



Going to the Mat with Shad

by Vic Attardo

Remember the Florida Marlins of the mid-1990s? They rocketed from last place to the World Championship in one year. That's nice to think about, because then there's precedence for this season's shad fishing.

After an utterly abysmal spring in 1999, perhaps there's hope in the new millennium. Then again, after the Marlins won the championship, they bottomed out the following year.

Though water conditions were very good, about the only people who were happy with last season's shad fishing were the few anglers who squeaked out tournament wins with lightweight fish. When a six-pound shad wins the famous Forks of the Delaware Tournament in Easton, you know something's wrong.

For a few years now, the tournament winners have been getting lighter and lighter. Gone are the heady days of the early 1990s when it took an eight-pounder to garner top money. Last spring, even five-pound shad were winning daily prizes. Personally, for the first time in about 10 years, I didn't catch at least a six-pound fish.

Last May, during the season of our discontent, Fish & Boat Commission Fisheries Biologist Dave Miko told me a woeful tale. Each year the biologists are assigned the task of acquiring 30 shad per week for five weeks for the Commission's studies. Normally it takes just a couple of hours one day a week for the shad to be electrofished and netted. But when I talked to Miko, he told me the task had required nearly a full day each week to collect 30 shad.

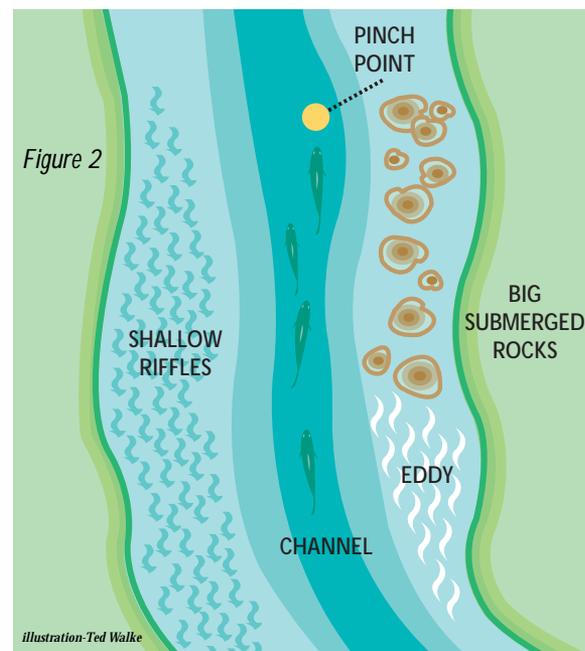
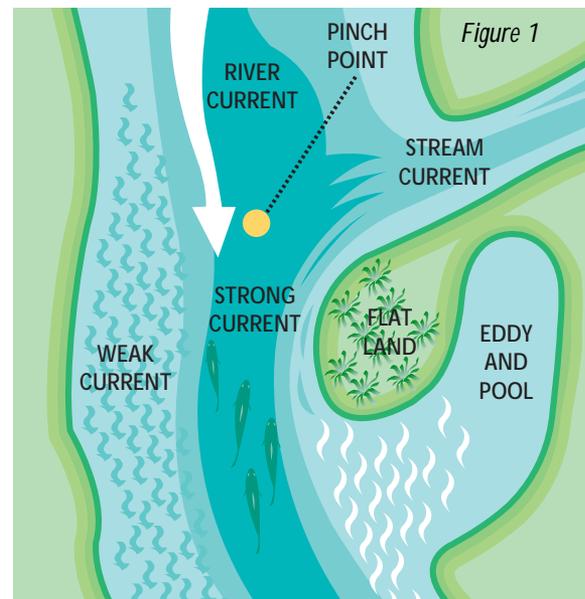
"There were no large pods of shad," Miko said. "Only two or three fish in a pod and the pods were separated by more than a quarter-mile."

What the biologists discovered equaled the experience of the Delaware's best shad anglers.

But when pondering the future, let's not get too discouraged. I remember 1995 was a rotten year. Then the following year most anglers had a good spring, with another three years of fine fishing after that.

Lessons

When fishing for shad this season, extraordinary care may be needed in setting your anchor and laying your lines. Putting darts and flutterpoons on the money is always important when pursuing shad. But it becomes doubly important when there are fewer fish in the river. Sometimes you have to pin them to the mat.



The shad anglers who were even moderately successful last season were often those who got away from the crowds—what little crowds there were—and fished exceptional spots. Since the pods were small and far apart, hardly anyone was catching them across the river's wide field. To get a few shad, you had to narrow the zone. Successful anglers found what are called "pinch points"—places where most shad will run to continue their upstream migration.

A "pinch point" is not a single type of structure. In fact, the term encompasses a wide variety of river formations. A pinch point may be a twist in the channel, a narrowing at the head of a riffle, a collection of large rocks forming a maze, and even a spinning current around a bridge abutment. It can be all these things and more.

Last season, my shad partner Ken Koury and I tried a number of spots early in the season and then ended up sticking to one pinch point like glue. It paid off—at least better than a lot of other strategies.

The site was around Riegelsville where a New Jersey stream entered the Delaware. The flow from the stream created a shallow point out from the main shoreline and a deep eddy behind the point. Along the landed extension, the stream pressed the river in a moderately flowing riffle and narrow channel (see Figure 1). Away from the channel the main body of the river flattened out. We discovered the spot a few years ago and knew the shad had to run the pinch point between the shoal and the flat river. We had great confidence in the site.

Nevertheless, we had to work for our shad. On our best day in early May, Koury, a guest Phil Falato and I landed 14 fish. Last year, on about the same date, we had over 35. Still, the pinch point was the key.

In previous years, Koury and I set up above Easton near the head of a riffle. At this spot the river makes a little jog to the left around some boulders (see Figure 2). The trick is to anchor well above the rocks and let the flutter spoons dance around the obstructions.

Because anchoring in the heavy flow is difficult, it isn't a good spot to lower the downrigger. Frankly, we fear that the anchor might get loose and we'd lose the cannonballs. Our game then is flatlining.

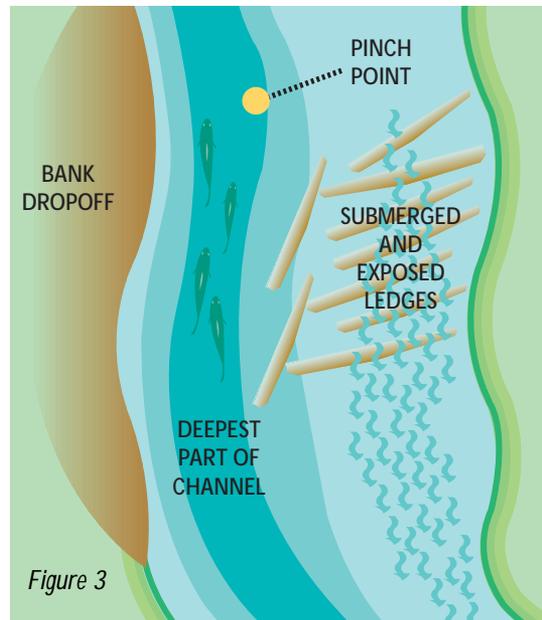


Figure 3

points. It was a bright, late-April day with water temperature climbing from 53 degrees in the morning to 55 degrees by mid-afternoon. Unfortunately, the river had risen eight inches as a result of an all-day soaker two days before our outing. With the conditions and the type of year we were having, fishing wasn't easy.

Magaro was working his fireman's hat off to get us shad, but the strikes were few and far between. After a time, Pappy moved to a difficult pinch point below a railroad bridge. We set our downriggers and within a few minutes took a shad. We quickly got another hit and big smiles appeared on our faces. But after the second fish, we lost anchor in the high flow and not for love or shad darts could we reposition ourselves at the right pinch point. Because of this, we didn't get any more fish from that spot.

Shad from shore

Pinch points are an applicable concept for taking shad from shore as well as a boat. Up above the Delaware Water Gap I know a place where the channel runs close to a series of ledges seemingly out in the middle of the river (see Figure 3). Barring any mid-May rains, I can walk to the ledges barely getting my knees wet. Though the rocks are extremely slippery, they offer a casting platform to the channel. There are actually quite a few places like these between the Gap and Port Jervis, and the lesson is applicable throughout.

In years with good shad, I stand on the rocks, cast across the river beyond the other side of the channel, and let my darts transcribe an arc through the bottom of the channel.

"Pinch points" are places where most shad must swim to continue their upstream migration.

Some years I get hits across the whole width of the current, but the majority of strikes come tight to the ledges on the inside wall of the trough.

Last season, I hardly got a hit at this spot as the dart swung in the current. The few that I did get came close to the ledge at the most defined pinch point at the site.

Growing weary of the fruitless casting across the channel, I rigged a 10-foot noodle rod with a $\frac{3}{4}$ -ounce bell sinker and put a flutter spoon on a dropper about three feet above the weight. The rig cast ugly, but on a 45-degree angle to the bottom, I was able to keep the spoon in place on a tight line. For self-amusement, I'd twitch the limber tip of the noodle rod ever so slightly, not letting any slack develop that might pick up the sinker and take it off station. In effect, I had a mini-downrigger.

In a couple of hours one day I was able to pick up a few shad with this silly looking outfit. Anglers above and below me on the ledges working darts across the width of the channel had little to show for their efforts. If someone had anchored in the same spot, they might have taken these shad. But since the small pods were tightly confined against the ledges, the wide casting sweep went unrewarded. Pinch points.

Tales from the thermometer

Other factors in addition to pinch points helped us during the pitiful 1999 season. One of the most important was water temperature.

When fishing is bad, you don't feel like putting a whole day into the effort. But as shad anglers, we're conditioned to get to the water before dawn and stay until the last light of day. That got awfully weary last season, as it became clear it was not a banner year.

I've drummed it into my head that decent shad angling is not going to begin until the water temperature reaches at least 50 degrees. I'm so confident with that mark that by 52 degrees I start looking for other reasons if I'm not catching fish.

What I learned last year was that 50 degrees is a good starting point. But now I think there's a sort of "shared aggression" between shad that improves the chances of getting a strike.

By the last few days of April, we had water temps in the lower 50s, but often the pods of fish went by without hitting. As the water temp around Easton got in the mid-50s in the first week of May, the shared aggression became more intense and we had a few decent bites. I now believe that the aggressive nature of the fish is more intense when there are larger numbers of fish in a pod.



Last year I stopped going down to the water at first light but instead waited for the sun to push the water temperature up a few degrees, at least into the mid-50s. I talked to fellow anglers and they were not doing well in the morning. But as the river warmed a few degrees during the day, we got a few afternoon flurries. On the other hand, when the sun was on its way down again, the bite stopped. I don't think I had a good evening bite from late April through mid-May.

As a result, I'm beginning to think that good shad fishing is not only a case of water temperature but also a case of monkey-see, monkey-do, "shared aggression," if you will. One striking shad provokes, or interests, another shad into striking. Even with the small numbers of fish, we still had a few doubles in the boat last year. But, unlike the year before, we had no triples.

Turn off the TV

Here's another shocking statement about the 1999 season, and one that may address all those blips you're seeing on your sonar screen. I've long held that most of those dots swimming across the view screen are not American shad. And what the biologist discovered last year proved it.

It so happens that in the Fish & Boat Commission's shad electrofishing, a lot of the fish they caught swimming along weren't shad at all. Miko reported that for every one or two American shad captured from a pod, there were three or four gizzard shad in the school. Also in late April they had large numbers of quillbacks moving with the shad, and at other times, astounding numbers of white suckers. All spring the river was alive with schools of shad-sized fish, but few of them were American shad.

In mid-June I observed biologists from the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences electrofishing the middle Delaware. The number of big gizzard shad and quillbacks was amazing. Ironically, we also found some pockets of male American shads still hanging around the middle river. I don't know what it all means, but I know it's fascinating.

If the Delaware's shad are in a decline, then it is important to release correctly the fish you don't need. Use barbless hooks and when removing the hook, grasp the shad over its back, behind the gills. Don't put your fingers into the gills unless you intend to keep the fish. A bleeding shad is a dead shad.

All fish populations are cyclical. You get good years and bad. I know I've had poor years followed by a bunch of great ones. Let's hope that tendency continues. ☐