



THOMAS & THOMAS > EXOCETT 88 FLY RODS

REVIEW BY BRIAN CLARK WITH INPUT FROM AUSTIN ORR AND TAISON CLARK

Believe

it or not, it's possible to have too much of a good thing, at least in terms of fly rods. For a number of years now, I've been convinced that we're living in a golden age of fly fishing gear: whether it's rods or reels or fly lines, sunglasses, waders, submersible bags or technical clothing, we're spoiled for choice across an extraordinarily broad range of price points. Despite the fact that sticker prices on premium rods seem to cause more shock every year, today's entry-level rods offer better performance than ever before in the sport's history. Although this plethora of choices can be intimidating or even paralyzing, the consumer is generally winning.

Alas, those of us who write gear reviews face a less vexing but still real challenge: it's increasingly difficult to find new superlatives and fresh, useful ways to describe each new release – especially fly rods, since so many of them offer very similar feel and performance.

There's a more serious problem too: those similarities among rods aren't coincidence; it appears that modern saltwater fly rod actions have coalesced around a performance standard fixated on the "flats hero shot" where an intrepid angler blasts a heavy crab fly at least 80ft directly into the wind at an enormous permit tailing in gin-clear water under clear blue tropical skies, probably somewhere very expensive.

Meanwhile, back here in reality, even those of us who fish frequently encounter a real need for those hero shots only rarely, and we usually take them because it's super fun rather than strictly necessary. Worse, rods designed for that game tend to be very technical and not very versatile. They're delicious for casting nerds throwing extreme distance, but they range from inefficient to downright unfriendly for your average caster facing a typical fishing situation. It's like bringing a finicky rail gun to a stick fight.

As I've said in other OTFM rod reviews, the gold standard for me is versatility. The rods I appreciate most are those which perform admirably across a wide range of fishing applications and fly lines, from floaters to sink tips to intermediate and even single-hand spey / micro-Skagit heads. Most versatile rods rank high on the "feel" scale, and many modern premium rods broadly fail those versatility, feel, and fishability tests. All of that brings us around to the new Exocett 88 rods from Thomas & Thomas.

I've been a huge fan of the older Exocett SS series, introduced back in 2017. I've had my trusty SS 350 almost that long, and it's been everywhere. It's landed big permit in Mexico, small tarpon in Belize, big jacks in the Gulf of Mexico, and monster peacock bass in the Amazon. It throws

a WF10F tarpon line beautifully, but it also handles heavy intermediate and sink tip lines. Somewhat to our surprise, given that the SS rods were supposedly designed mostly for throwing sinking lines (thus the grain-weight rating system), on the Amazon trip it quickly became our favorite rod for zinging large poppers deep into the jungle on a long-belly floating 10wt line. At 8'8" the shorter rod is fantastic both for tight casting situations in the jungle and mangroves, and for subduing powerful quarry. Despite all the travel and abuse and fighting some very heavy fish, it's never been broken even once – something I can't say for any other rod I've used as much. Perhaps I've just jinxed myself, but that's fine; see, my SS rods have just been relegated to backup status thanks to the arrival of the new Exocett 88 series.

Because of my history with the SS rods, I haven't been this excited about a new rod release in recent memory. From the name it was clear that they were keeping the same 8'8" rod length with the 88s, but would they also retain the other features that I loved about the SS series? Could those virtues be improved upon?

I'm pleased to report that yes, in several nuanced ways, the 88s are even better than the SS series. Bold claims require robust defenses, and you've already heard one of them: versatility. The 88s gracefully handle an extraordinarily wide range of lines, from long-belly floaters to overweighted "Grand Slam" and "Redfish" tapers, and a number of sinking lines. The 88s are again exceptions to the ultra-fast norms, and we've found them to be smooth, light in the hand, and very forgiving, but without giving up any power. That forgiving nature is tightly coupled to the versatility, and the notion of "feel" comes in part because the rods are so smooth.

We use the word "feel" to describe a quality that helps a caster time their stops and power application; part of it comes from casting technique and experience, and the line is a big part of the equation. In addition to versatility, an abundance of feel is what makes the 88s exceptional, and it's extremely rare to find a rod in the higher line weights that offers both feel and power. The 8'8" length surely helps; as discussed in previous OTFM rod reviews, shorter rods offer lighter swing weights, enable a faster stroke, reduce errors, and give up less leverage when fighting big fish.

We've been working with three models from the Exocett 88 line-up: the 200gr / 7wt, and 300gr / 9wt, and the 350gr / 10wt. Thomas & Thomas is rightfully known for making beautiful rods, and the new 88s live up to their exacting standards for fit-and-finish. The stripping guides are titanium with ceramic inserts, and they've used

titanium snake guides from Recoil. The wraps and varnish are clean, the composite + cork handles are comfortable, the gunmetal uplocking reel seats are anodized aluminum, and I'm particularly fond of the fighting butts – just the right size and shape.

Over the years we've found some rod models where particular weights and lengths can feel very different from other rods carrying the same moniker; not so with the 88s, which definitely possess familial affinity. The analogy is a bit too just-so, but it's almost like the 88s are readily identifiable as siblings to each other, and also as cousins to the SS rods. T&T has done a nice job both in keeping the action consistent across the model lines and in improving the latest generation.

I've thrown a variety of 6wt, 7wt, and even 8wt lines on the 200gr / 7wt so far. My favorites for punching big flies into wind tend to be 7wt lines like the MPX and Infinity, and a WF-6-F/S (with a 210gr head at 30ft), but it also sings at distance with long-belly lines in both 6wt and 7wt. Given that many modern rods only throw one or two line tapers well, range like that really is exceptional.

We've had similar experiences with the heavier rods. The 9wt / 300gr is particularly sweet with the SA Bonefish Plus in WF8F, but it also handled a chunky WF9S line with a heavy tip and did nicely with the two WF9Fs we tried. The 10wt / 350gr is just a cannon. I've yet to find a 10wt or 11wt line that doesn't work well on it. The SA Magnitude Infinity Salt Smooth in a WF10F Clear Tip came along on my last Florida tarpon mission and performed admirably.

The more I practice casting and – hopefully – the better I get, the more I've come to appreciate medium action rods like the Exocett 88s. It isn't that I entirely dislike those faster rods or can't throw them well; it's more that they're just a lot of work and limited in their range of useful applications. I still break them out for serious distance practice, but I reach for softer sticks when I'm fishing, especially when accuracy is paramount. I can't help but believe that a large number of less-obsessive casters would be better served by slower rods that offer more feel. Long live the 88s!

MSRP starting at US\$995

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