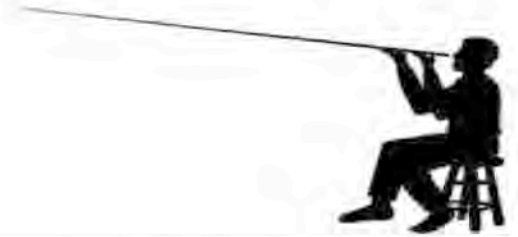


Snake Skin Inlays

by Pat Vinzant



Custom Rod Builders Guild

The first snakeskin inlay I ever saw was on a custom rod that Fuzz Morgan had made for his grandson. Prior to that I had seen snake skins on belts, belt buckles, boots, hat bands, wallets etc, but never on a custom rod. Although I'm not a snake lover I did like the way their skins looked on custom rods. Perhaps it was because of the diamond pattern on rattlesnake skins.

My search for snake skins that would meet the requirements for inlaying on rods began. Because the diameter of rods have been reduced significantly it was necessary to find skins that were small enough so the diamonds or design was visible on the top side of the rod with out wrapping completely around the rod.

Very soon I discovered that a rattlesnake skin was generally wide enough to wrap around your arm. Also that dried snake skins become stiff and the scales curled much like fish scales do when dry. I did find some very nice tanned skins but they were far too expensive for my use (experiment).

Each year there is a rattlesnake roundup at Opp, Alabama. My wife, Leona and I headed for Opp to look for rattlesnake skins. It took sometime, but eventually we found a vendor who sold tanned snake skins. He had a huge plastic box with hundreds of skins. He told us to pick out what we wanted. Right away I realized that I had finally found what I was looking for. (Small skins, with beautiful patterns, no scales). I told Leona that I bet she never thought she would be back of a tent in Opp, Alabama, sorting snake skins. Never received a reply, but she convinced me to buy two cobra skins that later I found make beautiful inlays on graphite tube handles. We ended up buying 5 rattlesnake and 2 cobra skins at a very reasonable price.

My first attempt in applying a snakeskin to a rod blank was an absolute disaster! All of the problems stemmed from the type of adhesives I was attempting to use and the fact that the skins have a lot and I mean a lot of stretch, and this distorts the diamond pattern you are attempting to display if they are not applied with even pressure. After many failures I discovered that U-40 Color lock 2, was the correct adhesive to use. Latter in this article I will explain how to apply color lock..

One of my other problems was how to wrap the skin around the rod blank and be able to create a near seamless connection on the back side of the rod. Fortunately, this was one problem that was easily accomplished. The procedure for doing this will also be covered in the how to portion of this article.

The first few rods that I had put snake skin inlays on, I took to the annual big "Duck River Bash" at Custom Tackle Supply, Shelbyville, TN. If you have never been to one of the great events you have missed an opportunity for a superb party combined with sharing ideas with some of the best rod builders in the world. Also fishing the Duck River is great, even if you don't catch one of those bad small mouths. There were a number of ladies at Duck River. I found that almost every lady loved the snake skin rods, but only about 50 percent of the gentleman expressed an opinion. It appeared the gentleman either liked the inlays or really didn't care one way or another. I did find that gentleman wearing snake skin or lizard cowboy boots loved the snake skin rods!

Well this sort of covers how I got into applying snake skin inlays to custom rods. The remaining part of this article will be dedicated to the steps necessary to apply them to your custom rods.

The retail sources that offer good tanned snake skins at a reasonable price are limited. I buy mine from a young man named Dwayne that operates "Skin Shop USA" phone number 1-800-544-0793. The following picture shows the different skins (some dyed in different colors) that are available.



Step 1. Rod Preparation: Scuff the location where the inlay is to be applied with Scotch Bright. Determine the length of the inlay. Wrap the beginning and end parameters with masking tape and mark the 0 and 180 degree axis on both. This will provide the capability to align the pattern just like you would do when you do a diamond or chevron thread wrap.



Step 2. Cut Skin to size. Place the skin on the rod and determine the best place where the best design can be achieved. Take measurements then cut the skin a little larger than required.



Step 3. Apply color preserver to rod blank and the back side of the skin. Then place the skin on the 0 degree center line aligning the center of the pattern to the marks on the masking tape. Smooth the skin with your fingers then roll the rod and smooth the skin to the 180 degree location. Repeat this process for the other side of the skin so both sides end at the 180 degree location. If the skin has any wrinkles, pull loose and smooth again. Be careful not to stretch the skin so much that it distorts the pattern. In the event the color preserver becomes too dry, apply more to allow movement of the skin.



Step 4. Create near seamless connection. At the 180 degree axis (back side of the inlay) over lap the skin making sure it is glued down with color preserver. Tape a small metal ruler to the rod blank that is aligned with the centerline marks on the masking tape. Use a new razor blade to cut along the ruler to slice through two layers of the skin. Be careful, the skin cuts very easy so not much pressure is required. Avoid excessive pressure to avoid damaging the rod.



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Step 5. Remove under layer of skin. When the skin is cut in step 4, it leaves a small piece of skin underneath the top skin. This is easily removed by lifting the top skin and pulling the skin underneath from the rod. When the skin is removed, apply more color preserver and close the seam by pushing both sides together.



Step 6. Square ends of inlay. Wrap masking tape around each end of the inlay to square the ends. Use a razor blade to trim the ends of the skin following the masking tape as a guide. Again, be careful, the skin cuts very easy so only a little pressure is required.



Step 7. Finish. Apply at least two coats of color preserver to the inlay. Make sure each end is completely sealed. If the snake skin inlay is not completely sealed when finish is applied, it will wick into the inlay and create very ugly black spots and streaks!

The following are pictures of the completed inlay without finish. While I was doing this inlay I decided to include a matching inlay on the handle.

