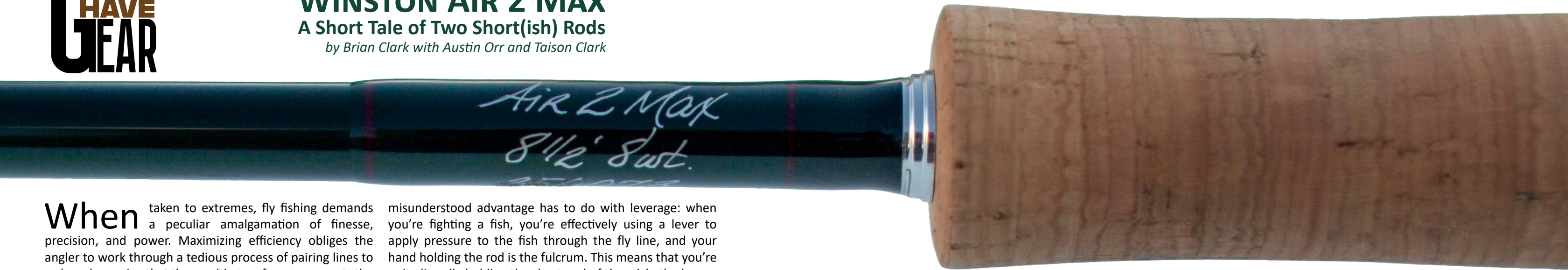


WINSTON AIR 2 MAX

A Short Tale of Two Short(ish) Rods

by Brian Clark with Austin Orr and Taison Clark



When taken to extremes, fly fishing demands a peculiar amalgamation of finesse, precision, and power. Maximizing efficiency obliges the angler to work through a tedious process of pairing lines to rods and ensuring that the resulting performance meets the unique requirements of a particular fishing scenario.

Except when it doesn't.

We've spent the last few months working with two prototype 8.5ft rods from Winston's new Air 2 MAX line of saltwater sticks (models which are now in production and available for purchase), a 6wt and an 8wt, and it's been a very interesting process to contrast the shorter rods with their 9ft siblings, and with each other. Taken together, this pair of rods neatly illustrates the ever-increasing degree of specialization among modern fly rods, and the ongoing importance of good fly rod design.

But before we dig into specifics about each rod, let's clear up a lingering question: has Winston finally made a line of true saltwater fly rods? I've been a Winston fan since my trouty youth in Colorado, but I've been skeptical about their salt offerings myself. I've come around in the last few years; I can argue fairly that the Air Salt series was indeed pretty salty, as were some of the Alpha+ rods, but I don't think there's much doubt that the Air 2 MAX definitely passes muster as a real saltwater-focused series on par with other rods in the premium tier. But perhaps our most interesting observations about both of these rods lie with their applications beyond the salt.

Rod Length Trade-offs

As most folks know if they've been hanging around the fly game for long, the 9-foot 4-piece configuration is the industry standard for single-hand rods (at least outside the Euro-style Nymphing (ESN) niche). Why would anyone want a shorter (or longer) rod? There are a number of good reasons (in addition to simple personal preference) for shorter rods; they depend somewhat on line weight and prospective fishing scenarios. One much discussed benefit of shorter rods is easier navigation in tight quarters, whether that's targeting tiny brook trout on a brushy blue line way back in the mountains or in the jungle. One much

misunderstood advantage has to do with leverage: when you're fighting a fish, you're effectively using a lever to apply pressure to the fish through the fly line, and your hand holding the rod is the fulcrum. This means that you're quite literally holding the short end of the stick; the longer the lever on the fish's side of the fulcrum, the more leverage you've given to the fish. This is why big game offshore rods are short and very stiff, and the same principle applies to fly rods when you're battling big fish on heavy leaders. Many people think that longer fly rods give you more control over the fish, but this isn't true; longer rods do a better job of mending line and protecting light tippet (thus their appeal to the ESN and trout crowd) and are useful for roll casting (which is why two-hand switch and spey rods are longer than 9ft), but shorter rods are better for putting the hickory to a real beast. Although this principle generally matters very little with regard to trout and smaller fish, it's an important consideration in the salt and the jungle.

Leverage plays into the last set of trade-offs as well. As established in the "Broomsticks and Fairy Wands" iteration of the Elevate Casting column (OTFM Fall 2023), a fly rod is more lever than spring; the longer the lever, the more line you can move. Naturally, this cuts both ways: while it is possible to throw longer distances with longer rods, you're also having to work harder to move that longer lever, and it's slower. This is why shorter rods generally feel lighter, crisper (faster), and more responsive. It's also why they're more accurate; the shorter lever reduces the potential for error distortion. In practice, both distance and accuracy come down to the caster's ability to manipulate that fulcrum, and your mileage may vary. It's also where personal preference enters the equation, and the performance of each particular rod. In the hands of a competent caster, giving up a few inches of rod length doesn't sacrifice any distance in common fishing scenarios, and the shorter rod usually means less fatigue.

Last but not least, several logistical considerations: shorter rods take up a bit less space in your luggage, fit a bit better into rod racks in boats, and are just a wee bit less likely to get clipped by ceiling fans and car doors – but again, your breakage may vary.

Winston Air 2 MAX 686: Shocking Versatility

I'm a huge fan of 6wt rods with fighting butts. They're my go-to rods for carp, gar, bass, and other warmwater species, for streamers on sinktips in big trout rivers, for small bones in the Yucatan and Bahamas, and for the less blustery days in the salt marsh. What surprised me most about the 8'6" 6wt Air 2 MAX is how capable this rod is for ALL of those scenarios. I take the rod + line pairing ritual quite seriously; we worked through 14 different lines with this rod, including a mystery overweighted sink tip that I ended up having to fish almost exclusively for most of a multi-day trout trip due to a string of poor packing decisions that I'd rather not discuss. To my shock, the 686 handled all of those lines quite well. A few worked better than others, but there were no outright rejects. That's an extraordinary range of versatility for a modern fly rod. I've also overlined and underlined the rod, and it still performs quite well. It's fast, but it's friendlier than most fast rods on the market today. It probably isn't the first rod I'd hand to a novice caster, but it isn't out of the question. Compared to its 9ft 6wt sibling, the 686 is noticeably lighter in the hand, recovers faster, and provides more feedback. The 9ft version is great too – it's on par with all the premium saltwater rods on the market – but the 8.5ft 6wt is really special.

I've never liked Swiss Army knives; the idea that a single tool can perform a broad variety of tasks generally feels to me like a few compromises too far. In the case of this 686, I'm willing to make an exception. It's one of the finest all-around rods I've ever fished.

Winston Air 2 MAX 886: Uncompromising Power

In stark contrast to the multi-tool versatility of the 686, the 886 has a specific mission: it's a robust, powerful rod designed primarily to do battle with fishy beasts. We tested 11 different lines on this rod; honestly, we struggled to make some of them sing. Things clicked into place when Hank

Haen, the rod designer, suggested that we give some sink tips a try. He was right: the rod comes alive with a heavy sinking line. In a sense, this makes the 886 a descendant of the fabled Winston BIII+ "Jungle" model, a niche rod introduced a decade or so ago which is still much-loved by anglers who chase powerful fish in tight quarters. Although shorter rods really do come into their own in the jungle, I'd also reach for this rod when throwing large, wind-resistant flies to bass or bowfin in heavy cover. For saltwater use with mainstream Redfish or Bonefish lines, the 9ft 8wt version will be a little more forgiving; the 8.5ft is a technical rod that rewards a powerful stroke and good timing. I wouldn't recommend this one for beginners, but for experienced casters seeking raw power, it should definitely be considered alongside other premium saltwater rods, and it'll definitely be going on our next jungle adventure.

Rod Build Details

- **Sections:** four (4) pieces; currently all Air 2 MAX models are in the 4pc configuration
- **Handle:** full wells grip made from pristine Premium Flor Grade cork; Winston is famous for beautiful handles, and these rods live up to the hype. Note that the full wells flare is gentle, and the fighting butt is rounded.
- **Guides:** the two stripping guides are Cerecoil hard titanium with ceramic inserts stripping guides; the flexible Recoil snake guides have a hard titanium saltwater finish.
- **Reel Seat:** lightweight anodized aluminum with double uplocking aluminum rings, engraved with the script logo
- **Storage:** top-notch green graphite tube and traditional embroidered cotton rod sock
- **Manufacture:** 100% designed and built in Twin Bridges, Montana, USA

MSRP: US\$1,245

Available online at www.winstonrods.com
and at fine fly shops worldwide