

# Claim a Waterway, Share Your Know-How



by Art Michaels  
*photos by the author*

*George Magaro (left) instructs Ron Kuhn on some of the finer points of shad fishing.*

I know residents of Pittsburgh and Johnstown who regularly fish Lake Erie. I also know Philadelphia-area residents who frequent Pocono Mountains trout streams. Fishing trip after fishing trip, year after year, these anglers have learned a waterway's secrets. They have claimed those waterways and their quarries as their own. And part of that silent declaration includes the joy and wonder of sharing their knowledge and delight with

others. So I, central Pennsylvania resident, claim the Delaware River and its shad fishing as my own.

The Delaware River and I were no strangers. Even though I hadn't discovered its shad, as a high schooler in New Jersey, the inviting Delaware and its good fishing were an hour's drive from home. Later, as a college graduate and then a new teacher in New York's Catskill Mountains, I visited the Delaware's Wayne County

portion. I fished exclusively with a fly rod then, and I caught some fine smallmouth bass and trout. After short stints in Chicago and suburban Washington, DC, I moved to central Pennsylvania.

When friends introduced me to the Delaware River's shad in Pike, Monroe, Northampton and Bucks counties, my attraction to Delaware River shad fishing began.

During some 20 years, thanks to my mentors, I practiced shad angling's varied techniques, including shore fishing, trolling, deadsticking and downrigging. Furthermore, my writing and photography on shad fishing enriched my understanding of the sport's theory and practice by forcing me to explain strategies so that others could understand them.

Accompanied by colleagues and friends, I took special satisfaction in introducing my father to shad fishing. How delightful it was to teach the person who taught me: Some of my earliest memories include my father's

## Shad Fishing Methods

### Trolling

**This fishing method moves lures across pools above rapids and other likely shad spots when action is slow or when you want to locate fish for downrigging or deadsticking. Troll at your engine's slowest speeds.**

### Deadsticking

**Anglers rig shad darts and other lures with splitshot about 18 to 24 inches above the lure. Flutterspoons are rigged with splitshot at the end of a 3-foot or 4-foot leader. The rig is cast downstream about 5 to 20 yards from an anchored boat, and the rod then rests in a rod holder until a shad strikes. Anglers sometimes lightly jig, or twitch, a deadsticked outfit to entice strikes.**

### Downrigging

**From an anchored boat, downrigging allows placing lures precisely at any depth. Precision in placing lures increases when downrigging is used in combination with a depth sounder.**

### Shore fishing

**From shore, or by wading into the water, anglers cast lures and reel them in over likely areas. Shore anglers use spinning tackle or fly rods. Fishing from shore can be productive in selected spots where fish congregate, in pools during spawning, or when high water and prudence keep boaters off the river. Do not wade in dangerously high water.**



teaching my brother and me to fish. Add enthusiasm to basic know-how and you have all you need to succeed on your claimed waterway and share that success with others.

Last season I introduced another colleague and friend to the Delaware's shad, Fish & Boat Commission artist/illustrator Ron Kuhn.

"The channel edge is the key," I said. We were driving east on I-78 to our Delaware River rendezvous with one of my shad mentors, George "Pappy" Magaro. "As they swim upriver, they're usually not in the channel, and they're not outside the current flow, either. Find the edge of the channel and you'll find migrating fish."

"In low water and high water?" Ron asked.

The conversation continued after making introductions and boarding George's boat. "In high water they'll still be on the edges, and that means almost hugging the shoreline

## Shad Tackle

### Rods, reels

For most shad fishing, choose a graphite medium-fast-action rod of 6.5 to 7.5 feet with a strong butt section and a reel that holds 200 yards of clear or low-visibility green 6-pound-test line. Shorter spinning outfits work, but the longer rods let you achieve longer casts and force the fish to fight the rod more than your arm. Make sure your reel has a smooth drag. Noodle rods of 10 to 12 feet with 4-pound-test or 2-pound-test line are also popular. Fly-rod outfits of 8 to 9 feet with extra fast-sinking 7-, 8- or 9-weight lines also work well.

### Lures

Boat and shore anglers with spinning tackle choose mainly flutterspoons; shad darts of about 1/32-ounce to 1/4-ounce; and gold spinners in blade sizes 0, 1 and 2. To increase casting distance, shore anglers choose heavier darts of 1/8-ounce to 1/4-ounce.

The variety of color combinations for shad darts and flutterspoons is astounding, and all catch fish sometime, depending on water conditions and clarity.

### Other items

For fishing from a boat, you need the sturdiest, adjustable longest-handled net you can find. You also need an appropriately sized and styled anchor with plenty of line and sturdy connecting hardware for the Delaware's swift, deep flow. Wear your life jacket at all times aboard your boat and while wading. For wading, add a wading stick to your usual gear. No matter how you fish, use a hook sharpener often.



*Shad darts (upper right) and flutterspoons are today's shad anglers' main offerings.*

in some cases," I said. George maneuvered the boat exactly into place. "In low water you have to place your lures closer to the flow, and sometimes that means in the middle of the channel flow." George anchored the boat, and I pointed to the channel edge. "See that line where the bubbly water meets the smoother water?" I asked. Ron nodded. George's tacit approval showed that I had learned these lessons satisfactorily. "That's where we'll place our lures today."

Ron inspected the assortment of flutterspoons and shad darts I showed him. In George's boat, flutterspoons and shad darts lined the carpeted gunwale, and four downriggers extended over the stern. The boat's storage bins were filled with tackle boxes crammed with darts and flutterspoons. "All different colors, huh?" Ron asked.

"Yup," I said. "All different sizes, too." I pointed to the collection. "You never know which color combo the fish will want from day to day, week to week and season to season. The key is to identify patterns, some short-term, some long-term. Right, George?"

George nodded. "This year it's mostly black/pink and black/orange," George said. "Last year anything with chartreuse in it did well."

"When do you use those really small darts?" Ron asked.

"I've caught fish on 1/32-ouncers in low water at the tails of upriver pools," I said. "We'd deadstick them with no weight, and they'd quiver in the current just beneath the surface."

While we waited for a strike, a caddis occasionally rose from the current. These caddisflies were typical of an afternoon in early May on the Delaware. They were the



A light shower didn't stop Ron from catching this beautifully hued shad among several others.

species *Psilotreta*, and they could have been faked with a size 14 cream caddis.

No need to provide too many details too soon, I thought. "Hey, Ron, there's a caddis hatch on," I said. Ron watched them rise into the air.

We continued to watch the caddises flit off the water, and the arched rods swayed gently with the boat's rocking, their lines taut in the tensioned grips of the downriggers' release clips. "Do you have to really hit 'em, or do they take the spoon readily," Ron asked. "Don't worry," I said. "You'll know a strike when it comes! They can rip a rod right out of the boat if it's not secured!"

The right-outside rod suddenly straightened, and the line tightened instantly. Then the rod bent sharply toward the water in quick, deep pulsations. "Get 'em, Ron!" I said.

Ron pulled the rod from its holder and instinctively reared back. He felt the full weight of the animated fighter at the end of the line, the shad's resistance aided by the swift Delaware's flow. The shad horsed line in a sustained, powerful run, and Ron's reel drag whined. "Whoa!" He said, turning to George and me with a broad, approving smile.

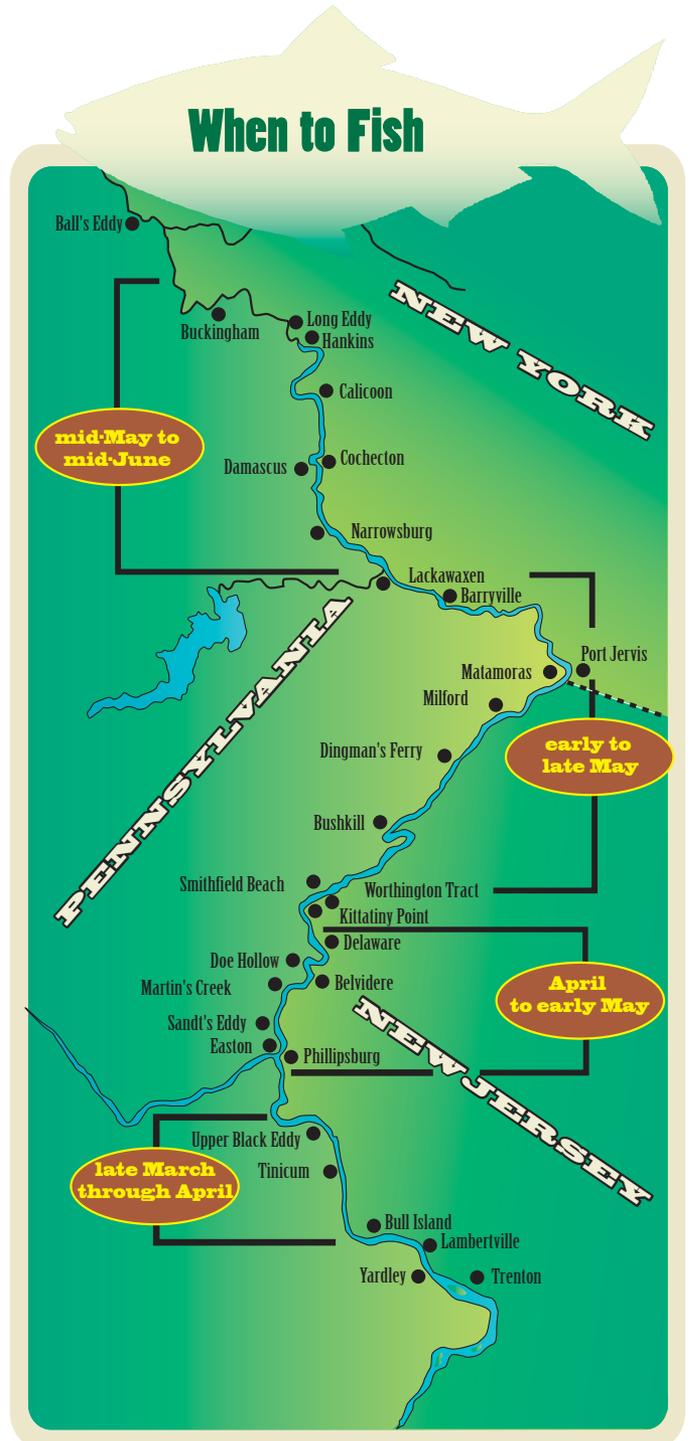
"Don't keep hooking him," George said. "Remember—they have a soft-sided mouth that tears very easily.

Just pump and reel. Pump and reel." George motioned the words to Ron.

Ron's shad stayed deep for several minutes, and pumping and reeling was not bringing the brute closer to the boat. I was delighted that Ron had probably hooked a big roe. As he slowly dredged the fish toward the boat, George rearranged some of our equipment on the deck to facilitate netting.

"Keep him down," George said. "Put the rod tip right into the water. Don't let him up too soon. Less of a chance he'll throw the hook."

Ron may have been a shad novice, but he certainly was otherwise an accomplished angler. He followed George's instructions effortlessly.





*Tackle and equipment, and perhaps techniques, will change. But the basic how, where and when of Delaware River shad fishing will remain the same in the future as it has through the ages. Ron, George and I are in its present, and we'll be in its future. And when Ron teaches his family, especially his children, the details of Delaware River shad fishing, they'll be part of that living history, too.*

“Now move toward the bow,” George said. Ron had maneuvered the shad near the boat only a few feet below the surface. “There he is!” I said. The three of us peered into the water. “Looks like a nice roe.” We saw that this shad was longer than usual and rounder in the belly than most shad.

Ron continued to pump and reel the fish to the surface, but as the fish came close, it dived straight toward the bottom. Again Ron's reel drag whirred. He stepped

toward the stern and held the rod with both hands, letting the fish fight the drag in a blistering 15-yard run.

Again George coached. “Pump and reel. Pump and reel.” George chuckled at Ron's delight and surprise at the fish's powerful run.

“Move toward the bow,” George said. George grabbed the net. Again Ron coaxed the fish toward the surface near the boat. George plunged the net into the water, and in one smooth motion he scooped up the shad.

We quickly photographed, measured and weighed Ron's fish—a 6.3-pound, 23-inch roe. George held the shad in the water facing the current for a few moments. Then it splashed away into the depths.

All in all, we boated 15 fish and lost five. Ron caught eight, I caught six, and George, gracious host and teacher, caught one.

During the ride home, Ron and I shared fishing stories and recounted the day's shad action. I recalled that my grandfather taught my father to fish, my father taught me to fish, and I taught my children to fish. But passing along what you know about shad fishing, or any kind of fishing, is more than just teaching. It's becoming part of a heritage that could be centuries, or even millennia, old. It's linking the past with the present and the future, first as a learner, then as a practitioner, and then as a teacher. And it's becoming a learner, a practitioner and a teacher all at the same time.

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## American Shad Internet Resources

**[http://sites.state.pa.us/PA\\_Exec/Fish\\_Boat/shad.htm](http://sites.state.pa.us/PA_Exec/Fish_Boat/shad.htm)**

PA Fish & Boat Commission's main page for shad migration and restoration reports.

**[http://sites.state.pa.us/PA\\_Exec/Fish\\_Boat/afm.htm](http://sites.state.pa.us/PA_Exec/Fish_Boat/afm.htm)**

PA Fish & Boat Commission Fisheries Management Division field reports web page. Look at reports for areas 5 and 6.

**[www.nps.gov/upde/fishing.htm](http://www.nps.gov/upde/fishing.htm)**

Information on fishing the upper Delaware River.

**[http://sites.state.pa.us/PA\\_Exec/Fish\\_Boat/map/03pfbcmaps/statewide.htm](http://sites.state.pa.us/PA_Exec/Fish_Boat/map/03pfbcmaps/statewide.htm)**

Online maps on the Commission's web site provide county-by-county access information.