

## DELAWARE RIVER RAPIDS SHAD

by Brian M. Wiprud

As a trout-schooled fly rodder, I'm convinced there's a reason shad take a fly, however, I have yet to construct any comprehensive theory as to what a shad fly is supposed to imitate. No one has all the answers, but after hundreds of hours of successfully fishing Delaware River rapids, I've been able to observe some aspects of shad behavior which are as interesting as they are useful for catching shad.

First, some quick facts about shad. Each spring, they swim from the ocean up rivers in large groups to spawn. Some make a return trip; most don't. Bucks (two to three pounds plus) come up river earlier in the season and are more prone to jump. Roe (three to eight pounds plus) follow the males upstream and tend to stay deeper in the river. In heavy flood conditions they tend to run along shore, but otherwise they prefer deep channeled water.

When fishing for shad in the large pools, you need distance and depth to cover the channels through which the shad move. The fly rodder is afforded a more interesting field of play in the

rapids, where moving shad are shallow, often visible, and thus targeted more precisely. The part of the rapid of particular interest is the tail end, where pocketwater gives way to channels, and the channels drop off into pools below.

Before moving up the rapids, shad will congregate in the pool below and wait for the school to enlarge. Without being shoved from behind, they usually won't move. As the school grows, they come up the rapids in bursts. When there are a particularly large number of shad, fish will move in a continuous stream into the rapids via a main tailrace or channel. Sometimes the school is so large that the shad spill over into smaller side channels.

When moving from the pool toward the rapid, they stage en masse between the dropoff into the pool and the fast water at a channel. As the school approaches the point where they funnel into a channel, the fish often break the surface—leaping, finning, porpoising, and tailing. Look for gangs of pointy black fins that are quite like those of schooling bonefish. Another sign of staging is the flashing of their chrome sides showing deep in the water. This staging activity can last for up to a half hour.

When you first set up on a rapid with rod in hand, try to get an elevated look at the river, note the terrain, and sight in on specific eddies or rocks where the pool and channels seem to begin. Wading is often the best vantage by which to see the flash of passing shad moving through channels. Make a mental map of possible shad migration routes and holding water.

Casting location and the right drift are the keys to success. An essential part of fishing rapids for shad is being able to locate the channels and to find holding spots from past visits. Try to employ a combination of shore points to triangulate your position in the river, and use a larger submerged rock to find that exact position again. Be advised that water levels vary day to day on the Delaware, and becoming familiar with the rock configuration in a particular rapid will help you locate your position relative to the channels and dropoffs under changing conditions.

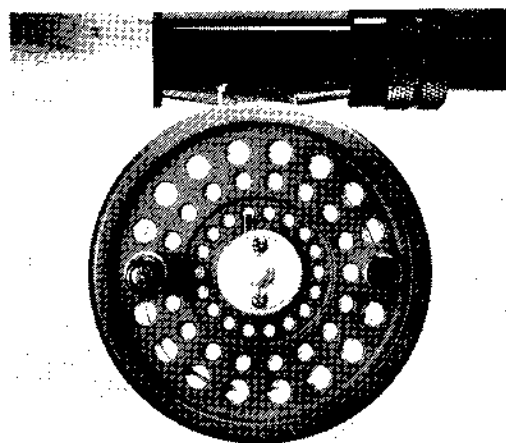
Presentation should be such that the fly swings across the shad's path in a semi-dead drift; which means keeping a good pull on the fly but not dragging it too fast. It's rarely the case that you fish to a specific fish so much as target the seam in the current through which they travel. The fly should be at the fish's level, so cast well upstream of where you expect the fly to cross the path of the fish. Shad are more apt to scoop up the fly than rise to it, and the strike is usually hard. Productive spots in the flow tend to be right where the fish funnel into a channel, but seams on either side of the channel upstream can be equally productive.

Shad hooked in a rapids channel are apt to press upstream or across stream, and they often jump. With their broad, muscular sides, the fight often requires the angler to wade to shore in order to net his catch. The other option is to use an eddy, ideally getting the shad upstream before netting, although a well-hooked and exhausted fish can be dragged to net from downstream.

Staging fish and shad holding in pools are also susceptible to the fly. Dead drift the fly to the lip of the pool. Dancing the fly sometimes encourages a strike, and it's often useful to experiment with added weight and heavier flies to find the fish. Don't hesitate to let the fly drift directly downstream at the edge of a pool and sink.

Prevailing weather conditions often have little to do with the best days. Records I've kept over the years show that the only correlation between shad

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