

# The Poor Man's Tarpon: Shad Fishing in California

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BY PHIL FISCHER

**M**Y CAST LANDED on the water some 80 feet out, and the two-fly rig hit the current just slightly downstream of where I was standing. The line sank quickly — when angling for shad, it is important most of the time to fish deep. As the flies swung through the drift, the line entered the sweet spot, which was defined by the reflection of a large tree on the water quartering downstream from where I stood. Almost as if on cue, the line straightened out sharply, and my reaction set the hook. I was into another strong shad that ripped 30 feet of line off my reel, jumped twice, then settled in for a battle. This hen of about four and a half pounds was expert at using her broad body and the current to gain an advantage, and landing her on a fly rod would prove to be a challenge. Slowly, I gained line back and eventually brought the fish to hand.

It was May, I was on California's lower Sacramento River, and it was shad season. It is a season I look forward to every year for fast action, warm weather, and good friends to share the river.

They say steelhead are the fish of a thousand casts, whereas shad have been nicknamed "the poor man's tarpon." Fortunately, most shad fishing takes place during the emerging summer, and never does the shad angler have to worry about iced-up guides, cold rain or snow, or waiting for a thousand casts between fish. Nor does shad fishing require a long plane flight to a resort in the Caribbean in search of real tarpon. Most good places to fish for shad are a two-hour drive from my home in the San Francisco Bay Area. With shad fishing, the resort is often a trailer or camper parked on the banks of the river. The resort bar is often housed in an ice chest next to the truck, and the five-star restaurant is a barbecue grill, a big steak, a salad, and a striking sunset on a warm evening on the river. Tarpon are known for their strength, and bringing just one to the boat can make a good day. The poor man's tarpon has the strength of the real thing, although not the size, but catching 20 fish in a day is common, and fly fishers catch 50 fish in a day every year.

Shad are an anadromous fish, and they ascend rivers throughout the West Coast every year in the late spring and early summer by the thousands. Unlike salmon, which run to their natal river, shad seek out the best water conditions, and the runs can vary significantly from river to river, especially during drought years. In the Central Valley, very good runs occur in the Sacramento, Feather, Yuba, and American Rivers.

Shad and tarpon are both members of the herring family. Male shad weigh from two to four pounds, and females weigh from three to five pounds. During much of the run, they spend the day either moving up-river or resting in holding water. Once the water temperature gets warm enough, they spawn in the evening over shallow gravel bars near deeper



JOHN SHERMAN

SHAD PROVIDE SPORT FOR FLY RODDERS DURING THE MONTHS OF SPRING AND EARLY SUMMER, WHEN TROUT STREAMS USUALLY RUN HIGH AND COLD WITH SNOW MELT.

holding water. Shad are “free spawners” in that they do not pair up during spawning, like salmon. Instead, the females begin releasing their eggs, which prompts the males to release milt freely into the run in a frenetic courtship display involving many fish concurrently. Shad run upriver in large schools, often of a hundred to a thousand fish, so when they are in, the fishing can be sizzling.

When I was a kid in the early 1970s, we would wait longingly at the fly shops or read the fishing section of the local paper for the first reports of shad ascending the Sacramento Delta. Each year, we would usually hear by word of mouth news of fishermen “bumping shad.” At night, these fishermen would sit poised over likely holding water in the Delta with long-handled nets extended into the depths and facing downstream. When a fisherman felt a tell-tale “bump” from a shad, he’d sweep the net upward, bringing another shad aboard. Reports of fishermen bumping shad were our early warning that the run was about three to four weeks away in the reaches of the Sacramento a hundred miles upstream, where we would be waiting, fly rods in hand. Shortly after, reports would begin surfacing of fish being caught at the Minnow Hole on the Sacramento, and we knew shad season was near.

Shad were introduced into California back in the early 1870s, when the California Fisheries Commission arranged for a shipment of live shad from New York. These fish were released in the Sacramento River near Tehama. Over the course of the next decade, over five hundred thousand shad were planted in the lower Sacramento River, and the fish quickly spread throughout the West Coast, from California to Oregon and Washington. The runs were very strong, with millions of fish each year, and the fishery soon blossomed into an important commercial enterprise. Commercial fishing continued until 1957, when it was banned in recognition of shad as an important component of the sport fishery.

Shad fishing with a fly rod is a well-established sport in the eastern United States, and it has quickly grown here in California. Each May and June, throngs of fly fishers head to the Central Valley rivers to cast a fly for shad. It is a very social sport, and often you can park a vehicle right on the river’s edge, set up a chair and umbrella, a barbeque and ice chest, and wade into the line-up in the river with friends, all this only a few feet from the tailgate of your truck. The friendly ribbing from the angler next to you in line about your flies, or your casting, or your fish

count only adds to the allure of this sport. If the fishing gets slow, the chair, shade from the umbrella, and a cold beverage are only a few steps away. While a line of 20 fishermen evokes the thought of combat fishing, company is to be expected on shad runs and even preferred. Rods bending in



**FLY FISHING FOR SHAD TENDS TO BE A SOCIAL SPORT.**

the line a few people downstream often signify that a fresh school has entered the run, moving upstream, and that your turn to hook one of these fish is next. Unlike steelhead fishing, with its step-down and rotate-the-run approach, most often with shad, you stand in the same place and wait for the fish to move upriver to you.

### **Rods, Lines, Reels, and Tippets**

Fly fishing gear for shad is pretty straightforward. I like to fish with anything from a 6-weight to an 8-weight rod. You need a medium-action or fast-action rod that can cast easily, yet handle these hard-fighting fish. Recent years have also seen the emergence of a few anglers casting Spey rods, which appear to be a very worthy alternative. Most importantly, rods must be able to cast shooting heads well. Depending on the conditions, you will be routinely throwing a shooting-head line from 50 to 80 feet, and on rare occasions, even farther. Sometimes I see anglers casting light 5-weights, and these will perform adequately on most fish, but hooking a five-pound shad will test the rod’s mettle, and it can be hard on the fish. So I opt for the backbone offered by 6-weight to 8-weight rods.

The most critical gear for shad fishing is a selection of shooting heads. Most of the time, shad lie deep in the current, near the bottom, and it is important to choose a line that will sink quickly to get into the zone. Also, to reach the shad, as I’ve noted, you often need to make long casts. Those two criteria make shooting heads the preferred alternative for most shad fishing. I carry a series of shooting heads, from a slow sink rate up through

the heaviest sink rate offered. Most of the time, I fish with the fastest sink-rate head. If a high-density head isn’t picking up fish or is dragging too early in the drift, I change to a head with a slower sink rate.

Although shad usually hug the bottom, they sometimes will suspend in the

current at the middle depths, and they also will move into shallow water during spawning time in the evening. When shad suspend in the current, you have to change to a medium sink-rate shooting head to place your fly on the right level. During spawning, when shad move into shallow water, your tactics also need to change to adapt to this situation. In the early evening, I often shorten up my casts and may cast only slightly longer than the 30-foot shooting head. It also can pay to change to a medium or slow sink-rate shooting head during this time.

Behind the shooting head, your reel should be loaded with 100 feet of monofilament shooting line, and behind that, the remainder of the reel should be filled with Dacron backing. Monofilament shooting line is a specialized monofilament (available in most fly shops) that is designed for shooting the line during the forward cast. The trick to casting a shooting head is to make a false cast in the air with just a few feet of shooting line extended beyond the tip, then, on the forward cast, to load the rod aggressively and release the shooting line, allowing the line to shoot forward. Learning the double haul will add to your casting efficiency in fishing for shad.

Reels should have enough capacity to carry the shooting head, monofilament shooting line, and Dacron backing. The most critical part of the reel is the drag. A few times each season, a big hen shad will take me well into my backing. And yes, that means over 150 to 200 feet of line in the water, including a 30-foot shooting head and 100 feet of monofilament! I like a reel that I can palm and put pressure on the fish when I feel the need. But a good

drag on the reel also performs this role. The downside to palming the reel is the almost daily knuckle rapping that I take when fish decide to take unexpected burning runs.

Shad are not leader shy, and I often use a piece of tippet material 3 feet in length in 8-to-12-pound test for a leader. A short leader is important, because it more effectively connects the fly to the shooting head. If the leader is too long, the sink rate of the fly becomes difficult to control. I often just recycle my trout leaders. After fishing 9-foot 5X leaders to exhaustion, I clip them back to 4 to 6 feet and reuse them for shad.

In the past couple of years, I have gone almost exclusively to a two-fly system when fishing for shad. I tie a piece of tippet material using a Double Surgeon’s Knot and leave a tag end of about 8 inches. I tie an upper fly on this tag end and a dropper fly 30 inches below at the end of the tippet. That way, I am fishing two different colors of flies and at slightly different depths. I feel it gives me a shot at more hook-ups, and when the fishing is really good, occasionally I’ll get a double hook-up. Hence the need for lots of backing.

I strongly recommend fishing barbless hooks for shad. Not only is it easier on the fish, but with the occasional wind, long days casting on the river, and a two-fly set-up, invariably, someone hooks himself or herself at some time during the season. It is also critical to wear proper eye protection — a pair of good sunglasses. They are needed for the sun, but also provide protection against an ill-timed cast with a wind coming from your casting side.

I like to tease my fish, and shad are no exception. Just casting and swinging can be very effective, but teasing them as the fly line swings through the sweet spot in the run can be deadly. Teasing comes in many forms, from the occasional twitch, to a steady jiggling motion, to long, swift jerks on the line. One angler I know who is a heck of a shad fisherman makes quick, aggressive two-foot jerks on the line all the way through the swing. My own teasing style is more varied, with short, erratic pulls of about six to eight inches on and off throughout the swing. On some casts, I just let it drift, and on some casts, I tease aggressively, alternating techniques until I find what the fish seem to want that day.

You can also vary the depth of the presentation somewhat by varying the cast. If you want the fly to sink a little deeper, cast slightly farther upstream or lengthen the cast. To fish the fly a little shallower on the swing, cast a little farther

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# Shad

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downstream or shorten the cast to the softer water close in. It pays to experiment. Getting the right drift is the difference between a fish on every cast and watching in frustration while the person just downstream from you catches fish after fish while you get a rare tug now and again. Vary your drift and presentation until you start hooking fish. Otherwise, you'll be back in the chair under the umbrella with a cold beverage, just watching the action.

There are a few other gear considerations for shad fishing. Waders are optional. While I often fish in lightweight Gore-Tex waders, I prefer to wade wet if the days are warm enough. The rivers stay cold in the northern Central Valley, since all are controlled by dams. However, mid to late May can often be quite warm there, with temperatures in the low to mid 90s and often reaching into the 100s. When the temperature is over 85 degrees, I usually wade wet. I wear a light cotton shirt and a wide-brim hat, which helps prevent sunburn. Rather than wader boots, I wear neoprene booties that are made for skin diving. The river bottom tends to be gravel and easy to wade. The over-ankle height of the booties keeps the gravel and sand out. Finally, a bottle of water is always in my pocket, because the warm weather makes it easy to become dehydrated.

## Shad Fly Patterns

Modern fly-tying synthetics are a boon to tyers of shad flies. For some reason, shad prefer bright, flashy flies that resemble absolutely nothing in nature. Chartreuse, hot orange, hot pink, orange, yellow, and red are the colors of choice. Materials that make the fly flash are even better. Depending on the clarity of the water, I use from size 4 to size 8 hooks for shad flies. Clear water, such as that found on the lower Yuba River, warrants smaller flies, whereas the less clear water on the lower Sacramento suggests larger hooks. I prefer hooks with a nickel finish, adding to the flash.

Some of my favorite patterns follow (you can see color images on my Web site, [www.philscustomflies.bigstep.com](http://www.philscustomflies.bigstep.com)). I've picked one fly that I have fished for years and three that I have recently designed. Note the changes in materials over time. The first pattern was developed years ago, whereas the final three were designed in the last several years. Shad patterns have evolved considerably with the availability of today's synthetics.



### The Shad Fly

**Hook:** Eagle Claw 1197N

**Tail:** Red hackle fibers

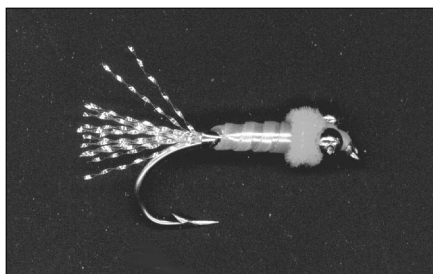
**Body:** Mylar tubing

**Hackle:** Whiting American hackle, white

**Collar:** Medium red chenille

**Eyes:** Bead chain

I have fond memories of this pattern, because it is the first shad fly I used on the lower Yuba when I began angling for these fish in the early 1970s. A fellow gave my dad a handful of these flies on the banks of the river on our inaugural trip. For years, it was the standard, hence its name: "The Shad Fly." I've never forgotten either this fly or that gentleman's generosity.



### The 81 Special

**Hook:** Eagle Claw 1197N

**Tail:** Olive Krystal Flash

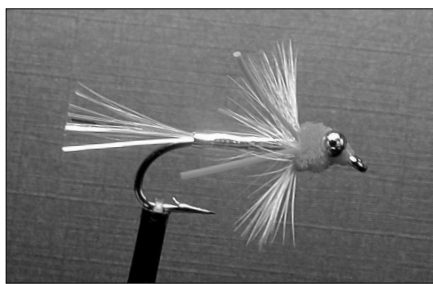
**Tag:** Silver tinsel

**Body:** Chartreuse Edge Glo, wound over silver tinsel and covered with nail polish to bring out the colors of the Edge Glo

**Collar:** Hot-Orange medium chenille

**Eyes:** Bead chain

The name of this fly comes from a red-hot day on the lower Sacramento River when this fly caught 81 shad before a big hen broke it off. Needless to say, it is a very durable pattern.



### The Hot-Pink

**Rubberlegs Mirage**

**Hook:** Eagle Claw 1197N

**Tail:** Flashabou Mirage in pink, the

length of the body

**Body:** Flashabou Mirage wound over hot-pink thread

**Hackle:** Whiting American saddle hackle, white

**Legs:** Hot-pink rubber legs tied back and split, two to a side

**Collar:** Fine hot-pink chenille

**Eyes:** Bead chain

This is a more recent pattern, which I designed for the Sacramento River shad run. Note the addition of rubber legs to this pattern, along with Flashabou Mirage. The fly resembles a small baitfish in the water and has proven very effective. I have wondered if it wouldn't also be a good bonefish pattern.



### The Fire-Orange Rubberlegs Mirage

**Hook:** Eagle Claw 1197N

**Tail:** Flashabou Mirage in pink, the length of the body

**Body:** Flashabou Mirage wound over hot-pink thread

**Hackle:** Ice Chenille, ivory

**Legs:** Chartreuse rubber legs tied back and split, two to a side

**Collar:** Fine hot-orange chenille

**Eyes:** Bead chain

This pattern is similar to the previous pattern, except for the color choices and the substitution of Ice Chenille for the hackle.

With regard to designing shad flies, you will note that all of the patterns presented above have bright colors, relatively short tails, and bead-chain eyes. I don't know why, but bright colors swinging by the fish seem to provoke a strike. I know some very good shad fisherman, however, who use more subdued colors in their flies, and these have also proven effective.

The shorter tail on most patterns is to prevent short strikes. Some patterns use a longer tail, but I have found that you will miss fewer strikes using a shorter tail. In the patterns above, I have tied two of the flies with a slightly longer tail using Flashabou Mirage. This material does an excellent job of refracting light, and the tail on this pattern is very visible because of this material. Accordingly, I have reached a trade-off in fly design where I have elected to lengthen the tail to empha-

size this attribute at the risk of a few short strikes. The pattern has performed wonderfully the past three years.

The last common attribute for these patterns is the use of bead-chain eyes. Bead-chain eyes cause the fly to fish "upside down," which results in a tendency to hook more fish in the hard upper jaw. Shad have very soft lower jaws, and hooking the fish in this area results in a greater loss of fish.

Finally, on two of the patterns, I have added rubber legs to the fly. Many trout patterns have rubber legs, and I thought the concept was worth a try on shad. The results have been awesome. When I tease the fly through the swing, the rubber legs pulsate and appear to attract a greater number of strikes. I have fished with these new designs for several years now with excellent results.

## Where to Fish for Shad

There are good shad runs on almost all of the major rivers in Northern California, from the major northern Sacramento Valley Rivers — the lower Sacramento, the Feather, the Yuba, and the American — to many of the coastal rivers, such as the Russian, the Klamath, and others. Without giving away any secrets, let me cover a few areas for consideration in the northern Sacramento Valley, which are the rivers with which I am most familiar.

### The Lower Sacramento River

The lower Sacramento River features the earliest and latest shad fishing. Above the town of Colusa, shad arrive in late April or early May and gradually filter throughout the river by later in May. There are many places to fish the lower Sacramento. However, access can be a challenge. If you have a boat, there are launch ramps at Colusa, Butte City, Hamilton City, Woodson Bridge, Tehama, and Red Bluff, which effectively opens up the entire river to fishing for shad. There are dozens of sandbars throughout the river that hold shad. Explore the river and do not hesitate to pick up and move if you are not catching fish. Additionally, there are a few roadside access points where you can get to the Sacramento River.

Below the Red Bluff Diversion Dam, shad can be caught until late July and even into August. For some reason, shad will not willingly ascend a fish ladder, and that means the fish are effectively stopped from further migration upriver below the Red Bluff Diversion Dam. However, access to that part of the river is extremely limited except for anglers in boats. Fly shops in Redding and Sacramento should be able

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to provide up-to-date information on the shad run and access points along the Sacramento, Feather, and Yuba Rivers.

### **The Feather River**

The Feather River's shad run peaks in mid to late May, depending on water flows each year. Because much of the upper river is within the Oroville Wildlife Area, access is very good. The river below the wildlife area also has several areas that can be floated. Areas to consider on the Feather are Shanghai Bend, Palm Avenue above Gridley, east of Biggs-Vance Avenue, and the Oroville Wildlife Area.

### **The American River**

Like the Feather, the American has excellent access throughout much of its length because of the parkland and hiking/biking trails on both sides of the river. The shad run here peaks in late May, depending on water conditions. Access points include all along the American River Parkway, above Sacramento State College, Goethe Park, Rancho Cordova, and Sailor Bar. There are numerous areas that make for excellent drifts with a pontoon boat. Contact Sacramento-area fly shops for up-to-the minute fishing reports on the American, as well as on other rivers in the Sacramento Valley.

### **The Yuba River**

The Yuba generally features the latest run of the major Sacramento Valley rivers. The run generally peaks in late May and

often in early June. Fishing can even extend well into July, depending on water conditions.

Access on the Yuba is more limited than access to the Feather and the American. There are easy access points right in the town of Marysville, and Hammerton Road on the south side of the river was recently determined to be a public access point. This road opened up much of the Yuba gold fields, although in many places you will have to make a bit of a walk to reach the river. Once-popular access points at the end of Hallwood and Walnut Avenues are not accessed as easily as they were many years ago.

Daguerre Dam serves as a barrier to shad on the Yuba. Access to this area of the river has been through a private club or by walking upriver from access points below. The fishing can be excellent there, because the fish stack up in the water below the dam late in the run.

Shad fishing is an awesome fly-fishing sport. It features easy access to many of the significant northern Sacramento Valley Rivers, the fish are willing, and the fishing itself is not too technical for the beginning fly fisher. Shad are hard fighters, just like their cousins the tarpon. This spring, the fish will again begin their spawning runs once more, completing one lifecycle and beginning another. Grab your rod, a few brightly dressed shad flies, a chair and umbrella, and head to your favorite river.



PHIL FISCHER

FLY FISHERS CAN SOMETIMES TEASE SHAD INTO HITTING A FLY BY MANIPULATING THE LINE WHILE IT SWINGS WITH THE CURRENT. TEASING COMES IN MANY FORMS, FROM THE OCCASIONAL TWITCH OF THE LINE, TO A STEADY JIGGING MOTION, TO LONG, SWIFT JERKS (SHOWN ABOVE). WHY SHAD TAKE FLIES IS NOT KNOWN, SO IT IS WORTH NOTING THAT THEY WILL ALSO HITS FLIES THAT ARE DEAD-DRIFTED AND NOT MANIPULATED. PART OF THE FUN OF FLY FISHING FOR SHAD COMES FROM EXPERIMENTATION.