

# Clinic

## GET A GRIP

Use these maintenance tips to reverse years of wear on the cork handle of your favorite fly rod.

**T**O AN ANGLER, A DIRTY, grimy, and chipped cork grip is a source of pride. It's a sign that he's been spending a lot of time on the water and catching fish. But as with your favorite pair of jeans, there comes a time that your rod grip needs a good cleaning. Slimy grips are slippery grips, and anglers can't have that. Like most natural materials, cork needs care and maintenance.

The source of your classic fly rod grip is the cork oak, which grows in the Mediterranean region. A cork tree yields its first harvest after about 25 years and then one about every 10 years for the next century or so. After the cork is stripped from the tree, it dries for between one and two years, then it's boiled, graded, and cut. One final cleaning and drying process prepares the cork for market. From the time cork is harvested to the time it's ready to sell takes two to four years.

Grades range from Flor—the highest—to Select, AAA, AA, A, B, on down and are based upon the density of the cork. High-quality cork offers a tight, dense texture and is more durable than lesser grades. Lower-grade cork is porous, softer, spongier, and has more holes. Over the past decade, there's been a shortage of high-grade cork, mostly from the millennial champagne toasts and a

worldwide increase in wine consumption. Odds are good that the grip on your fly rod is made from some lesser grade of cork and will eventually need some work.

### Cleaning and Patching

First, be careful about using caustic chemicals that can hasten the breakdown of cork. The best way to clean cork is with a soft nylon brush or toothbrush, some water, and dish soap. Apply only gentle pressure so you don't chip or gouge the cork. If the grip holds a lot of dried fish slime that won't come off, a Scotch-Brite cleaning pad with some soap will lift the grime without stripping the cork. For dried and caked slime, try 0000 steel wool with some dish soap.

You can also make your own cleaning solvent, and it will clean a grip in about three minutes. Mix equal parts dish soap, sodium carbonate, water, denatured alcohol, and ammonia. Sodium carbonate is

commonly known as washing soda, and you can find it in the detergent sections of grocery stores. Wipe the solvent on the grip with a cloth and rinse. Your grip will look and feel like new.

Most rod manufacturers use cork filler to bolster the appearance of their products and add to the appeal of their rods on the sales floor. But after a rod has been fished a bunch, and repeatedly soaked and dried, the filler gives way and leaves open holes. If these holes go untreated, the wetting and drying process will weaken the surrounding areas. If left unchecked, the cork will eventually tear, thereby ruining your grip.

A bit of cork filler is an excellent stop-gap, but you can't buy premade cork filler; you have to make it yourself. Take a cork grip ring, or a cleaned and dried wine cork, and sand it with a very fine 220- to 240-grit sandpaper. The sanding will produce a fine cork dust that you'll need to collect.

Once you have enough cork powder

### Before:



Prior to refinishing, the cork grip on this fly rod bears all the markings of wear: discoloration from grime, and pits and holes from heavy use.

### After:



With the handle sections patched, polished, and smoothed with 220-grit sandpaper, the grip will look good as new—and still catch just as many fish.

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For general cleaning purposes, a small soft brush, some dish soap, and a little pressure will do to clean your cork grip. Use a scouring pad for tougher grime, and to clean more thoroughly, make a solvent of equal parts dish soap, sodium carbonate, water, denatured alcohol, and ammonia. Simply wipe the solvent on the grip and rinse it off (1). You can fill the pits in the grip with a mixture of cork dust and adhesive, such as wood glue (2). Rid the pits of grime and grit with a bodkin or something similar, and then apply the cork dust-resin mixture with a tongue depressor (3). You may need to apply the mixture more than once to fill the holes flush with the handle's surface (4).

to fill the holes you want to patch, mix it with a bonding agent, such as wood glue, Minwax Wood Filler, or Elmer's Glue. Add enough of the adhesive to create a smooth and dry consistency. Make sure the powder-resin mixture is viscous enough so that it won't run out of the holes and gaps. If you are tight on time, or you've got a bunch of grips that need fixing, straight wood filler will also work.

Before applying the mixture, use a sharp, pointed tool, such as a bodkin, hook point, or cooking skewer, to clean out the holes and the pits, and refill them with the cork dust-glue mixture. The filler will shrink when it dries, so you'll need to repeat the process to get the holes flush with the surface of your grip.

When the filler has dried, polish the grip with 220-grade sandpaper; then wash and dry it. Your grip will look like new. I'll sometimes seal the cork with gunstock finish available from most sporting good stores. If you want a real professional rod-grip sealer, try a splash of U-40. (Find it on the Web at [www.u-40.com/corkseal.html](http://www.u-40.com/corkseal.html).)

## Reshaping Grips

Full-wells grips are pretty much the standard shape for saltwater sticks, but sometimes this grip just isn't that comfortable. If the full-wells grip is too big for your hands, or if you simply prefer more pronounced dips, you can reshape it.

Cut a section of fine-grade sandpaper (150- to 180-grit) that is long enough to wrap around the grip and wide enough to cover the area that you're trying to reduce. Wrap the sandpaper around the grip, and place your hand over the sandpaper. Rotate your hand in one direction, either clockwise or counterclockwise, until the paper has made a revolution or two around the grip. Test the grip for comfort, and repeat the sanding process as necessary.

A ragged, worn-out grip is also a sign that an angler has found a rod that he likes a lot. Take care of the grip so you can keep using the rod for years to come. ■

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