

The Aquinnah Rod Company

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GEAR GUIDE

FOR MANY YEARS my buddy Phil and I rented a cottage at the west end of Martha's Vineyard in the little community known as Aquinnah. The month was always June, and our main mission was to fly fish for striped bass, primarily along Dogfish Bar.

This was night fishing, mind you. And fishing for striped bass at night isn't easy. First, you spend hours stumbling around in the dark. When you least expect it, a big bass grabs hold and tries to drag you off into the night. It can be disconcerting. It can also be a great deal of fun.

Dealing with darkness wasn't the only issue we faced—we also had to deal with light. Let me explain. Typically we returned from Dogfish Bar around 3 A.M. and hit the hay. Shortly thereafter, however, the sun started creeping through the cottage windows. Not good when you're desperately seeking shuteye. Our only antidote was a roll of black plastic, which we used to cover as many windows as we could. Even with the plastic, the cottage was still too bright, and as a result, we were awake and wandering around woozily by 8 A.M.

Once you were vertical, the sunlight problem didn't go away. June days are mighty long. And that can drive you stir crazy if you're waiting for darkness. What do you do with all those glorious sun-filled hours?

At times we tried our hands at sight-fishing, but if you spent a long time on the flats you were too fried for the night bite. That ended that.

Occasionally we jumped in the Jeep and swung by various beaches, under the pretext of looking for signs of action—birds, bait, girls in bikinis, whatever. On the way home we religiously stopped at the general store to pound down slices of pizza—which was likely the real motive for firing up the truck in the first place.

At other times we just stayed at the ranch and whiled away the hours by tying flies, fixing leaders, patching waders, cleaning and stretching fly lines, napping, listening to the island radio station, and drinking cheap beer. In short, we killed time as best we could.

Illustration Al Hassall



In all the years we rented the cottage on the Vineyard, nothing memorable ever happened during those daylight hours, except the one sunny day, while returning from a pizza run, we spied a sign announcing a flea market at the Aquinnah Town Hall. Phil piped up saying he wanted to check it out. So as we approached the Town Hall, I pulled the Jeep over and he jumped out. I wasn't particularly psyched about a flea market, so I told him I'd wait in the truck. He replied that he didn't mind walking back to the cottage, which is less than a half mile away. "Fine by me," I said, and I took off.

About an hour later, I was sitting at the table tying flies, when Phil popped through the sliding glass doors, grinning from ear to ear. Immediately I knew he was up to something. Protruding from his right hand was what

Continued on page 71

Continued from page 72

appeared to be a wad of old tomato stakes. As I stared, he began boasting that he got these “gems” at the flea market for a very good price. Then he ceremoniously slapped them down on the table and vaulted over to the refrigerator to extract a cold beer.

The flea market gems were on top of my fly-tying material, so I began to examine the ugly pieces. Upon close inspection I discovered they were actually old bamboo rod parts. Some sections were crooked, some were straight; some sections were full length, others broken. Almost all of them had either ragged wraps and/or missing guides. Tips and midsections made up the bulk of the bamboo.

As far as manufacturer goes, they were unidentifiable, at least to my eye, although one slender fly rod tip showed a fine pedigree. Mixed in were also three butt sections complete with reel seats. One was from a bait-casting rod. The other two were fly rods—a Shakespeare, and a Japanese rod called a Valiant.

As I perused the pile, Phil swigged on a beer. In a serious voice, he stated that he was going to make a fly rod out of this conglomeration.

Really? At that point I was fairly convinced that Phil hadn't been getting enough sleep. These cane curiosities looked one notch above kindling. To say nothing of the fact that we didn't have any rod-building supplies, nor were there any supplies for sale nearby. Still, it was too early in the day to squash his dreams, so I nodded my head in agreement, and started my first beer of the day.

Phil spent the rest of the afternoon on the couch, carefully examining his new cane collection. With great care he sighted down each piece, checked the ferrules, checked wraps, and bent sections to test their integrity.

Out of this period of intensive inspection came a few revelations. The good news: He found the midsection to the Valiant. The bad news: The tip wasn't there. The good news: Another fly rod tip had a ferrule that fit the Valiant's midsection. The bad news: That tip section was two inches short, missing its tip-top and most of its snake guides. Ummmm.

Finding snakes guides was a no-brainer. They could be easily scavenged off the remaining rod sections, but coming up with a tip-top guide that fit was a different story. That's when I remembered I had an assortment of spare tip-tops in my tackle bag. I gave them to Phil and while none were the perfect size, one was close enough to work. With some head cement Phil promptly glued it on, and then assembled the three sections. Suddenly I had to admit that Phil's crazy rod project was gathering steam.

The following day, I awoke to a commotion in the basement. After wandering into the kitchen, I grabbed a cup of java just in time to see Phil emerge from downstairs. In his hands were a hammer, a hacksaw, and piece of 1x6 pine. I knew there were tools around, but it was probably not a good idea to ask where he scored the wood. He sawed off two short sections of equal length, made “V” notches in both, and secured them upright to a base. *Voilà*. He had himself a small rod-wrapping jig similar to ones you see in a rod building catalog.

Armed with a razor blade and his reading glasses, Phil sat at his new jig for hours doing battle with the bamboo. He salvaged snake guides off unused cane sections. He mended worn windings here and there. And then, hunched over like an Old World craftsman, he began the slow careful work of winding guides on his finished prize. We had no rod-wrapping thread, so fly-tying thread filled in. Color scheme? Red windings tipped in black.

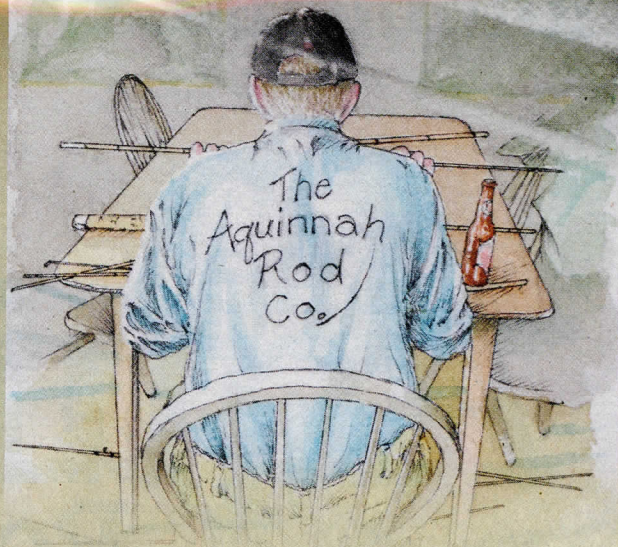


Illustration Al Hassall

As this was going down, the phone rang. Off the top of my head I answered: “The Aquinnah Rod Company.” I got a long pause and whoever it was hung up. But my spontaneous remark sparked a round of stupid jokes. Should we be building an Aquinnah Rod Company sign for the front of the cottage? Who's going to be on our pro staff? How about hats and T-shirts with logos? Damn, we don't even have a logo. It's amazing what inadequate sleep does to the mind.

Near lunch the next day, Phil put on the finishing touch. He took a pen and wrote Aquinnah #1 just above the cork grip. Done. Now the time had come for casting trials. We carted the rod outside, along with a bunch of reels, each carrying a different line weight. Right from the get-go, we recognized that the Valiant had been a pretty stiff stick, likely designed to troll streamers. So our first choice was an 8-weight line, which happened to be aboard a gold anti-reverse Fin-Nor. Phil locked it into the reel seat and strung up the rod. Man, it cast like magic. Phil and I were completely surprised how well it laid out a length of line.

As you can imagine Phil was happy as a clam, and why not? The rod cast well, cost nothing, and looked utterly fabulous with that Fin-Nor. What more could you ask?

Phil said he wanted to take a striper on the rod. With that focus in mind, we headed to Dogfish Bar in the early evening, with Aquinnah #1 rigged and ready. Phil said he was willing to try until at least sundown. After that he was going to take the wood back to the truck and dig out the graphite. Fair enough.

As the shadows lengthened, a few stripers popped up, swirling on sand eels. I was able to reach them with my modern 10-weight. But these bass were near the end of my cast, and well beyond the reach of Aquinnah #1.

As the sun dipped low, things went quiet and it looked like the cane rod was going to go unbaptized. But without warning, I heard Phil yell and I turned to see the Aquinnah #1 bent over. Moments later he slid a bass onto the sand. I snapped a few pictures and gave him a high-five. That made it official. The Aquinnah Rod Company had cranked out a mean-ass fly rod—although we would be weak on inventory until the flea market came back to town. 🐟

Ed Mitchell is a longtime contributor to FLY FISHERMAN. He is the author of *Fly Rodding the Coast* (Stackpole Books, 2002) and *Fly Rodding the Estuaries* (Stackpole Books, 2003). His web site is edmitchelloutdoors.com.