

Sample pages from
tenkara - the book

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A complete guide to the techniques, gear, history and philosophy of tenkara, the Japanese method of fly-fishing. **A manifesto on fly-fishing simplicity.**

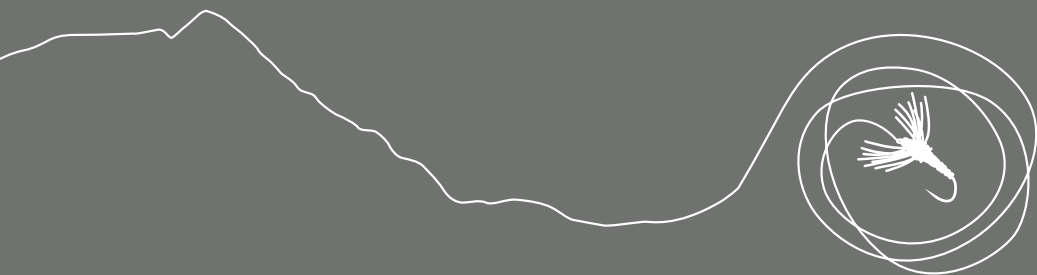
tenkara

—
the
book
—

Daniel Galhardo



DESIGN & ILLUSTRATIONS BY	
JEREMY SHELLHORN	



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table of contents

Quick Guides to Tenkara	7
Introduction	16
My Teachers	22
Part One: About Tenkara	26
What is Tenkara?	28
Tenkara Gear	30
History	36
Philosophy	46
Tenkara USA	51
Part Two: Equipment	56
The Complete Setup	59
Tenkara Rods	61
Tenkara Lines	78
Tenkara Flies	89
Tenkara Nets	107
Part Three: Learning Tenkara	110
Reading Water	113
Covering Water	132
Casting	143
Avoiding Frustrations	161
Presentation Techniques	171
Detecting Strikes and Setting the Hook	190
Landing and Handling Fish	195
Glossary	208
Conversions	209
Other Resources	210
Acknowledgments	212



The author has some fun after fishing with Mr. Yuzo Sebata in Japan.

how to read this book

This book begins with a quick guide that will show you the basic things you need to know to get started fishing with a tenkara rod.

Then throughout the book I expand on the basics of equipment and technique, and share just about everything I've learned from teachers in Japan and from teaching thousands of people how to tenkara.

It may seem contradictory that a simpler method of fly-fishing would require this many pages to explain. And it doesn't. You can grasp most of what you need from the first few pages and first paragraphs of each section. But, I do go into the very nuanced details of the method for those who are interested.

Throughout the book I share my experiences learning tenkara through recounting stories. That is my attempt to take you on my personal journey of learning the method with its masters in Japan. It is my hope that the stories, the philosophy, the history and culture of tenkara will be remembered more than the instructions themselves.

A lot of the information in this book is there to activate what will likely come to you instinctively. When you go fishing with your tenkara rod I hope you will not have to consciously think about what you learned in this book and that you will experience fishing without having to think too much about it. That is the best way to experience tenkara.

This book is interactive and takes advantage of all the resources we have created over the years and the ones we will create in the future. The main thing you will notice in the book is the inclusion of QR (quick response) codes.

These QR codes will take you to resources on the web, typically videos, to help illustrate the topic discussed more clearly than my words can.

How to use the QR codes

All you need to do is go to your app browser and search for “QR reader”. There will be many free options available. Download one. Test it by opening the app and scanning the code on this page. It will take you to the book’s main resource page on our website.



Scan this QR code to watch a video.



Scanning the different codes throughout the book (or, alternatively, typing the URL provided) will take you to the complementary resource*. For example, on page 143 I discuss casting. I can talk all I want about casting yet still leave you wondering what the cast looks like. Scanning the code with your phone or tablet and watching a short video will help make things much clearer. If the QR code ever stops working, or you don't have a mobile or tablet handy, simply type the URL provided below the code.

Book updates

If I make any changes or updates to this book, these changes will be posted on www.tenkarausa.com/book. Check in periodically, and follow Tenkara USA on social media and our blog for updates.

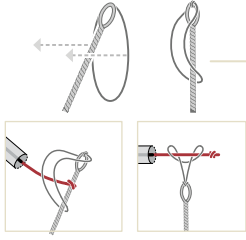
How to Set Up Your Tenkara Rod



10kara.com/1

TENKARA QUICK GUIDE

Scan QR code to access a short video on setting up your rod.



TAPERED LINE



4-5ft of 5X tippet

ROD



LEVEL LINE

Line length should be from 10-25ft.
We recommend to start at the same length as the rod.



A line holder is a useful accessory to put your line away when you need to move



FLY

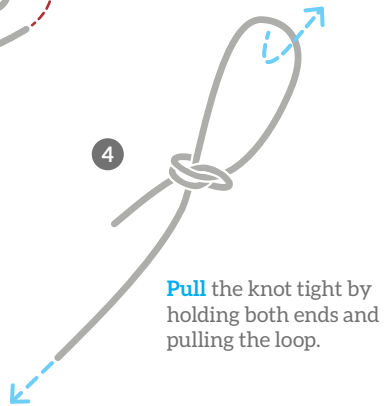
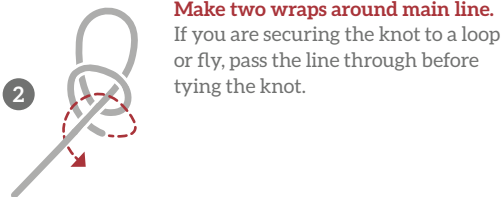
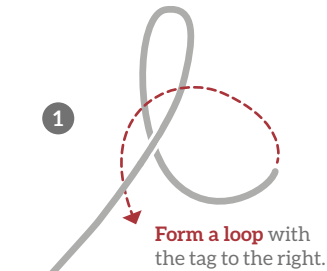
Anytime you learn a new knot, I highly recommend sitting at home and tying the knot several times in order to understand it and get the physical memory for the knot so that you don't struggle when out in the water.



Scan this QR code to watch a video on how to tie the one knot.

10kara.com/2

How to tie the “One Knot” in 4 steps



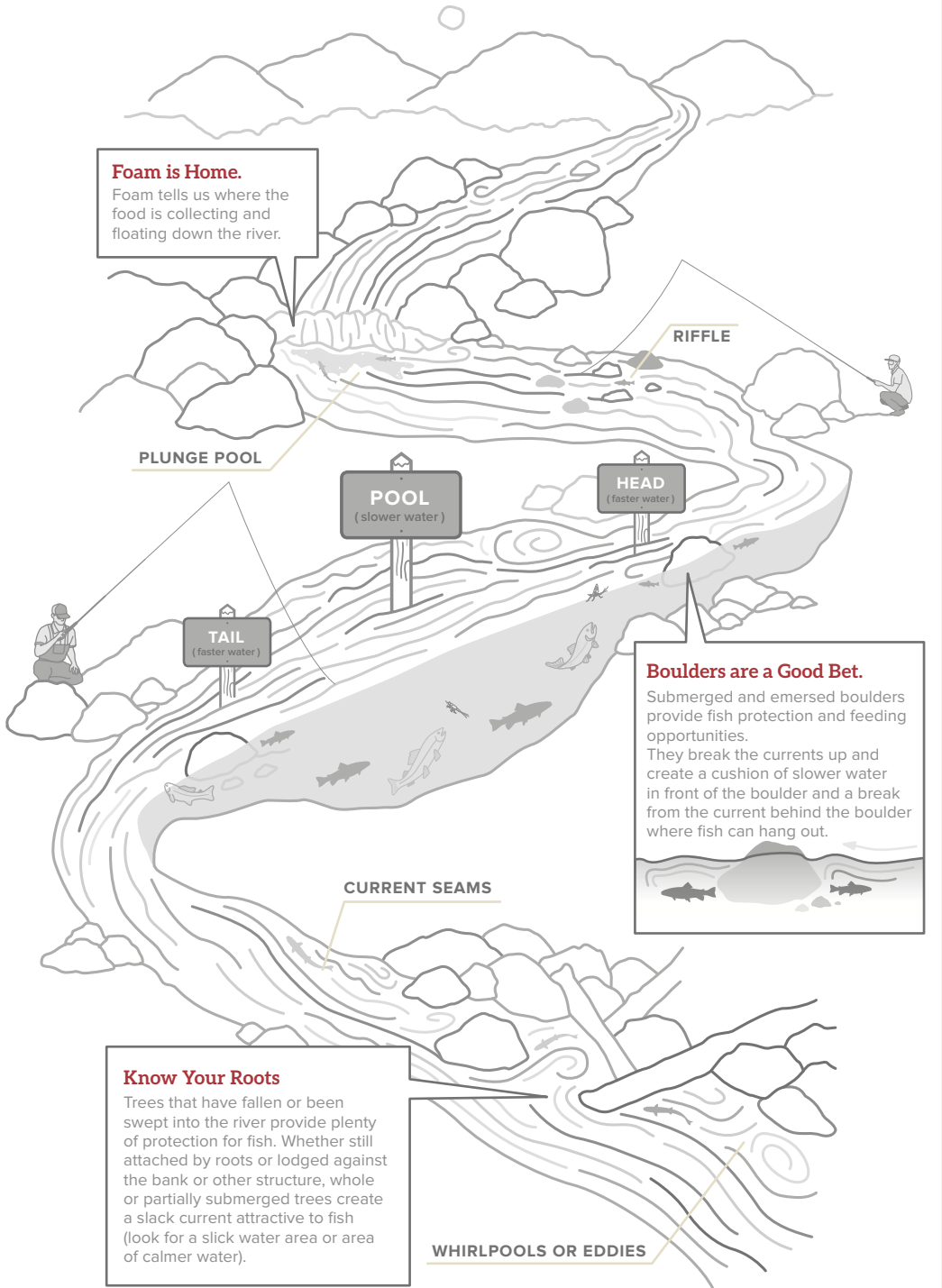
How to Read Water and Find Fish



TENKARA QUICK GUIDE

Scan QR code to access a short video on reading water.

10kara.com/3





In simplified terms, reading water can be boiled down to understanding that currents bring food to fish and that fish don't want to spend too much energy fighting those currents. The best places to cast a fly will often be where there is a meeting of these two conditions. Casting into calm water (which allows fish to stay in an area without spending too much energy) near faster water (which is bringing food down to the fish) is usually a good approach.

In tumbling mountain streams, target the calmest waters you see since fish do not want to fight very heavy currents. Features such as boulders and logs form an easy place for fish to stay put and protected while still having access to food. Also, target features that can allow a fish to stay in one area, such as behind rocks (including larger submerged rocks), in front of rocks, and in waters along the banks. Learn to identify other smaller features such as foam ("foam is home" as they say), whirlpools, and subtle water slicks that are just a tad slower than the faster waters around them.

While fishing, consider casting first toward the features at the tail of the pool (downstream end), and working your way up. Don't ignore very small pockets of water; those are the ones most anglers ignore because they are hard to fish with rod and reel, but they are easy to fish with tenkara.

In slower-moving water with fewer features, fish may be in a wider area. Target deeper areas, where the water may slow down, a bit as well as areas that offer protection to fish, such as undercut banks.

About Tenkara Flies



TENKARA QUICK GUIDE

Scan QR code to watch a video about tying tenkara flies.

10kara.com/4

Any fly can be used with tenkara. In fact, most tenkara anglers in Japan stick with only one fly pattern. Daniel Galhardo, founder of Tenkara USA, fishes with only these four tenkara flies. The beauty in tenkara flies lies in their simplicity and versatility.



Amano Kebari



Ishigaki Kebari

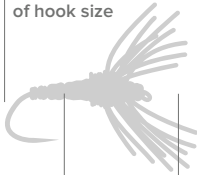


Oki Kebari



Takayama Kebari

any variety
of hook size



thread
body

"reverse"
hackle

SUGGESTIVE V. IMITATIVE

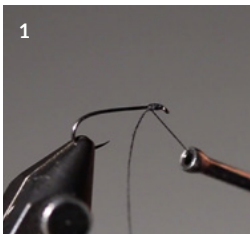
Tenkara flies don't imitate anything in particular, yet they suggest just about any bug in the water. This suggestive rather than imitative approach leads to incredible versatility, which in turn allows for simplicity.

Benefits of reverse hackle flies or "sakasa" kebari:

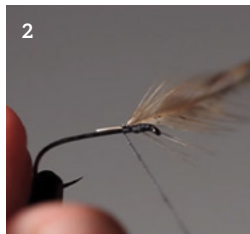
- incredibly easy and quick to tie
- looks buggy under water as hackle stays open
- the ability to impart motion by pulsating the fly and closing and opening the hackle

A "Sakasa Kebari" fly is easy to tie and very effective.

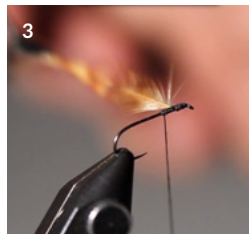
How to tie a Sakasa Kebari in 6 steps



1



2



3



4



5



6

1. Wrap thread 3-5 turns to make a head on the hook. Cut excess thread.
2. Secure the hackle with 2-3 wraps of thread and cut off feather stem.
3. Wrap hackle 3-4 times toward back.
4. Secure hackle with 4 wraps of thread. Push hackle forward.
5. Wrap back toward the end of the hook to build the body of the fly.
6. Tie the thread off with a half hitch or whip finish.

Yoshikazu Fujioka ties a "sakasa kebari" at the 2015 Tenkara Summit.



How to Cast and Land a Fish



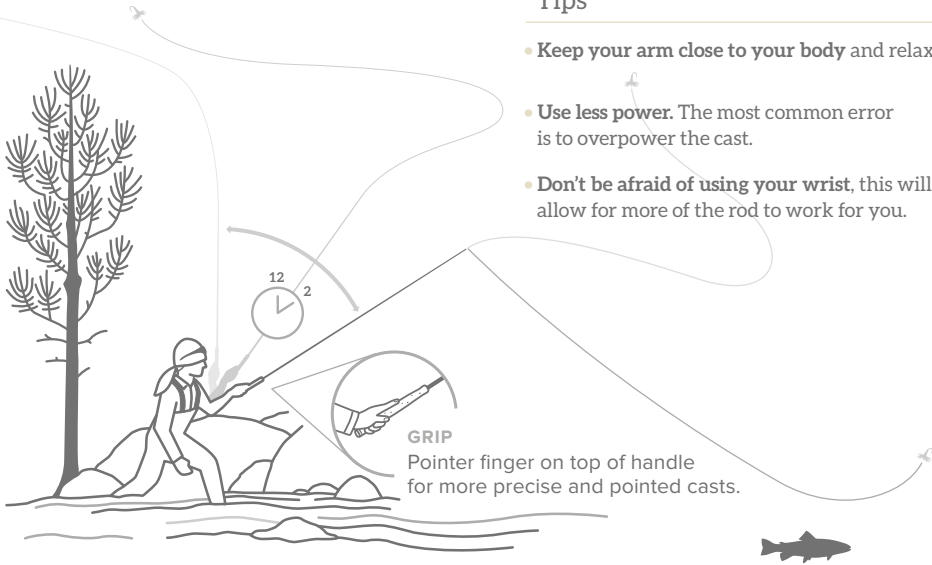
TENKARA QUICK GUIDE

Scan QR code to access a short video on casting,

10kara.com/5

Tips

- **Keep your arm close to your body and relaxed.**
- **Use less power.** The most common error is to overpower the cast.
- **Don't be afraid of using your wrist,** this will allow for more of the rod to work for you.

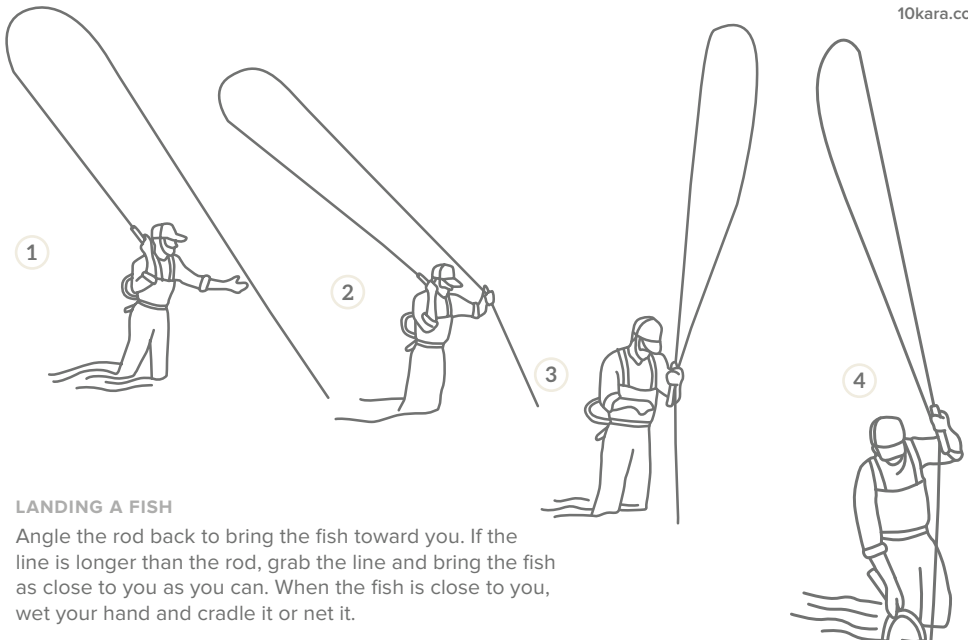


OVERHAND CAST

Casting is very intuitive. Throw the line back by moving the rod to a vertical position (12 o'clock). Very briefly stop the rod to let the line load the rod and immediately move the rod down in front of you to the 2 o'clock position. This will throw the line forward and take the fly with it.



10kara.com/6



LANDING A FISH

Angle the rod back to bring the fish toward you. If the line is longer than the rod, grab the line and bring the fish as close to you as you can. When the fish is close to you, wet your hand and cradle it or net it.

My Teachers

Beyond the idea of using just a rod, line and fly, there is little chance I would be able to truly understand how efficient tenkara can be and to share the techniques used in tenkara if it were not by learning the method directly from the masters in Japan.

I'm not interested in reinventing a method of fishing, but rather I'd prefer to share the centuries of refinements in techniques along with its history and culture. While tenkara is simple to pick up, there are nuances in the technique that have been passed down through generations or learned by individual anglers through their decades of experience. It would be a shame to not learn from them.

In a play of words tenkara is said to have "ten colors." Each tenkara angler will fish a bit differently from each other, showing slight variations in tackle and technique. Learning from several tenkara anglers in Japan has allowed me to pick up on these small differences. It has also allowed me to understand what gives tenkara its essence and what is truly the meaning of tenkara.

Over the years, the people whom I consider to be some of the masters of tenkara have welcomed me into their lives and have taught me most of what I know. In the following pages are the people from whom I have learned tenkara.

Dr. Hisao Ishigaki

It can only be seen as fate that soon after I discovered tenkara, I met Dr. Hisao Ishigaki, the most prominent tenkara angler in Japan. Dr. Ishigaki had been invited to speak about tenkara in the Catskills Fly Fishing Center and Museum in New York. As soon as I heard the master of tenkara from Japan was coming I booked a ticket and went there to meet him. We met on May 22nd, 2009, exactly 40 days after I launched Tenkara USA.

Dr. Ishigaki is tall and has a strong build, but his warmth ensures there is never a vestige of an intimidating person in him. He laughs easily and his sense of humor crosses over any language barriers in a way that puts anyone near him at ease. Any anxiety I had before meeting such an important person dissipated the moment we shook hands. As we sat together at the museum and chatted about my dreams in introducing tenkara outside of Japan. He said he would become my *tenkara otto-san*, or "tenkara father".

Indeed, Dr. Ishigaki has become my “tenkara father”. I enjoyed his presentation and demo the next day, and then we spent the day after that fishing together. It was immediately apparent he wanted to teach me what he knew. Since then we have fished together every year, at least once a year when I visit Japan, and on multiple occasions when he’s visited the U.S.. Most of the things I will share in this book are derived from the teachings of Dr. Ishigaki.

Dr. Ishigaki is the full embodiment of tenkara. He started learning tenkara in the late 1970s, and is one of the few people alive today who learned tenkara directly from the previous generation of tenkara “masters.” Dr. Ishigaki absorbed and incorporated the style, techniques, and spirit of these anglers.



Dr. Ishigaki enjoying the fishing in South Boulder Creek, Colorado.



Mr. Katsutoshi Amano started fishing with tenkara as a young teenager; in his 60s, he maintained a youthful laughter and a child-like approach to fishing. He taught me the importance of rhythm in pulsating my *sakasa kebari*. Learning that another of Japan's most recognized tenkara anglers uses only one type of fly—of the exact same size, color, and shape—and that he ties each one with no vise has given me confidence to further simplify my tenkara.



Mr. Masami Sakakibara is also known as the *tenkara no oni*, or “tenkara demon”. He earned the nickname due to the very serious and focused expression he keeps when he's fishing. Sakakibara-san helped me understand and get a bit closer to mastering the tenkara cast. Sakakibara-san's effortless and precise casts were a revelation to me, showing me how easy casting a tenkara line can be when you let your brain do most of the work. I have since shared his technique with numerous students.



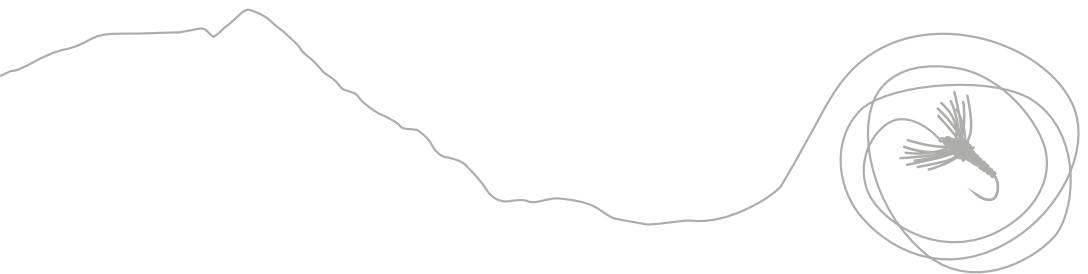
Mr. Yoshikazu Fujioka often wears a fishing vest adorned with the patch for his fly-fishing club, the Tsuttenkai. The club's tagline of “Jolly Fishers” fits Fujioka-san very well. He shared with me his passion and great knowledge of tenkara flies. His website, <http://www.hi-ho.ne.jp/amago/>, was one of the only resources I could count on when I first started learning about tenkara. His jovial spirit and interest in the history of tenkara have made him great company whenever I visit Japan.



Mr. Yuzo Sebata always wears the traditional Japanese *kasa* hat with a stash of flies hidden in his hat. His rock-hopping skills betray his age (73 as I write this). Mr. Sebata developed legendary status in Japan for the steep cliffs and remote streams he fishes and the “Sebata magic”—a term thrown around in fishing circles in Japan due to Sebata’s ability to coax fish out of unlikely places. His adventures have continued to inspire me to enjoy tenkara for fishing’s sake and to “go deeper upstream” in search of fish.



Mr. Yoshimaru Shotaro was 89-years old when I first met him in 2011 during a two-month stay in the village of Maze. He shared his experience of learning tenkara by “stealing” a professional angler’s technique from a distance over a summer when he was about 12 years old. When I met him he hadn’t fished in about three years due to failing legs. As we talked about tenkara, I could see he missed the water. A spark came to his eyes and he invited me to fish with him. Watching him cast a line and his flies into the water gave me a glimpse into the history of tenkara. Mr. Shotaro passed away in late 2016. I cherish my memory of meeting him.



—
part
two
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equipment

Standard Setup

12 foot rod, 12 foot line, 4 feet of 5X tippet, size 12 fly



Open Stream Setup

≥ 12 foot rod, 15 foot line, 4 feet of 5X tippet, size 12 fly



Small/Tight Stream Setup

≤ 12 foot rod, 8-12 foot line, 3 feet of 5X tippet, size 12 fly



Large River Setup

≥ 13 foot rod, 20 foot line, 4 feet of 5X tippet, size 12 fly



The Complete Setup

The basic rig used in tenkara consists of a rod, line about the length of rod, some tippet, and fly. As tenkara rods are on average 12 feet long, Jason Sparks came up with what he calls the rule of 12s for the novice tenkara angler: a 12-foot rod, 12 feet of line [plus 4 feet of tippet], and a size 12 fly.

Keep it simple: 12 foot rod, 12 foot line, 4 feet of 5X tippet, size 12 fly

Then, with something more specific in mind, one can start experimenting with lines that are longer or shorter than the rod as one acquires more experience and sees a need to vary. If one is fishing tighter waters then a shorter rod (not much shorter than 10 feet long) will make sense. Also, one could use a line that is a couple of feet shorter than the rod to fish tighter streams. If fishing bigger rivers, then I recommend trying longer lines, adding about 3 feet of line at a time, up to about 1 ½ times the length of the rod.

There are no exact formulas here, as everyone may do it a bit differently. In the following pages I'll cover the range of options you have for rods, lines, and flies.

My Kit

Admittedly, "Only a rod, line & fly" may be oversimplifying things slightly.

The line portion is more accurately described as line and tippet. I also find that forceps to remove hooks that are lodged deeper in a fish, nippers to cut tippet, and a line keeper to manage my line are essential in my kit.

My entire kit is composed of a rod, which I will choose depending on where I am fishing, and a small pouch that contains:

- a small fly box
- a line keeper with two different lengths of line
- a spool of 5X tippet
- forceps
- nippers
- fishing license

I also wear polarized sunglasses, which I always have with me whether I am fishing or not. For me polarized sunglasses are indispensable. They work like x-ray vision and allow anglers to see through the glare in the water to spot fish or identify where fish are likely to hold. Sunglasses also protect the angler's eyes in case a rogue fly comes at them.

If I am going on a dedicated fishing trip, then I may use a few things that make life more comfortable:

- a fishing net to help me handle and photograph fish
- waders and wading boots



I leave these behind almost as often as I use them. If I am going on a back-packing trip, I forego my fishing net. If it's hot out, I may not use waders. If you want to wear waders, do look up "wading safety" before you go fishing.

If I'm going out for a few hours of fishing, I may expand my kit to include:

- a small portable water filter

A small water filter allows for a drink directly from the stream. This way I won't run out of water; and a filter is often much smaller than a water bottle.

- a whistle

I started carrying a whistle with me when I read in the news that an angler near Salt Lake City got his foot trapped between two boulders in the water. Unable to free himself and with the loud roar of the stream muffling his calls for help, he spent a cold night in the water until someone spotted him the next morning, alive but very hypothermic. The same evening he got trapped I was fishing the next stream over the mountain just a few miles away.

If I'll be wandering deep into a forested area and there is any remote chance I could get lost I'll also carry:

- a small zip lock bag with a fire-starting sparker and lint

In the following pages, I'll get into details about each of the items that are essential to tenkara: rod, line, tippet, fly, and accessories to manage the line. I'll also introduce you to tenkara nets, which are very useful and a beautiful craft.

Tenkara Rods

Keep it simple: get a rod that covers the 12 foot length, such as the adjustable Tenkara USA Sato, or the Iwana.

Overview

Originally tenkara rods were made of bamboo, a material that was readily available to anglers in Japan. While the essence of a tenkara rod hasn't changed that much, today's tenkara rods are a vast improvement over the bamboo poles used by anglers of the past.

Tenkara rods come in different lengths and are typically longer and lighter than western fly rods. A typical tenkara rod is made of carbon fiber and is 12 feet in length when extended. They are telescopic and collapse down to a mere 20 inches, and often weigh less than 3 ounces.

There is a top plug on the thinner end of a collapsed rod that keeps all the segments inside the handle. On the end of the handle, there is a screw cap, which can be unscrewed to access segments for maintenance. On the very tip of the rod, there is a short segment of soft, red, hollow braided line called the lillian. This is where the line will be attached.



Thatched Roofs and Fly Tying with Masami Sakakibara

In 2013 I was back in Japan on my annual pilgrimage. It was my fifth visit to Japan and the third I'd spent learning from Mr. Masami Sakakibara, a.k.a. *tenkara no oni*, or "the tenkara demon."

My friend Go Ishii picked me up at a highway intersection close to where Dr. Ishigaki and I had been fishing in Nagano. From there we drove to the scenic Shogawa [river] valley, where the Shirakawa-go village of traditional thatched-roof houses is located. This was one of Mr. Sakakibara's favorite areas to fish and I could see why.

We spent the day catching amago and iwana, the native trout of the area. As evening fell upon us we retreated into the village. The old houses, built at a time when the villagers in the area were developing tenkara, transported us back to a simpler period.

The roofs of the *gassho-zukuri* houses were built steeply with dried straw and were over a foot thick. *Gassho* is the word used to describe when our hands come together in prayer like the steep roof angles that ensured the houses would withstand the weight of heavy snow that falls in the area.

This was not the kind of dwelling the original tenkara anglers would have lived in; theirs would likely have been less grand. The house had traditional features like *tatami* rooms and the *irori*, or sunken hearth used to heat up the house and to cook. While it had been retrofitted with modern amenities such as electricity, the low-wattage light bulbs, the dark wooden walls and the rice-paper sliding screens made it feel like it must have felt two hundred years ago. Smoke exhaled by the group's cigarettes filled the air and gave the interior a dreamlike feel.

After dinner Mr. Sakakibara brought out the fly-tying vise his father, a metal worker, had made for him decades earlier. Its patina revealed the decades of handling by Sakakibara-san and was the only vise he used.

We spent the evening enjoying good wine and watching Mr. Sakakibara tie the large flies he would use to catch more amago and iwana the next day.





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part
three
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A man and a woman are fishing in a stream. The woman is on the left, wearing a red beanie, a patterned scarf, and olive green waders over a dark long-sleeved shirt. She is holding a fishing rod. The man is on the right, wearing a grey cap, a grey and black jacket, and olive green waders. He is holding a fishing rod. They are standing on rocks in the stream. The background is a dense forest of evergreen trees.

learning tenkara



Casting

One does not have to go to summer camp or learn physics to learn how to fly cast, at least not with tenkara. Tenkara casting is very intuitive, and anyone can pick it up quickly. I often compare casting the tenkara line/fly with tossing a pebble at a target. Nobody has to teach you how to throw the pebble. You pick it up and your brain tells you what to do: lift the forearm up, then quickly move it down and release the pebble as your arm moves downward. The key is just to pick a target.

Your pebble may not always hit the tree the first time around. And there may be some tips others can share with you on how to get the pebble closer to your target. As long as you don't overthink it and focus on your target, then you already know 90% of what you need to know to cast your fly where you think the fish will be.

I will cover the foundations of a tenkara cast. These foundations will help you make good, effortless, precise casts.

Some general notes about terms about casting a fly. In fly-casting, the backward motion—where you swing the rod tip up and toward the back to throw the line backward—is called the backcast. On the backcast you will have a very brief but well-defined stop at the vertical position. Then, you will quickly swing the forearm downward, stopping at roughly a 45-degree angle (2 o'clock position). This is called the forward cast.

While I will give you a good amount of in-depth and nuanced details about how to cast in this chapter, watching our casting video will take a couple of minutes and will give you most of what you need to know. It is definitely worth taking a couple of minutes to watch this video.



10kara.com/21



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Presentation Techniques

One of the key concepts of tenkara is that technique is more important than gear. As you have read previously many tenkara anglers use fewer, or even one, fly patterns and then learn how to present the fly in different ways.

In fly-fishing, the most common way to present a fly is to let the fly drift with the current as if it were a dead bug. This is called the dead-drift. But fly presentation is another area where tenkara shows us there is a different way of thinking about fly-fishing.

While the dead-drift is also the most common technique we use with tenkara, there are different techniques we can use to entice fish to bite. In Japanese they use the term “*sasoi*”, which translates as “invitation”. We can use our rods to impart motion, make the fly stop or move in ways that will invite a strike.

The 5 Main Techniques

After years of observing different techniques used by tenkara anglers in Japan, I was able to distill them into the five main techniques below.

Dead-drift: let the fly drift with the currents as if it were a dead bug. Follow the fly with the rod tip.

Pulsing: impart movement on the fly by moving the rod tip up and down. The reverse-hackle fly pulsates, opening and closing

Pause: pause the fly in select spots for a couple of seconds by having the rod tip upstream or directly above the fly.

Pause-and-drift: pause the fly upstream from a fish and let it drift a foot or two toward it, pause and drift, pause and drift...

Pulling: pull the fly one to two feet at a time across a stream or river toward your shore, or upstream.

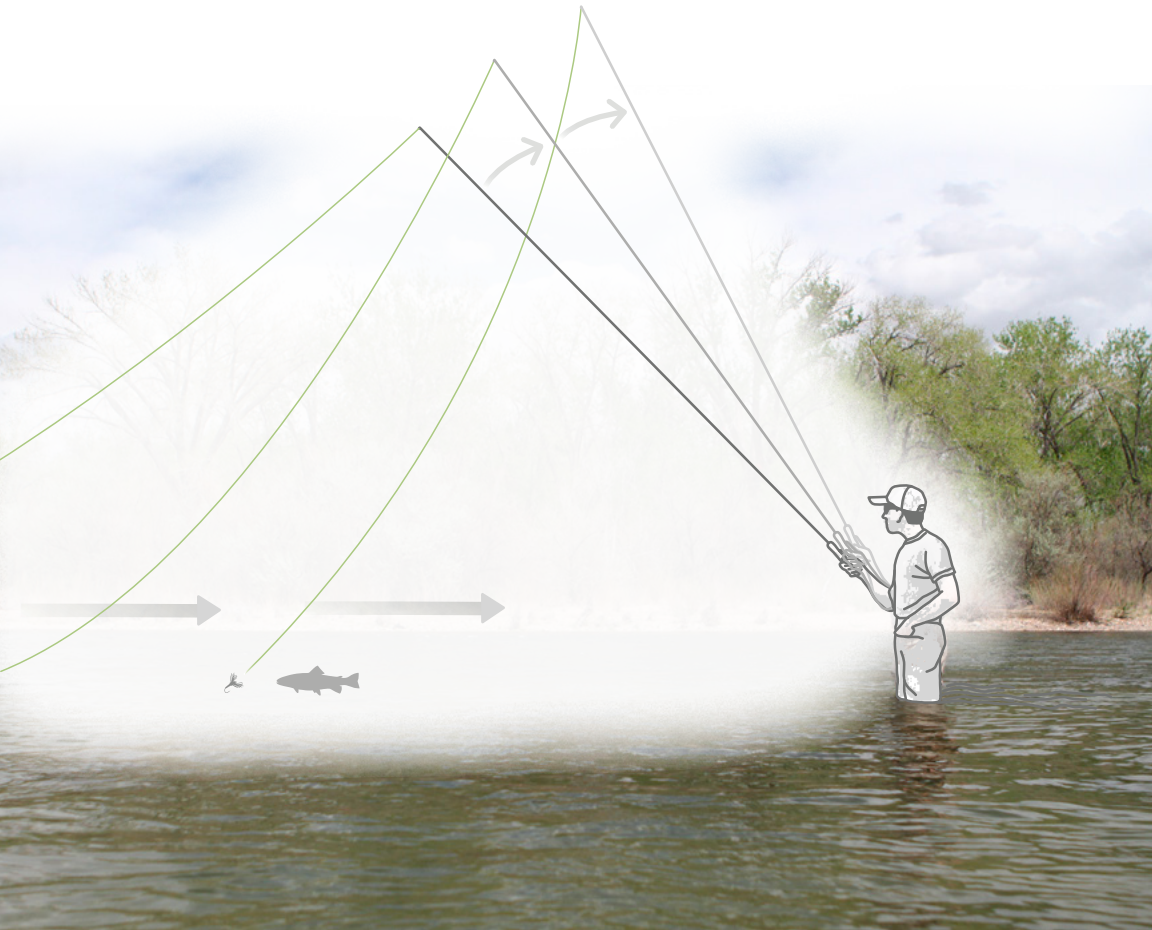
These are foundational techniques. As you’ll learn in this chapter, there are variations to each technique. And anglers can combine techniques together, or perhaps even create their own.

Dead-drift

The idea with the dead-drift is to drift the fly in currents as naturally as possible along where food would normally drift to fish. The dead drift probably comprises at least 80 percent of my fishing and should always be considered a good default technique.

If you are fishing facing upstream, cast the fly upstream and as it drifts down start lifting the rod to keep up with it. If you are fishing across a stream, cast across and keep the rod tip high; then follow the fly with the tip of the rod as it goes downstream. Lastly, you can also fish downstream with a dead-drift by casting closer to you and as the fly drifts down start lowering the tip of the rod.

Upstream dead-drift



LEARNING TENKARA

To perform the dead drift you'll want to avoid having much line laying on the water as currents will pick it up and "drag" it downstream at a different speed than the fly. This will make the drift unnatural and the fish suspicious.

WHERE TO CAST	Upstream, across, or downstream
WHEN/WHERE TO TRY	Always!
VARIATIONS	Slow the drift (Read: "Slowing the Drift" coming up)
TIP	To improve your drift, push your arm out and downstream to make the fly go in a straighter line with the current.



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