

Delaware Shad on the Drift

by Michael Hendricks
Pennsylvania Fish & Boat
Commission Fisheries Biologist

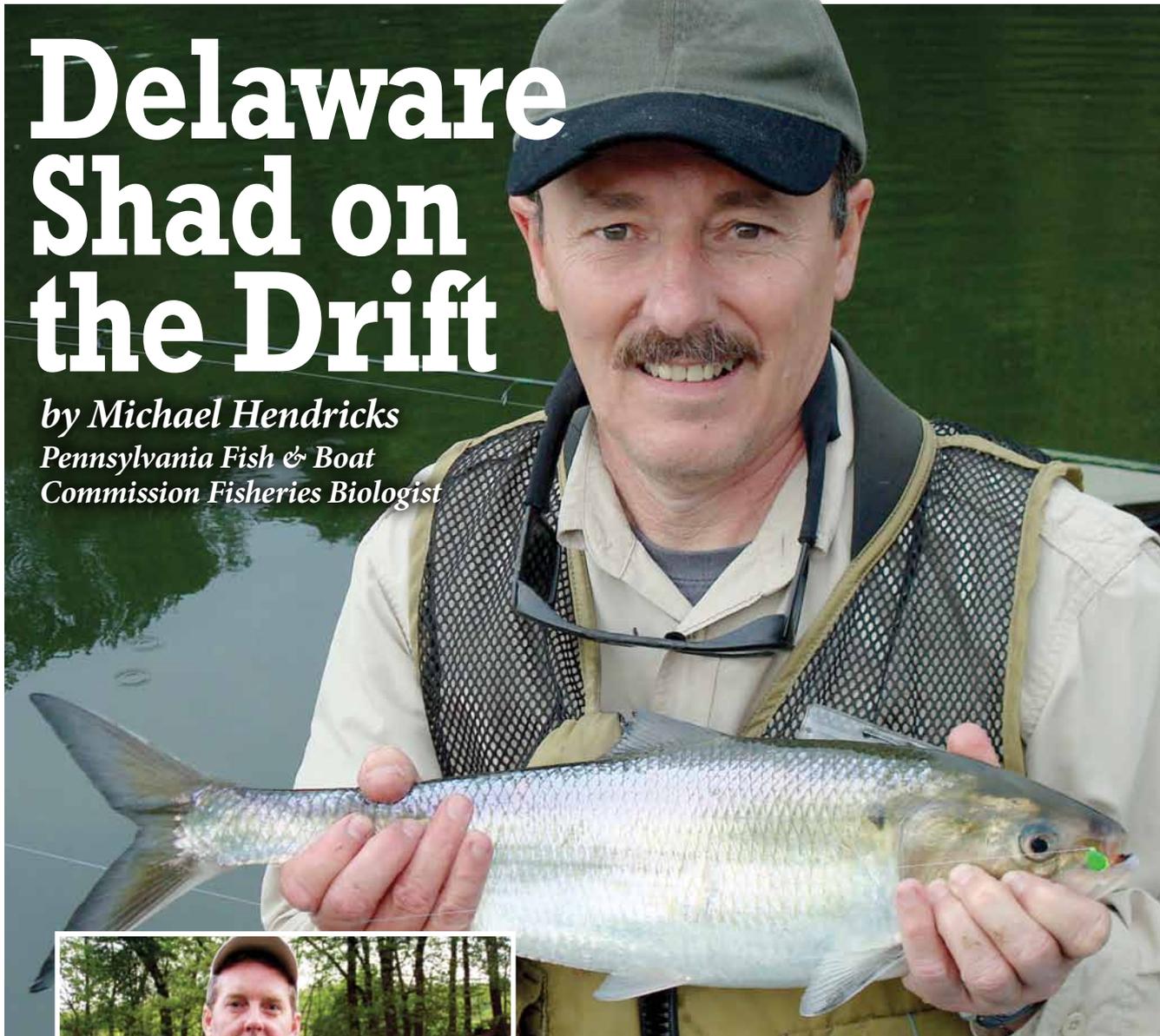


photo-Mike Hendricks

Shad fishing methods have not changed much since I started fishing for shad in 1962. Shad are open-water, current loving, schooling fish. Reaching the main river current is critical to success. Shore anglers cast shad darts, flutter spoons or both. The cast is usually made directly across current or slightly downriver. The dart is allowed to swing with the current until it swings into calm water where it is retrieved. Some anglers jig the dart while others just allow it to swing. If the current is too slow for a good drift, the dart is retrieved to keep it off the bottom. A splitshot

can be added 18 inches above the dart to get better distance on the cast or to sink the dart to the bottom. Conventional wisdom is that you have to be near the bottom to catch shad, but experienced anglers know that migrating shad will adjust their depth based on current speed and water temperature. In faster or colder water, the shad will be on the bottom. The shad will suspend later in the season, schooling just under the surface by mid-June. Getting the dart at the right depth is critical to catching shad.

Fishing for shad from a boat is an entirely different animal. A few anglers still troll for shad, but the vast majority anchor and flat-line. Shad fishing at anchor can be simple with minimal gear, or it can be high-tech with downriggers, planer boards and depth finders. Basically, the idea is to anchor in the main channel (wherever the shad are migrating), put lures out at the right depth, put the rod in a rod holder and wait for a shad to strike. The trick is to find the right spot in the channel and get the

lures at the right depth. This technique can be extremely effective and has, no doubt, accounted for the majority of shad caught over the years.

Some anglers, like me, want fishing to be an active pursuit. Flat-lining at anchor is just not our thing. We like casting, trying different retrieves and moving from spot to spot. Toward that end, my son Nick and I use a technique for catching shad while drifting. We discovered it about ten years ago, and we think it's not only more effective, but it's more fun than anchoring.

Catching shad on the drift

The technique of catching shad while drifting is quite easy. Start at the top of a run, shut off the motor and drift with the current. Make your casts across the river, slightly upriver or straight upriver using a jiggging retrieve. When you drift to the taylor of the pool, go upstream and try again. Unlike most other fish, boat traffic does not seem to scare shad.

I find it necessary to use a splitshot above the dart. Use the splitshot and the speed of retrieve to keep the dart at the depth of the shad. That's it, nothing to it. A trolling motor is very useful to keep the boat positioned parallel to the current and keep the wind from blowing you into frog water. Once you try this technique, you'll make some interesting observations. If the water is clear, you'll see schools of shad moving upstream or milling around. This will help you keep the dart at the same depth as the fish. Another thing that you'll notice is that often shad will take the dart on the fall. This is what makes jiggging deadly. The upward jig of the rod can go all the way from 9 o'clock to 12 o'clock or just a few inches before dropping the rod tip to begin the next jig. Try different jiggging motions to find out what the shad will want the most. Keep in contact with the jig on the fall, which is when the shad will take the dart.

Some observations

If the water is clear, you'll also get to see a lot of the strikes. Shad will follow the dart right to the boat and strike within a few feet of the boat. What a rush. A few years ago, Nick caught a shad that ate the dart three times before he hooked it on the fourth try. When you see a shad eat the dart, the tendency is to strike quickly, but often you are too quick. The shad will turn away, then do a complete 360 and strike again. On the fourth try, Nick was able to control his adrenalin and wait until the shad had taken the dart. Watching the shad eat the dart is something that rarely happens while at anchor. One of Nick's favorite tricks is to sight fish for shad. He waits, at the ready, until he sees a school of fish and tries to lead them with the cast to get one to hit the dart. He has also caught shad while vertical jiggging.

Landing shad while drifting is much easier than while at anchor. A net is not needed. We grab the fish with one hand and release the hook with the other, keeping the fish in the water at all times. If you bend down the hook barb, you can often release the fish without ever touching it.



photo-Andrew L. Shields

Use a splitshot and the speed of retrieve to keep the dart at the depth of the shad.

We prefer fat belly darts with a 1-inch twister tail to darts tied with calf tail. This gives the tail much more action and results in more hits. The color of the dart doesn't seem to matter, but I prefer dark green on a chartreuse base. Pink, bright red or orange on yellow or white also work well. Bright red twisters are our favorite, but white, yellow and chartreuse also work.

One last trick for those of you who like to anchor and flat-line: try holding the rod. You'll find that you get many strikes where the shad swims through the dart. You feel a very light bump and then slack line. If you strike, the shad will be there. With the rod in a holder, you'll never know you had a hit. ☐

Status of the Delaware River shad population

Contrary to what you may hear, shad fishing in the Delaware River has been excellent, but many anglers seem to have abandoned shad fishing. Nick and I fished out of a popular boat ramp on a beautiful Sunday in May 2011, and we were the only anglers there. While it's true that the Delaware River shad population has declined from highs in the late 1980s and early 1990s, abundance has increased in recent years. Shad fishing in 2009 was quite good and has improved each year. Strong year classes of young shad were documented in 2005 and 2007, resulting in a large number of 5-year-old fish returning in 2010 and 6-year-old fish in 2011. In 2012, I expect good numbers of large, 7-year-old fish, along with strong numbers of 5-year-old fish from 2007.—M. H.