Rattan Grips - Time for a come back?

by Kevin Graybeal

Leonard copy of a Murphy marked “Abbey & Imbrie Best”
Circa 1863                        Courtesy of Jeff Hatton

Rattan wrapped fishing rod grips. Most of us have seen photos of them on antique bamboo rods and thought “That looks nice, but it’s not very practical on a modern fishing rod.” Maybe we should rethink that statement for just a moment.

Cork has become known to most of us as the “traditional” fishing rod handle material. We all know that cork has a velvety feel, decent thermal insulation properties (cold weather), and is light in weight. However, cork is also easily damaged, difficult to keep clean, and is becoming more expensive. Prices climb while quality grades are harder to find.

So what about the traditional handle materials before cork’s debut in the late 1800’s?

Wood, leather wrapped wood, or wood mortised into a swelled butt to form the handle, was the common rod grip. But some of the great rod builders of the era chose to adorn the rods they built with something a little classier. H. L. Leonard, BF Nichols, T.Chubb, Waring, and Krider, to name but a few, often wrapped rattan over the butt itself, or over a core of wood such as Pine. There are rods built during the Civil War surviving to this day with their rattan handles looking as nice as the day they were made. Rattan truly can withstand the test of time.

According to Jeff Hatton, author of the book “Rod Crafting: A Full Color Pictorial & Written History from 1843-1960” –

"Making cork rod handles is the worst mistake rod builders ever made. It insulates and dampens vibrations."

And I agree wholeheartedly with Jeff. From my own experience, I know that the weight difference between a cork grip and a dense balsa core rattan grip is so negligible that I can’t feel any weight difference. However, the difference in sensitivity is like night and day. Rattan wrapped wood grips are lightweight, durable, attractive, easy to keep clean, and transmit vibrations to the hand much better than cork.

So why do we use cork as handle material on a fishing rod if we’re so concerned about sensitivity? Rattan wrapped wood predates cork as a fishing rod handle material by nearly half a century. Was cork a step backwards in the evolution of the fishing rod?
It has been said “If you want to make a rod sensitive, just build it as light as you can.” While true indeed, this statement is only partially true. Weight reduction does help, but only if rigidity stays high. Lightweight and stiff materials are much better than lightweight and flexible ones. In this regard, any lightweight wood transmits vibrations far better than cork.

Wrapped over a core of pine, white cedar, basswood, or even balsa, Rattan is a good looking, light weight and practical alternative to cork. Due to its weight to rigidity ratio, it is a far better medium for the transmission of vibrations than cork.

Making a rattan grip is not really difficult, and once you understand the basics of the construction you can get really creative with this stuff. Okay, so you’ve decided to try making a rattan grip, but aren’t sure what to order. The “chair caner” terminology can be a little confusing at first, so let’s take a look at rattan and how it’s processed into the various products we can use.

Rattan (calamus rotang) is a species of Palm that grows like a vine in the jungles and rain forests of Indonesia, China, and the Philippines. It can reach lengths of up to 600 feet and a diameter of 4 inches in just 6 to 8 years.

When processed, the outer bark is peeled off and machine cut into various widths. This outer bark is known as “Chair cane” or “Binder cane”, depending on width. “Chair cane” comes in widths ranging from 1.5 to 3.5 mm, whereas Binder cane ranges from 4 to 6mm wide.

Once the outer bark is stripped off, the remaining core of the rattan stalk is known as “Reed” and is also used in Wicker furniture. While it has a rougher surface than cane, it can be purchased in many shapes and diameters, and can be sanded smooth. It accepts dye and stain very well, so just about any color or shade desired can be achieved.

Chair and Binder cane can be stained, although the results can vary wildly and be difficult to reproduce. It is best stained in batches larger than you think you’ll need. Once dried, you can match pieces according to shade and depth of color.

Chair and Binding cane is sold in 100, 500 and even 1000 ft rolls called “Hanks” which consists of various length strips. A typical 100 ft Hank of rattan, depending on width, is enough material to wrap at least 6 to 8 grips. As I write this, the average price for a 100 ft Hank is around 6 or 8 dollars. A 1000 ft Hank can be had for about $29.00. On average, that is enough rattan to make 60 to 80 grips.

What else will we need?
Materials (fig 1)

Grip core
The core of a rattan grip can be wood, cork, or foam. Balsa is readily available, easy to turn to the desired shape, and is inexpensive when compared to cork. Cork has an average density of 12 pounds per cubic foot (lb/ft$^3$). Balsa wood can be obtained in densities from 6 to 19 lb/ft$^3$, and averaging about 10 lb/ft$^3$.

Basswood is much tougher and won't crush easily like balsa, but is a little heavier with an average density of about 20 to 24 lb/ft$^3$.

Rattan (12 – 15ft)
Super glue (preferably Gel type)
Wood Glue
Thread
Rod Finish
Razor Blade
File
Stain (optional)

Construction -
The Grip Core
We begin this project by turning the grip core to shape as normal, or you can use pre-shaped grips sold by many rod building supply companies. Don’t waste money on the expensive grades of cork. Remember - it will be covered with rattan when finished, so even the worst grades of cork are just fine for this project. If maximum sensitivity is important, I recommend using a grip core made from Basswood.

It should be noted that while cork, foam and balsa can be turned using a regular rod lathe, Basswood should probably be turned on a wood lathe. Also, if you do turn your own grip cores, be creative if you like but bear in mind that rattan does not like conforming to radical shapes and curves. Keep the grip shape close to what is considered “normal” and you’ll be fine. You can’t wrap something with the curves of a French horn with rattan.

The Rattan
Begin by selecting a strip of rattan long enough to wrap the grip. For this demonstration, we are using 4mm Binder cane. To cover a 7 in. reverse half-wells fly rod grip, 140 inches of 4mm Binder cane is usually more than enough. Chair cane would require a longer length, as more revolutions will be needed due to its narrower width. If the Hank of cane you purchase doesn’t have strips this long, a splice will be required and we’ll cover that here too. Finding one piece long enough to wrap an entire grip doesn’t happen very often.

Wrap a few strips into a coil small enough to fit in the bottom of a coffee cup. To prevent them from unraveling, secure with a bread tie and place inside the coffee cup with enough water to cover them, then microwave for about a minute and a half. You’ll want the water very hot, but not boiling. Allow the rattan to soak in the hot water for about fifteen minutes. After the soak, the rattan will be pliable enough to work with and will not crack. Be sure to wipe them clean after the soak - sometimes they have dirt and debris you won’t notice until they get wet.

Now we wrap the Rattan onto the grip core.
Start by wrapping the rattan two or three turns around the front of the grip, making sure there is enough excess rattan for at least two complete wraps past the front of the grip. (Fig 1) (Flat, rough side down - shiny round side up.) The idea is to line everything up making sure the wraps are even and spiral nicely.

Once they appear even, apply a bead of superglue on the grip core to secure the rattan and continue gluing up to and past the end of the grip. (Fig 2) You only want maybe 4 turns glued with the superglue. The idea here is to tack down the start of the wrap quickly, and the superglue does this very well.

Make sure to immediately clean up any that oozes out from between the rattan.

Once that dries, coat the grip core with a thin coat of Wood glue and continue wrapping the rest of the grip making sure each strand is wrapped tightly against one another, similar to packing thread on a guide wrap. Don't worry about tiny gaps – this will be hid later with thread.

Make sure you leave the last \( \frac{1}{2} \) inch of the core without Wood glue and finish this end by tacking the rattan down with superglue as you did the opposite end. (Fig 3)
If the single strip of rattan was not long enough to wrap the entire grip, you'll need to splice in a second strip. To do this, use a razor to cut the end of the rattan at an angle (Fig 4) and super glue it down to the grip core. (Fig 5 – A)

Cut the reverse angle on the second strip of rattan (Fig 5 – B) adjusting the angle as necessary for proper fit. Apply super glue to the tip and first inch or so of rattan, and insert the tip of the second piece beneath the first and hold in place for about a minute or so until dried. Be sure and play with the fitting of these two pieces prior to applying the glue. The finished seam should look like Fig 5-C. Done properly, this seam will be almost impossible to distinguish from the natural nodes found on rattan.

Once the entire grip has been wrapped with rattan and the glue has dried, shave the excess rattan off of each end with a razor blade. True the ends of the grip on your lathe with a file. (Fig 6) Warning - when truing the ends with the file, make sure you turn each end in the opposite direction of wrap. i.e. - if the rattan was wrapped on to the core in a clockwise direction, place the mandrel in your lathe so that it turns the grip in a counterclockwise direction. This prevents the file from ripping the rattan off of the core.

Once the ends have been turned true, trim the hairs and fibers protruding from the rattan off with a razor blade. Do not pull on them, cut them off with a razor. Trust me on this!
At this point the thread is wound in between the rattan by supergluing the first inch or so of thread down, wrapping the entire grip, and securing the opposite end down with superglue as before. (Fig 7)

Now the grip is ready for the finish of your choice. Permagloss works very well, but leaves a finish that is somewhat slick. I prefer the “Lite” version of any standard two-part finish, such as Flexcoat Lite.

This thin coat of finish secures the thread and rattan very well, and makes everything water proof.

The rattan grip is now ready to ream out and fit to the blank as usual.

Options

The rattan can be colored or stained with black tea, coffee, food coloring, RIT dye, etc. to achieve many interesting effects. However, it is best to try this on scrap pieces first. When you discover a staining technique that gives the shade or effect you’re after, treat several strips of rattan at once, as the results will be very hard to reproduce later. It often takes staining 3 to 5 pieces in the same batch at a time in order to get 2 pieces to match closely in shade and tone.

It is sometimes easier to simply tint the finish rather than trying to color or stain the rattan.

Forend tips can also be added before or after attaching the grip to the blank. These can be made from horn, ebony, or even painted and finished wood or cork.

From inlays to different color patterns, or retro-look to woven designs, the only real limitations are imagination and experimentation with this stuff.

Remember, there are many different ways to skin a cat. This is only one of them. The many different options, applications and techniques can’t be covered in an article this small, so for any questions, tips or pointers feel free to contact me at –

rodbuilder @ rocketmail.com

I’ll be glad to help in any way I can and would like to hear any ideas you may have.

Lance Rogge has also written an excellent tutorial on wrapping rattan grips, and I highly recommend it. Lance is a great guy and more than willing to help. You can email him at lsrogge@cs.com

Also, big thanks to Jeff Hatton. His help and knowledge has been priceless.