST CASTS

(Measured in a straight line to the point where my fly landed. With most rods, my average distance casts were 5 to 8 feet shorter than my longest cast.)

- Mystic – 93 feet, 6 inches
- Winston BIIIx- 91 feet, 7 inches
- St. Croix LE – 91 feet, 3 inches
- Sage Z-Axis – 91 feet, 2 inches
- G Loomis NRX – 90 feet
- Orvis Helios – 88 feet, 1 inch

SWEET SPOT

(The range where the rod cast effortlessly for me.)

- 1) Mystic - 28 to 53 feet
- 2) Winston BIIIx - 26 to 50 feet
- 3) Sage Z-Axis - 28 to 51 feet
- 4) G Loomis NRX - 33 to 55 feet
- 5) St. Croix LE - 34 to 49 feet
- 6) Orvis Helios - 40 to 50 feet