

Spey lines explained

A newcomer to spey casting would be forgiven for peeping into this sport, trying it out or talking to the many different opinions and then turning tail and running away from the mass of confusion that there is out there.

There is a mind boggling array of theories, techniques, tackle and styles and it is very difficult for the beginner to make head or tail out of the world of spey casting. To explain the subtleties and intricacies of this spey world would be like trying to explain the rules of cricket to the average American, or of baseball to the average Brit. However, as fly line manufacturers, we only need to make it easier to understand the fly line – the most important part of your tackle.

Weight

Let's start with a look at spey line weights. Perhaps the greatest confusion lies in the rating of two-handed rods and lines. Most fly fishers are familiar with the rating of a single handed rod – choose a #5 rod for trout, a #8 rod for bonefish and a #12 rod for tarpon. Two-handed rods also have a similar rating – somewhere between #5 and #12, but the 8 weight fly line that loads your bonefish rod will never get close to loading a #8 two handed rod. The reason for this is that two handed rods are far more powerful than an equivalent rated single handed rod.

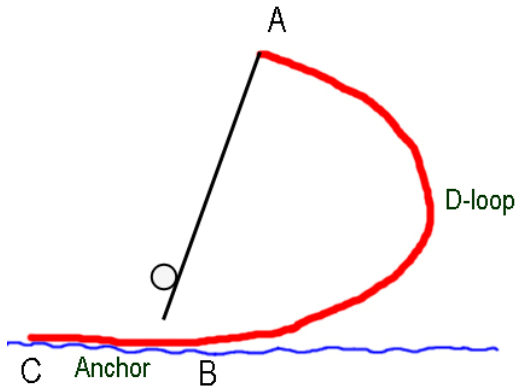
A single handed rod, rated for a #8 line, will load effectively with between 200 and 300 grains. A #8 two-handed rod will take between 450 and 700 grains to load for spey casting. This large range is due to the spey casting style used. At this stage there is no need to confuse anyone more with the differences in these styles, just remember that the two-handed rod needs more weight to make it load. In other words, if you put a regular WF8 line on a #8 two-handed rod you will never get close to loading it.

One confusing thing about spey lines is that they have more than one line number. The WindCutter lines have three numbers such as 7/8/9, 8/9/10 and 9/10/11. The reason for this triple numbering system is that the first WindCutter line designed by Jim Vincent was made by taking the body of a #10 line, adding some of a #9 to the front end and then finishing it off with the full front taper of a #8, thus the line became an 8/9/10. The numbering system stuck. As a simple guideline, use the middle number of the three to find out what line size it is – the 8/9/10 is a good #9 line.

The MidSpey and GrandSpey lines only have two numbers – 7/8, 8/9 and 9/10 for example and in these cases, use the higher number. The 8/9 is, in effect a #9 line. To help choose the right line for your rod, we have compiled a chart [“HERE”](#) that recommends the right line for hundreds of spey rods on the market.

Taper

Most spey lines follow a simply designed taper. There needs to be weight in the back of the belly to load the rod effectively as a “D-loop”. There also needs to be a long fine front taper, so that the line lying on the water (“The Anchor”) at the start of the forward cast has as little drag as possible.



In a spey cast the “D-loop” (from A to B) loads the rod and needs to be the heaviest part of the line. The “Anchor” (B to C) lies on the water. The more line there is lying on the water, the more energy is lost during the forward cast as it tries to tear itself off the surface film.

A typical spey line design will have most of the weight in the back end of the head and a long, fine front taper to make the most of these casting requirements:



Within the basic spey line design are numerous variations, but the main one to compare is the head length. At RIO we make three different head lengths of spey lines. These are the WindCutter[®], with a head length of around 55 ft, the MidSpey[™], with a head length of around 65 ft and the GrandSpey[™], with a head length of around 80 ft.

WindCutter[®] Spey Line

Overall Length: 130' (39m)



Head Length: 55' (16m)

MidSpey

Overall Length: 130' (39m)



Head Length: 65' (20m)

GrandSpey Fly Line

Overall Length: 130' (39m)



Head Length: 80' (25m)

The longer the head of the spey line, the more line there needs to be outside the rod to make a cast. Long belly lines, like the GrandSpey, really need plenty of room behind them to create a big enough D-loop for the line to load the rod – say 30 ft of room for the GrandSpey. With the medium head length of the MidSpey, you may only need around 20 ft of room behind and with a short head line like the WindCutter, even less; perhaps only 15 ft of space is needed.

Of course, space behind isn't the only factor. There are four other factors that influence your choice of head length:

1. **Casting Ability** - you need to be a better caster to handle the longer head length lines.
2. **Rod Length** – A short rod does not have the same lift as a long rod, so the shorter the rod, the shorter the line head length must be.
3. **Sinking Tip** – with sink tips or heavy flies it can be really tricky to get the sunken line to the surface with a long belly line. A short head line means that the sink tip is closer to you and easier to get out of the water.
4. **Stripping flies** – Some fishing techniques require you to strip the fly in to entice a fish to take. The short head lines are perfect for this as you must strip the start of the head up to the rod tip before making a cast.

If you don't need to do any stripping, the short belly lines are more of a problem and a good caster will have to manage the slack coils of running line hanging in the water before each cast. They will also waste good fishing time having to strip the line into the casting length.

Generally, if you start with a WindCutter line and, with practice, get to a skill level where you can cast the whole head at the tip of the rod, without stripping anything in, you are ready to move up to a MidSpey line. When you do, make sure you start with the head about 10 feet in side the rod tip; this will be the same as the WindCutter you are used to. As you get better lengthen the head a foot at a time and when you can handle the whole head of the MidSpey, it is time to move to the GrandSpey.

SKAGIT CASTING

The most recent style of spey casting is called Skagit casting (pronounced ska-jit) and named after the Skagit river in Washington.

This style of spey casting utilizes an even shorter head length spey line than the WindCutter - something in the region of 27 ft. This exceptionally short head length allows the fly caster to make long casts in extremely tight situations. Even the most basic of spey casters can make a 70 ft cast with no more than 3 ft of room behind. Added to the shortness of the line is the fact that the head weighs about the same amount as the corresponding WindCutter, but at half the length. This means that the Skagit line has almost twice the weight per inch of the WindCutter line. This extra weight per inch is an immense asset for lifting out deeply sunken tips or heavy, large flies. Nothing will pick up big flies or T-14 or LC13 style sink tips as easily as a Skagit line will.

RIO Skagit Spey Line

Overall Length: 120' (36m)



Head Length: 27' (8.2m)

Skagit Cheaters

The most confusion with Skagit lines comes with something called “Skagit Cheaters”, which are 5 ft and 10 ft extension pieces for a Skagit line.

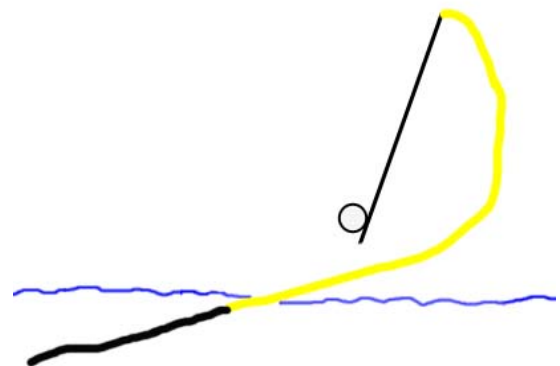
One of the ideas behind Skagit casting is that you want to maintain a constant ratio between the rod length and the head length of the line. It may be 3 times the rod length, it may be 4 times the rod length, and each caster will find their happy ratio.

For the purpose of this example, let’s say a caster likes a ratio of $3\frac{1}{2}:1$. A 12 ft rod would require 42 ft of line and a 15 ft rod will require $52\frac{1}{2}$ ft. By following this ratio, it means that the caster never needs to adjust their casting stroke, regardless of which outfit they pick up.

If a caster likes this ratio and uses a 12 ft rod, they are going to need 42 ft of line to feel comfortable. The Skagit line has a 27 ft head. Add a 15 ft sink tip and you get 42 ft, which means there is no cheater needed. The next day, the same caster casts a 14 ft rod - $14 \times 3\frac{1}{2} = 49$ ft. So, to keep the same casting stroke, the caster needs a total head length around 49 ft. A 27 ft Skagit line, plus the 15 ft sink tip is only 42 ft. Plug in the 5 ft cheater and the head length becomes 47 ft and much closer to the required ratio.

The whole idea is pretty confusing to a novice, but once the concept is grasped, it is very easy to understand and allows for a caster to develop a consistent style, regardless of the size of rod used.

A final note to mention on the Skagit lines is that the sink tip does not form part of the calculation for line weight. If you look at the spey line recommendation chart [“HERE”](#) and decide on a Skagit line for your rod make sure you use the weight of the Skagit body. If the chart suggests you need a 550 grain Skagit line, it does not matter which size sink tip you add on to the front end of this (as long as it is not heavier than the Skagit body). The reason for this is that the sink tip usually does not form part of the D-loop and, therefore, plays no role in loading the rod. A typical example is that someone is told that they need a 550 grain Skagit line. They know they are going to use a 150 grain sink tip, so they buy a 400 grain Skagit line (thinking that the two added together will give them the correct load). This is very wrong and will result in an under loaded outfit. Make sure the Skagit *body* weight is correct, regardless of the sink tip.



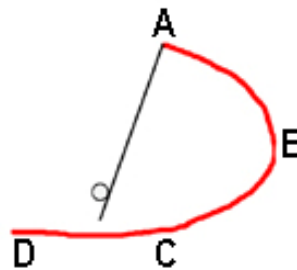
SALTWAER

More and more people are using two-handed rods for overhead casting in the surf these days. The length and power of these rods are great for throwing big flies out against a wind and over incoming surf.

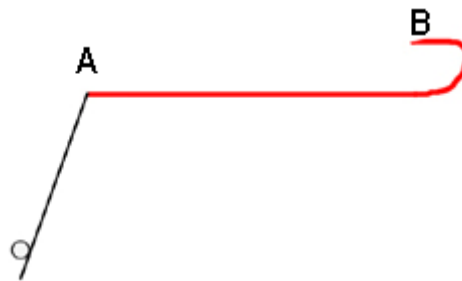
When choosing a line for overhead casting a two-handed rod there are two important considerations.

1. The head length needs to be shorter than for spey casting so that the back loop does not drop and line speed is retained to shoot big distances.
2. The line weight should be less with an overhead cast, than with a spey cast. Here's why:

With a spey cast, only part of the line weight loads the rod. In this example the load really comes from A to B, though B to C also helps load the rod. The piece of line from C to D really has no effect on the load of the rod.



With an overhead cast, the entire weight of line serves to load the rod at the end of the back cast. This means that a lighter line can be used when overhead casting, as opposed to when spey casting, because the entire line length (A to B) loads the rod.



An ideal line for overhead casting a two-handed rod is RIO's OutBound®

OutBound®

Overall Length: 120' (37m)



Head Length: 38' (11.5m)

The OutBound is available in several densities and sizes, but the most popular one for overhead casting, particularly in the surf, is the intermediate version. Check out the link on this web site "[2007 RIO Spey Line Recommendations \(PDF\)](#)" to find the right OutBound line for a number of two-handed rods.

TIP 2

RIO's interchangeable tip spey lines are unique in the fly fishing world. Nobody else makes a spey line with three sections. When you purchase a WindCutter or MidSpey interchangeable tip line you will find there are three pieces, along with a wallet of sinking tips. These three sections are:

1. a body section
2. a middle section (Tip 2)
3. and the front tip (Tip 1)



There are a number of reasons for these three sections:

1. For normal spey casting simply change out Tip 1 with whichever sink tips is required for the fishing conditions. Each sink tip in the wallet will weigh the same, which ensures the casting is not affected and the line remains balanced. However, each sink tip has a different sink rate from the clear intermediate tip, with a sink rate of 1½ inches per second, to the Type 8, density compensated tip which sinks at 8 inches per second.
2. For overhead casting, when a shorter and lighter weight head is needed, simply remove Tip 2 completely and attach the sink tip, or tip 1 directly to the body.
3. Sometimes extra depth is required and many fly fishers use RIO's long 24 ft density compensated sink tips called Big Boys. These tips are too long to simply replace Tip 1, so when using longer sinking tips like this, again remove Tip 2 and attach the long tip directly to the body.
4. One odd-looking tip in the wallet is grey and has two loops on. This tip is called a sink tip compensator. The sink tip compensator is simply a sinking Tip 2. Replace the floating tip 2 with this compensator when fishing in strong currents. By lengthening the sinking portion of the line, the current has much less "lift" effect and ensures that the fly stays deep.
5. On really windy days, or with big, cumbersome flies, remove Tip 1 and attach the leader directly to Tip 2. This shorter taper and heavier front end makes light work of the windiest of conditions and the biggest of flies.

T-14 & T-8

T-14 and T-8 are both level shooting head materials. T-14 weighs 14 grains per foot and T-8 weighs 8 grains per foot. T-14 sinks around 8.5 inches per second and T-8 around 7.5 inches per second.

The material is usually sold in a 30 ft pack. Anglers simply cut this level material to the length they need for a variety of fishing conditions, and then add a braided loop to each end to easily attach to the spey line. The most useful tip lengths from a 30 ft pack are 15 ft, 10 ft and 5 ft, though some anglers prefer 15 ft, 9 ft and 6 ft lengths.

The weight of T-14 makes it pretty heavy for the lighter lines to lift out. Most of the Skagit line sizes will not have a problem with 15 ft of T-14, but attaching it to the lighter WindCutter and MidSpey lines can result in poor turnover and inefficient casts. As a simple guideline, use T-14 for the spey lines of #8 and bigger and use T-8 for the lighter line sizes.

Hopefully, this document will help to give you a better understanding of Rio's spey line assortment and when to use what. If you are still in doubt, or confused, do not hesitate to contact us, either by phone; 208 524 7760, or email; rio@rioproducts.com