GONE FISHING

A new generation of fly-fishing fans is turning toward the soulful history of the sport, with a penchant for vintage gear.

BY DARRELL HARTMAN
ILLUSTRATION BY AURELLE DE LA MORINERIE

LATE LAST YEAR, Jonas Clark reached out to the owner of Vintage Fly Tackle, an online dealer of ultrafine rods, reels and other fly-fishing equipment, which is the most ardent collector.

For weeks his emails and phone calls to the owner, Laura Siemer, went unanswered. Clark, 38, sent a handwritten letter in which he described his passion for bamboo rods and English-made Hardy reels. Clark runs the Spinaoza Rod Company with his stepfather, Marc Aroner, who has been crafting bamboo rods out of hard-to-find Tonkin cane since the early 70s.

Siemer eventually responded, and the two started talking shop. Looking at their books was “eye-opening,” recalls Clark, who teaches entrepreneurship at Brown University and has sold consignment fly rods and tackle on the side for a decade. “They were doing as much business as the next five competitors combined, including me. I was like, ‘What? Maybe this is a bigger community than I realized.’”

When Clark bought the company’s core assets in March, he acquired documentation for the nearly 10,000 vintage items it had sold, a trove to rival any factory or museum archive. He also gained the company’s email list, cementing his link to a subset of anglers willing to spend four figures on the type of pieces their grandfather’s generation would have used—including the Ultimate fly-fishing status symbol, a hand-engineered Bogdan reel. Rare versions have sold for upward of $10,000.

“The field’s a bit—as my students would say—as pale, as male and stale,” Clark says. And yet he’s betting that interest in these wares isn’t going to fade—and that Vintage Fly Tackle’s assets in combination with Spinaoza, his other site, can lay the groundwork for a seven-figure business.

April Vokey, 37, arguably North America’s most famous living pro under 40, started using bamboo 10 years ago and noticed many of her peers doing the same a couple years later. “I’d started to lose the passion for fishing. It started to get too familiar. Understanding the history behind it helped me to spruce things up a little,” she says. “I really appreciate holding an original piece of art in my hands.... It made me slow down when I was out there.”

“The hallmark of bamboo is that it’s slower and provides more of a connection to the fish and to the water—more soul,” says Ben Carmichael, who has co-edited several volumes of fly-fishing history with his father, Hoagy B. Carmichael, son of the famous songwriter.

“I think the Luddites are kind of missing the boat,” says Clark, who has seen his peers drawn to the pared-down philosophy behind vintage gear. “Fly-fishing has been growing in the last couple years. It has started to pick up again, especially with a younger generation who...don’t want to schlep a lot of stuff around in life.”

FLY-FISHING is only a fraction as popular as spin fishing, its more accessible cousin. According to a 2019 joint report by the Outdoor Foundation and the Recreational Boating & Fishing Foundation, only one out of every seven American fishers uses flies. It is an older form of the sport, named for its signature element: the miniature imitations of minnows and aquatic insects, which are traditionally crafted out of fur and feathers. These lures are so lightweight that they rarely travel an arm’s length when thrown; rather, a weighted, tapered fly line and the caster’s skill conspire to send a fly the dozens of feet it needs to travel in order to attract the notice of an unsuspecting fish.

It is conventionally considered a challenging type of fishing, one that requires patience, practice and often a hefty investment in gear.

Even so, the sport is on the rise. In fact, it hasn’t been this ascendant in decades, industry experts say—not since the early 90s, to be precise, when images of a young Brad Pitt casting for Montana trout
addition techniques and tools have been devised to
hook, land and safely release them.

Women are more prevalent in the sport than they
had been. “When I started, more than 20 years ago, it
was unusual. That’s not the case anymore, thankfully,”
says Vokey, whose podcast, Anchored, has been down-
loaded more than 10 million times. “I attribute it to the
internet and feminism—women coming together and
feeling stronger in all sorts of ways.”

As this reporter can attest from visits, the 114-year-
old Anglers’ Club of New York is men-only. Yet there is
plenty in the history of the sport to encourage women,
including the fact that a 15th-century English nun is
thought to have been the author of the first book to
include angling, The Boke of Saint Albans.

“It’s often been men who’ve inspired me to con-
tinue on the path I’m on,” Vokey says, referring both
to contemporary practitioners and to the likes of the
late Roderick Haig-Brown, who wrote lyrically about
fishing in British Columbia. “I don’t think it matters
if you’re a man or a woman; if you read his books and
Kim, 45, a New York-based Google marketing execu-
tive who bought himself a weekend at Joan Wulf’s
school as a 35th-birthday present and has been an
avid angler ever since. He serves as president of a
private Catskills fishing club, and his 14-year-old
daughter, Stevie Kim-Rubell, is now a tournament-
level saltwater fly-angler.

“Whenver the sport has a renaissance, you get
a lot of people looking back at the past,” says Joe Fox.
His great-grandparents opened Dette in 1928, and he
still deals primarily in the Catskills flies they popu-
larized—dry flies, so-called because they float on
the water’s surface. Dette’s classics mostly lack the
foam thorax, rubber legs and elaborate dressings
of newer and Western styles, and all are tied in the U.S.
He says he’s seeing a return to traditional two-handed
rods, which are being adapted using new techniques.
Old-school fiberglass and bamboo rods are having a
moment too.

Fly-fishing style has also found its niche. This
spring, as part of The North Face’s partnership

in A River Runs Through It sent droves of neophytes to
their nearest Orvis dealer.

“There are a lot of new anglers, and not as many old
white guys out there on the river as there used to be,”
says Joe Fox, 34, owner of Dette Flies in Livingston
Manor, New York. “There is [also] much more variety
at a customer’s fingertips.”

Fly-fishing has been growing at an annual rate of
nearly 3 percent, says the 2019 Outdoor Foundation
report. And since Covid-19, local fishing has picked
up. Between January and the end of August this year,
for example, Connecticut saw a 6 percent increase in
purchases of trout-and-salmon stamps, which tend to
be more closely correlated with fly-fishing. New
York State saw a 15 percent uptick in fishing licenses
over a similar period. A wide variety of fish, includ-
ing carp, northern pike and Amazonian peacock bass,
are now deemed worthy of a fly-fisher’s attention, and

HOPE FLOATS
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don’t feel inspired to be a better human, something is
wrong with you,” she says.

Younger moguls have glamorized fly-fishing for
a new generation of moneyed travelers. Former
Blackstone executive Chad Pike has created a portfo-
ilio of luxury guest lodges and live-aboard boats that
is unique to the sport. (In the past two years his hos-
pitality company, Eleven Experience, has acquired
properties in Patagonia and New Zealand.) Talk-show
host Jimmy Kimmel, a devoted fly-fisherman, pur-
chased Idaho’s South Fork Lodge with professional
angler Oliver White in late June after nearly a year of
negotiations. The renovated lodge will incorporate
fishing art and books from Kimmel’s personal collection
when it opens next spring for the 2021 season.

The southern Catskills, meanwhile, are gener-
ally agreed to be the cradle of the sport in America.
Many of fly-fishing’s biggest legends have been locals,
from 19th-century innovator Theodore Gordon to
champion caster Joan Wulff, who at 94 still runs her
famous fly-fishing school in the Beaverkill Valley.

The Catskill Fly Fishing Center and Museum,
in Livingston Manor, New York, undertook a long-
needed makeover of its exhibition space earlier this
year, as part of a larger effort to be more accessible
to the general public. “We mostly pruned. The place
had collected loads of things that had fish on them and got
screwed to a blank spot on the wall. [We are] paring
down to the essentials,” says Cy Amundson, 44, an art
handler for Manhattan’s David Zwirner gallery who
serves on the museum’s board of trustees and goes
by the angling pseudonym T. Polecat Dubbins. “It’s an
attempt to make the whole thing readable.”

“It’s about trying to find all the good threads and
weave them together for the present,” says Daniel P.
with Supreme, the streetwear brand released a
fly-fishing-themed collection that included shiny
gold wading dungarees for $350. Patagonia’s
distinctive trucker hats and dry bags are de rigueur
for the under-40 adventuring set, and premium
items such as its recycled-plastic chest waders and
American-made wading boots have earned the pio-
neering California label the nickname “Patagucci.”
Patagonia has also garnered attention for its activist
filmmaking, including the eco-documentaries
Artifishal, which takes a critical look at fish farms, and
Darn Nation, which advocates for the removal of
defunct dams.

And yet the brand’s latest fishing-related release
celebrates an approach more ancient than any-
ting to be found in the sport’s museums or vintage
marketplace. It’s an 18-minute profile of octogenari-
ian Italian angler Arturo Pugno, who is said to use
techniques from the 16th century and a 15-foot pole
that looks more suited for Gandalf the Grey than for
a modern outdoorsman.

“Arturo embodies an ideal of mastery in sports,
which allows us to be more focused and effective in
our lives. Legacy and simplicity are foundational
principles of our brand, and it’s bigger than any
product,” explains Ted Manning, director of fish for
Patagonia. The film also features Patagonia’s influen-
tial founder, Yvon Chouinard, riffing on a favorite
mantra: “The more you know, the less you need.”

It’s a rule that even conscientious anglers have
long struggled to abide by. Learning about the sport’s
most exquisitely crafted items tends to increase
one’s desire to own at least a few of them. And if one
ends up with too many? Clark, the vintage dealer, is
always buying.