

Making sense of Switch rods and lines

THE ROD

Over the past few years there has been a marked change in the sales of Spey rods, and in particular the average length and line size of the Spey rods being sold. In the late 1990's/early 2000's the average length of two-handed rods sold was 14 ft long, and the average line size was a 9 wt. There weren't a lot of sales for these long rods, for the simple reason that these long, powerful rods were just not suitable for the majority of fisheries in the US.

Since those early days rod manufacturers have taken to heart the US fisheries and made shorter and lighter Spey rods – rods more suitable for steelhead, trout, smaller rivers and the average fly fisher and species likely to be caught. Out of this evolution of shorter and lighter Spey rods came the “Switch” rod. Switch rods are typically two-handed rods less than 12ft in length

The idea behind the name “Switch” rod is that an angler can switch between using them two-handed and single-handed, depending on casting skill and fishing situation. To do this they have to be light and relatively short so that the leverage does not work against the single-handed caster. While this name works and has stuck, these rods are best considered as mini Spey rods, with the added advantage of being able to use them single handedly if needed.

A more recent “evolution” is the even lighter sized Switch rods. You can now get these mini two-handed rods in sizes as light as a #1, and with this development these ultra-light two-handed rods have got their own name – “Trout Spey”. Essentially Trout Spey rods are very light Switch rods, so less than 12ft in length, and in more typical trout line sizes – 1wt, 2wt, 3wt, and 4wt.

So why get a Switch, or a Trout Spey rod? Well, they are shorter and lighter than their longer two-handed brethren, so require much less effort and work to use. They balance beautifully in the hand and are extremely nimble and fun to use. They also allow anglers to fish in much tighter casting situations than those longer Spey rods.

As far as comparing their advantages to a regular single-handed rod; being longer they are awesome for controlling the fly's drift and swing through a pool, and fantastic at mending and steering a fly along a seam. You will overhead cast them much further than a regular single-handed rod because of the length of the lever, so are a great choice when fishing in the surf, or on a lake.



Sage's 3wt Trout Spey HD rod – light, balanced and incredibly fun to use

Switch & Trout Spey rods are available in numerous sizes; from as light as a 1wt, to as heavy as a 9wt, and generally vary in length between 10' and 11' 9". The beginner, who is told to get a Switch, or Trout Spey rod, can easily get muddled up as to which size of rod to choose. – basing their choice on the equivalent single-handed rod size. As we will explain shortly, two-handed rods are **NOT** rated by the same line standard as a single-handed rod, so this can be a very big mistake!! Let's start with a simple guideline of rod size choice to fish size chased – which should be your starting point.

- #1 Trout, sea-run cutties – fish up to about 3lbs
- #2 Trout, sea-run cutties – fish up to about 4lbs
- #3 Trout, sea-run cutties – fish up to about 6lbs
- #4 Trout, summer run steelhead, sea-run cutties, sea-run browns – fish up to about 8lbs
- #5 Trout, summer run steelhead, sea-run cutties, sea-run browns – fish up to about 10lbs
- #6 Big trout, steelhead, sea-run cutties, sea-run browns, grilse – fish up to about 12lbs
- #7 Steelhead, Silvers, grilse, sea-run browns, stripers – fish up to about 15lbs
- #8 Steelhead, Kings, Silvers, Atlantic Salmon, stripers – fish up to 20lbs
- #9 Kings, Atlantic Salmon, stripers – fish up to 25lbs

This is no more than a starting point as there are influencing factors that can make you go up (or down) in size. How far you want to cast, how narrow the river is, how overgrown the place you are fishing is, what the water height is, how strong the current is, how big a fly you want to fish, how much wind you have to cope with, or how fast a sink tip you need to cast, are all factors that result in you tweaking the basic guideline.

Assuming none of the above influencing factors are in play, and you have chosen your rod, the next thing is the line, and then the reel.

THE FLY LINE

With a rod chosen all that is left is to match it up with a suitable line. While this sounds simple enough, the plethora of lines that work on these short two-handed rods is mind-numbingly confusing, so this part of the document might be particularly helpful.

Switch rods are rated on the two-handed AFTTA standard, **NOT** the single-handed AFTMA standard. This means they take a very different grain weight of line to a single-handed rod. For example, a #5 single handed rod really works well with around 180 to 200 grains, whereas a #5 Switch rod needs 300 to 330 grains – a big difference. If you put a regular WF5 trout line on a 5wt Switch rod, you can see from this formulation that you would drastically be under-lining the rod, and it would be far too light. A simple rule-of-thumb is to step up 3 line sizes if you have to get a single-handed line. So if you have a 5wt Switch rod, choose an 8wt single-handed line, and you will be relatively close. Better still is to know the grain weights that each of these short two-handed rods load best with and chose the right grain weight. Ideally, choose a line designed for a Switch, or Trout Spey rod, rather than a single-handed trout line.

Here's a grain weight window that you can certainly use as a starting point of what weight of line to get. Again, this is only a guideline and can vary from rod manufacturer to rod manufacturer, from caster to caster, and from situation to situation:

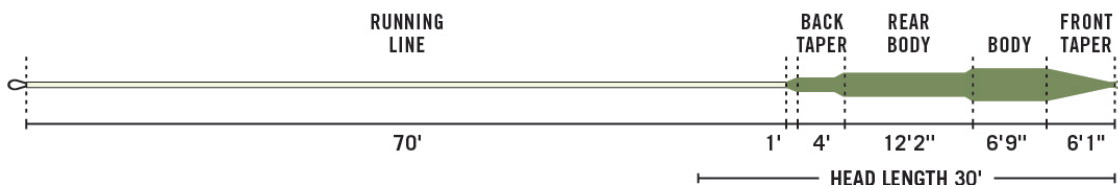
- #1 150 to 200 grains
- #2 200 to 250 grains
- #3 225 to 275 grains
- #4 250 to 325 grains
- #5 300 to 375 grains
- #6 350 to 450 grains
- #7 450 to 525 grains
- #8 475 to 550 grains
- #9 550 to 650 grains

Okay, so there is a good guideline for the weight of the line to go on the rod of choice, now what about the taper or design of the line?

It all depends on what you want to do with the line. The first choice is whether you are going to mostly overhead cast with it, or Spey/roll cast with it – there is a big difference in line type and size depending on the answer to this.

OVERHEAD CASTING

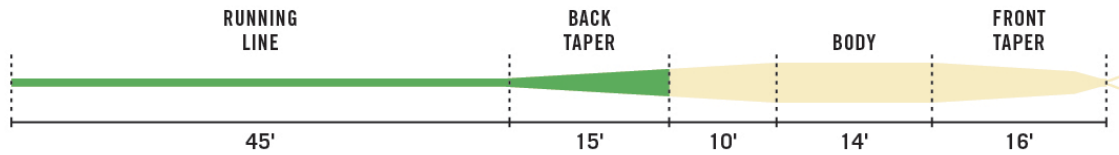
If you are going to mostly overhead cast with a Switch rod, you want to choose a line with more weight at the front end – something that will load the rod up from the first cast, with the minimum amount of line outside the rod. For the majority of overhead casting situations RIO's OutBound Short is going to be the very best choice. It is front loaded, has a short head, and shoots a country mile. Make sure you choose the right grain weight for the Switch rod, based on the chart above. If you put a WF6 OutBound Short on a #6 Switch rod, you will almost certainly be under-loaded by quite a few grains.



OutBound Short

One other option for overhead casting with Switch rods is RIO's InTouch Switch line. This has a much longer head length than the OutBound Short (55 ft as opposed to 30 ft), so is much better for controlling a fly at range and for mending. This line is an excellent choice for anglers looking for a line to throw indicators and nymph/egg pattern rigs, and who want to have control of the fly's drift at long distance. What is slightly confusing is that the Switch line

(like most Spey lines) has a dual number rating (5/6, for example). It is rated on the two-handed AFTTA standard, and for overhead casting go with the last number - so if you have a #6 Switch rod, go with 5/6 line.



InTouch Switch Line

SPEY/ROLL CASTING

When you start looking for a line specifically designed for roll and Spey casting things change. When Spey casting you actually want more weight at the back of the line to help load the rod against the minimal "D-loop".

Generally speaking you want to choose a line that has a head length no longer than 3 times your rod length, as the greater the ratio between rod length and head length, the harder it is to roll/Spey cast with. As the majority of Switch rods and Trout Spey rods are around 11 ft in length, a good starting point is to pick a line with a head length of 33ft, or less.

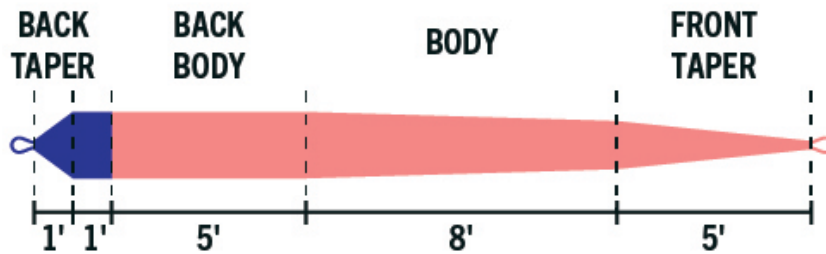
Almost all lines designed for Spey casting fall in to one of two designs - "Skagit" type, or "Scandi" type.

SKAGIT LINES

Skagit lines are short, have thick, heavy front ends and are designed for one thing in particular – casting weight. These lines (most of them are shooting heads, rather than "lines") are perfect for casting fast sinking tips and heavy, or large, flies. The power at the front end is also great for casting in tough wind conditions, and they are VERY easy to cast.

The power of any fly line is calculated (in the simplest way) by dividing the head weight, by the head length to get the average number of grains per foot. The more grains per foot there are in a fly line (particularly at the front of the line), the more "power" it has. For example, if you have a head that weighs 600grains, that is 20ft long, it averages 30 grains per foot. A head that is 600grains, being 30ft long, only has an average of 20 grains per foot. Even though the heads weigh the same, the former one is more powerful. Skagit heads almost invariably have more power than the other "Scandi" type, which is why they are a good choice for big flies, sink tips, strong winds, or for complete novice casters that just want to "chuck it out there".

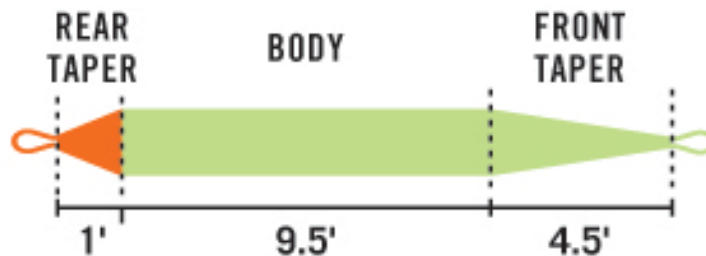
RIO offers two types of Skagit head designs for these shorter two-handed rods. For a true Switch rod, the **Skagit Max Power** is the perfect choice, and varies between 18ft and 20ft in length. When you add a 10ft tip on the front end (which is usual), you get a total length of 30ft or less, which is perfect for these short rods.



SKAGIT MAX POWER

Skagit Trout Spey: For the really light weight Trout Spey rods, a better option is the Skagit Trout Spey. These heads go down in size to cover all the lighter Trout Spey rods sizes on the market, are slightly shorter than the Max Power heads, and available as either a shooting head, or a fully integrated head, with running line. This is a more familiar type of line for trout anglers, as there is no loop-to-loop connection running between the guides when you are retrieving the line close to you – an issue a shooting head, and a shooting line combination most certainly does have.

These heads are also fantastic on single handed rods but remember the “rule of 3” – add 3 line sizes to find the right head for a single handed rod – ie, choose the #2 for a #5 single handed rod, and the #4 for a #7.



SKAGIT TROUT SPEY SHOOTING HEAD



SKAGIT TROUT SPEY INTEGRATED LINE

Pretty well all Skagit heads that are on the market require the addition of some kind of tip to the front end – either sinking or floating to complete them. Also, if they are a shooting head, they won't have a running line, so you need a Shooting Line attached to the rear end to make it a complete, fishable system.

Talking of tips, it is very important that the caster takes into account the length of any tip they add when calculating the head length to rod length ratio. If you have a 25ft head, and a 15ft tip, that totals 40ft, so would be closer to 4:1 ratio on an 11ft rod. If you aim to keep the ratio at 3:1, or less, it will be a lot easier for you to cast.

SCANDI LINES

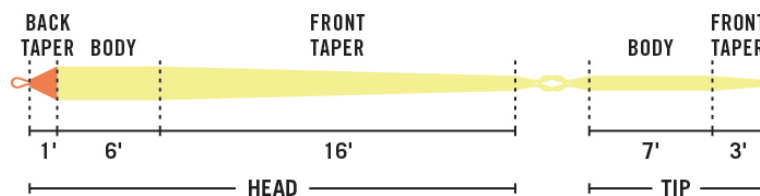
Scandi lines again tend to be shooting heads – meaning the back end still needs to be attached to some kind of shooting line to make it fishable. However, in most cases there is no need to attach a tip to the front end like the Skagit heads require. Scandi lines are built with long front tapers and have most of the weight at the back. This type of design creates the smoothest and tightest of loops and give the very best in presentation. They are really enjoyable and fun to cast, and ideal for fishing regular size flies. While you cannot add a sink tip to **most** Scandi heads (not enough grains per foot at the front), you can certainly add sinking (and floating) VersiLeaders to such Scandi heads and use these to control the depth.

However, as with the Skagit heads, try and keep the 3:1 ratio rule in mind. If you buy a 30ft Scandi head, and add a 10ft VersiLeader, you have 40ft, which is a bit long for most people on these shorter two-handed rods.

RIO offers a couple of Scandi head designs for the Switch rod user. The “**Scandi Short**” is a series of full floating heads that are 28 – 34 ft, and ideal for most Switch rods. For a bit more versatility the **Scandi Short VersiTip** is a fantastic option. It has a short body, and a selection of 4 different density, 10ft long tips, so that anglers are covered in almost any fishing situation they come across. The entire head length (with tips attached) is only 33ft, so perfect for that 3:1 ratio.



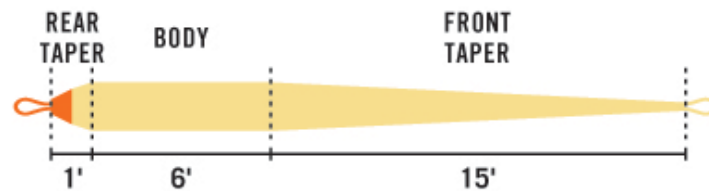
RIO Scandi Short



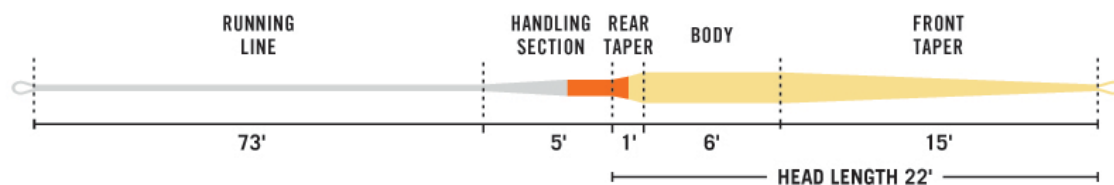
Scandi Short VersiTip

The real selling point of the Scandi Short VersiTip is the versatility of it. If you attach one of the supplied 10 ft tips, it is a beautiful and easy casting Scandi head. If you don't attach the supplied tips, the 23 ft body is a great Skagit head that can handle the heavier fast sinking tips (such as the MOW tips) as needed.

For the Trout Spey user, you will want something shorter and lighter than the Scandi Short series, and as with the Skagit Trout Spey options, you can get Scandi style heads called **Trout Spey** in both a shooting head, and integrated options.



TROUT SPEY SHOOTING HEAD



TROUT SPEY INTEGRATED LINE

SWITCH LINE (again)

The InTouch Switch line was last mentioned in the overhead casting section as a great line for overhead casting, and for fishing indicator rigs. This also would be a good choice of line for anglers who wish to Spey cast with indicator rigs. It has been designed with a long head that is great for mending and controlling the fly at range and is an easy choice for anglers who are going to combine overhead and Spey techniques when fishing such rigs. It isn't the best choice of line for *just* overhead casting, or *just* Spey casting, but does a pretty good job at both. In the piece on overhead casting (above) we recommended using the last number of the two number digit, but as you need more weight when Spey/Roll casting than you do for overhead casting, if you are choosing this line for mostly Spey casting, use the first number - so if you have a #6 Switch rod, go with a 6/7 line.

SWITCH CHUCKER

A final line to mention for this kind of rod is RIO's "Switch Chucker". This is an integrated line (needs no additional shooting line) that has a short, very powerful head. The short head makes this a fantastic line choice for smaller rivers, for fishing tight to obstructions, and just for being really easy to cast. The powerful front end easily throws any kind of indicator and nymph/egg pattern rig, as well as a multitude of sinking tips, and is essentially an

integrated Skagit type of line. You can add a tip, or you don't have to, but if you do, again, make sure you stick to the 3:1 ratio. With a 25ft head, you can't put any long tips on, and expect this to cast easily.



SUMMARY

So, there are a lot of words prior to this part, and for those who like “details” it is worth reading through them, but if you just want a simple summary of the benefits of each line for Switch rods, this is the part to go to.

- Spey fishing almost exclusively with heavy sink tips and large flies – Skagit Max Power or Skagit Trout Spey
- Fishing indicator rigs with nymph/egg patterns at distance– Switch line
- Fishing indicators rigs and sink tips, and just being “easy” – Switch Chucker
- Everything else Spey – Scandi Short, Scandi Short VersiTip, or Trout Spey
- Overhead casting in the surf, or on a lake for maximum distance – OutBound Short

TIPS

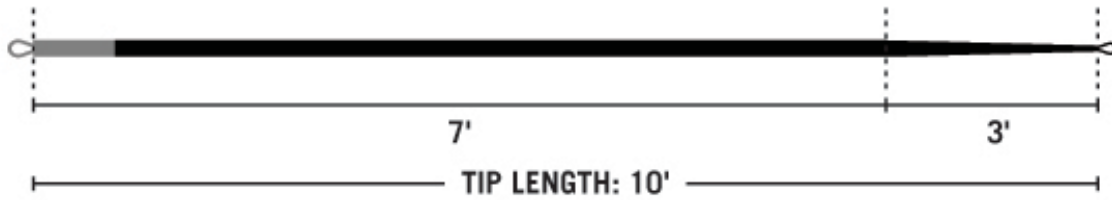
There are quite an array of tips you can choose from to put on the line you end up buying. Not all lines need tips, of course, and you could quite easily get a Scandi type line, or a Switch line, attach your regular leader to it and fish on. Many times, however, a tip is essential – swinging soft hackles and swinging/stripping streamers in particular.

The tip should reflect the head, so if you choose a powerful head, like a Skagit head, you will need a powerful tip, and the perfect accompaniment to any of the Skagit heads is either a “MOW” tip, or a “Level T” tip. These tips don't have any taper, so the grains per foot stay the same along the length. More grains per foot, means more powerful of a tip, which makes casting heavy streamers and flies easy.



MOW/LEVEL T TIP

The lack of taper on the aforementioned tips mean you don't get great presentation, and they tend to dump and kick when used with small flies, so for more normal sized/weight of flies, avoid these kinds of tips and look for tips that have tapers – probably the best of which is RIO's 10ft "Replacement" Tip.



Again, make sure you take into account the length of tip you are adding to your line and try and avoid the total length exceeding the 3:1 ratio.

Another thing to consider is that the tip you add can't be too heavy for the front of the line you are attaching it to. Going back to the grains per foot conversation, if the front of your Scandi head (for example) weighted 7 grains per foot, you cant put a tip on that has the back end weighing 14 grains per foot. Try and put on a tip that is equal in weight to the front of the head/line you are attaching it to.

The final tip option is called a **VersiLeader**, which is really a sinking leader, not so much a sinking tip. Like Replacement tips, they are tapered, come in a variety of different sinking rates, and a variety of lengths. The main downside with them is that there is no coating at the front of the leader, which means it has the least mass/power of any sinking tip, so they really struggle with any size of fly, or in a wind. They are good for a temporary fix, when you just need to put something on to get a small fly deeper, but generally you will fare better if you can find a sink tip that works, over a VersiLeader.

THE REEL

We'll finish this document with a brief piece of advice on the right type of reel to pick. As the rods are longer than the standard trout/saltwater rods, they need a heavier reel for counterbalance. This is simply achieved by following the rule of 3 again. For a 5wt Switch rod, get an 8wt reel, and for a 2wt Trout Spey rod, get a 5wt reel.

Hopefully, this information will help you gain you a better understanding of Switch rods and lines and when to use what. If you are still in doubt, or confused, do not hesitate to contact us, either by phone; 800 553 0838, or email; cs@rioproducts.com.