

Pushing the Envelope - The Orvis Helios Reviewed!

Review by Joe Cornwall, Photographs by Jim Stuard



In Greek mythology Helios was imagined as a handsome god crowned with the shining aura of the sun, who drove a chariot across the sky each day and returned to the East at night. From Helios we get helium, a name coined from the Greek helios because the element was observed in the solar spectrum during an eclipse in 1868. NASA thinks of Helios as a unique electrically powered experimental lightweight flying wing. Orvis has introduced Helios as "the lightest fly rod in the industry." Why making a fly rod lighter – they're already a pretty easy load – should be such a tantalizing goal has always escaped me. Because of that, I entered this review with more than a fair amount of skepticism. I mean how can a rod that weighs 2 ¾ ounce possibly be that much different that one that weighs 4 ¼ ounces but is the same length and has nearly the same action?

The technology of the Helios is similar to that of the Zero Gravity, but taken to an extreme. You may recall, from our review of the Zero Gravity Anniversary Rod, that it's built using technology developed for attack-helicopter blades.

If you're chasing big carp on Lake Michigan flats, or fat shad on the Delaware, this could be your rod. If you're chasing Ohio River wipers or Rhode Island schoolies, this could be your rod. If you're swinging big streamers for monster browns or shooting at tailing reds, this could be your rod! **It's a specialized tool**.



Orvis uses high temperature thermoplastic resins to encase graphite fibers and eliminate any fiberglass or graphite cross-scrim. In essence, Orvis has found a way to remove mass while simultaneously increasing bulk modulus and decreasing elastic modulus. An easier way to think of it is that they made the rod hold its shape better while it bends, and return to an unbent condition more quickly. The practical result is an amazingly fast recovery from flex and a very, very efficient delivery of casting power. The Zero Gravity is an impressive casting tool.

Orvis says "Building upon our Zero Gravity's exclusive thermoplastic resin technology, which is stronger and lighter than the epoxy resins used to make traditional fly rods, the designers found an exciting new scrim in the space satellite industry. This unidirec-

tional graphite scrim with a thermoplastic binder gives us the same strength in our rods, but uses much less material. We reduced the weight on our new Helios blanks by 25% less than our already lightweight Zero Gravity blanks." So they made a Zero Gravity on a diet? Again the question of weight. Can the loss of 1 3/8 ounce really make a tangible difference?



I fished the 906-4 Helios with an Orvis Mach IV reel and several different 6-weight lines. It felt a bit lighter in the hand that my TLS 904-6, and significantly lighter than any glass rods I own. It didn't seem like the weight could matter, though. We're talking about less than the weight of my wrist watch! A few casts had me pleasantly surprised. The rod actually did feel like a 4-weight in my hands! Double hauling and firing booming casts was fun, not work. The Helios is definitely the exotic sports car of the fly rod world. It's faster to accelerate, faster to stop and faster to respond to slight casting corrections than any rod I've used.

It turns out it's not the weight (in my opinion). The weight is a nice, easy to read number, but the actual break-through with the Helios is much more difficult to describe. It doesn't feel so much light to me as loss-

less. No energy is absorbed by the rod. Everything goes to the line, and from there things happen much more quickly. The weight is a marketing hook. The magic is the technology. The pay-off is efficiency.

One cannot approach an evaluation of this rod without addressing price. The suggested retail price point of the Orvis Helios ranges from \$755 to \$775, depending on size. It is, currently, the most expensive production fly rod in its class. In looking at historical rod sales we find there are rods that have hit this lofty height in the past. In 1954 Shakespeare sold the No. 1295 "Presentation" Wonderod for \$150.00. That's about \$1,125 in today's dollars, when compared using CPI correction. In the mid 1950's Silaflex fielded a Presentation Grade Medallion rod that had a catalog list price of \$225, or roughly \$1350 today.

In production rods, the competition doesn't range quite as high. A top-of-the-line Wulff rod from Garcia cost \$179 in 1971. That's \$890 today. The Silaflex Medallion sold for \$75 in 1952 and the Phillipson Premium, sold for \$75 in 1951.



Both of these rods approach \$600 in today's currency. While Orvis has hit a rarefied price point for a fly rod, they aren't the first to get there and they aren't alone. I think it's safe to say that each of these products set a standard for performance, innovation and quality in their time.

I'll come right out and say it. I took the Orvis Helios out on the water not wanting to like it. I had a preformed expectation that I'd find it to be a tapered graphite and thermoplastic wand differentiated from its own siblings only by marketing hype and price. A fast rod is a fast rod is a fast rod. Perhaps at this point I should repeat the words of author Paul Graham; "For [a product] to surprise me, it must be satisfying expectations I didn't know I had. No focus group is going to discover those. Only a great designer can." The designer of the Orvis Helios did that. "The new Helios saltwater fly rod is so far ahead of all other fly rods it skips generations in how a fly rod should feel, cast, and fish. It is so sublimely light, incredibly responsive, deadly accurate, and just plain easy and enjoyable to cast that to compare it to other graphite rods is like comparing graphite to bamboo." There's more than a bit of marketing hyperbole in that sentence, but there's truth, too. At least when compared with Orvis' own previous offerings this rod *does* provide an increase in tangible performance. It feels lighter, it casts faster and it's deadly accurate. A fast 6-weight designed for "light duty bonefish, warmwater bass, schoolie stripers and small steelhead", the Helios I tested is a fabulous tool for firing size 8 to 2 flies of limited air resistance to precise targets under windy, demanding conditions. It felt at its best with a goodly hunk of line in the air - no in-close fishing feel here. I think I might drop the suggestion that this is a warmwater bass rod. It isn't, at least in any of the ponds or rivers where I fish. It's probably well suited for bassers on large flows like the Susquehanna or Columbia, though. But the soul of this fishing rod is a cannon. It's about speed, distance and target shooting.

This is a rod that demands a lightweight reel to keep from feeling tip-light. Large arbor reels, like Orvis' own Mach III are just the slightest bit overweight. Not displeasingly so, but with the reel mounted and the line strung the rod canted up about 30 degrees in my hand with the pivot point being my casting finger while holding the rod with a proper grip. Use caution if you opt for a heavier or larger reel. Most premium state-of-the-art designs in an appropriate size will work. I don't expect to see too many Helios rods mated with a classic or entry-level reels. If you're buying hot horsepower you're spending money on the good tires, too.

The Orvis Saltwater 906-4 Helios is a fine, fine fly rod. It's perfectly suited for the applications Orvis recommends. If you're chasing big carp on Lake Michigan flats, or fat shad on the Delaware, this could be *your* rod. If you're chasing Ohio River wipers or Rhode Island schoolies, this could be *your* rod. If you're swinging big streamers for monster browns or shooting at tailing reds, this could be *your* rod. It's a specialized tool. If you regularly fish in situations that require long, accurate casts under demanding conditions you might even find this rod to be a good value. After all, a great tool is never cheap.



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