

HERALD SPORTS

Home at last: American Shad returns to Lambertville, N.J.

Editor's note: *New Hope's Mickey Melchiondo is gearing up for the 31st annual Shad Festival in Lambertville, N.J., on April 28 and 29. Here's his take on Shad.*



MICKEY MELCHIONDO

Mark Modoski with his catch.

Mickey Melchiondo

The American Shad is an anadromous fish species, living in saltwater but spawning in freshwater rivers and estuaries, much like the Salmon or Striped Bass.

We are fortunate to live on the banks along one of the last rivers where Shad can still be caught in great numbers, the Delaware River.

The fish enter our river via the Delaware Bay and travel on their amazing journey as far north as the headwaters in upstate New York. Shad typically first appear in our waters around the beginning of April or when water temperatures warm to 50-55 degrees.

With the unseasonably warm weather we've experienced this year, the first Shad were taken on rod and reel as early as March 7 with the run in full swing at the time of this article's publication.

Shad are primarily filter feeders, sustaining themselves on a diet of plankton. Many people assume when they hook a Shad that the fish is feeding (like most other fish) but the fish is actually striking out of aggression

as your lure is simply blocking its path. When targeting Shad, the angler uses weighted hooks painted in bright colors, referred to as Shad "darts." My preferred method is to use flutter spoons, a simple willow leaf blade with a hook soldered on the end. Again, colors range all over the spectrum and there is no rhyme or reason as to why one day they will hit a red and green spoon, the next day white and orange will take the majority of the fish; experimentation is key.

Shad swim in large schools, typically moving about one or two feet from the bottom of the water column following the main channel of the river. It is very important to present your lure at this depth or you will not catch any fish. Shad have very thin mouths that are translucent and no stronger than a layer of tissue paper, because of this many fish become unbuttoned during the fight. Use of a net is almost essential to land a Shad, if you try to lift them vertically into the boat chances are they will become unbuttoned.

Because Shad travel in schools it is not uncommon to experience long

periods without a strike followed by hooking up with multiple fish on every rod at the same time. Shad prefer the security of low-light or overcast days, best fishing times are at first light and also at dusk. I have had the most success on rainy or cloudy days as the camouflage of grey skies help the fish to get up their nerve and leave their staging areas. Once you have picked out a prime spot to fish and you have hooked up, you have found the fish and there is no reason to move.

Many times, I have seen anglers be as close as 10 feet away from my boat while we are hooking up constantly and yet they don't receive as much as one hit (I have also been on the other side of this scenario). Location is key. Fishermen are very guarded when it comes to keeping their favorite spots a secret, although it is no secret where this channel is located in the New Hope-Lambertville area, just look for the fleet of boats and chances are that you've found the place.

As table fare, Shad are not among the world's most popular fish as they

contain many bones, but the roe (the eggs found in the females) are a highly-prized delicacy for many diners. It is very easy to spot a female Shad (roe) from a male (Buck Shad). The females are considerably larger, ranging from 4 to 8 pounds, whereas their male counterparts typically range from 2 to 3 pounds. Pennsylvania regulations allow you to keep three fish per angler per day. We are fortunate to live in an area where we have access to so many outstanding fisheries. With the Jersey coast being a little more than an hour away, there are fish to be caught 12 months out of the year, but the American Shad is hands down one of the most unique fish that pays us a yearly visit.

Take advantage of this hard-fighting visitor to our waters by chartering a local captain on a guided fishing trip or by attending Lambertville's Shad Festival this spring.

New Hope native Captain Mickey Melchiondo (mickkeysfishing.com) divides his time between mornings on the water and evenings onstage performing with his band Ween.