

Fishing Scenario ID #173

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## John Day Shad from Shore



Photo from [englishriverwebsite.com/LewisClarkColumbiaRiv...](http://englishriverwebsite.com/LewisClarkColumbiaRiv...)

**Like tarpon**, American Shad are a kind of herring. Nationally, they're often called "America's Fish," a tribute to the Delaware River run that saved Washington's starving army. But in Washington State and Oregon, thousands of anglers just consider them fun, stone fools for properly presented darts or jigs. When conditions are right fishers count on days when they can land scores of shad speedsters.

John Day River offers that kind of **bank fishing** opportunity to those wise enough to track shad counts and water flows, and who to pay special attention to tackle. Follow this Gameplan and the odds are already in your favor. And since FC President Dale's data demonstrates that "Sometimes we average a pound per cast," make sure to check at the end of this Scenario for a recipe that might surprise you!



## Timing Details

- 1. DATE: June 15 to June 28—preferably on weekdays, when fewer anglers make it easier to move into premier spots.
- 2. River flows and fish counts are critical to this Scenario, and not a case of "either/or". Members must gather up-to-date info: Dale looks first at [www.seattletimes.nwsourc](http://www.seattletimes.nwsourc), then at [flows](#), and follows-up by calling Flows FORECASTING at 503-808-3941. (At [flows](#) look for "Basin List" links to specific sites/projects, click hourly data-- John Day in the Lower Columbia section. For more, see Timing and Location details.)



**Don't go unless:**

- a. Flows are above 240,000 cfs. and below 450,000
- b. John Day fish passage counts at 10,000 per day or higher!

**Dale goes only when...**

- a. Flows and fish counts are as above, *and* Oregon Fish and Game has closed fishing for Chinooks, which reduces crowds.

- 3. This John Day Scenario provides a fine example of how valuable it can be to stay flexible in your trip timing and planning. Some conditions are difficult to determine far in advance, so the more quickly you can prepare to go – or cancel – the better you can adapt to Timing Details. Try to cut your lead-time to 36 hours.
- 4. Prepare to observe carefully! Shad are changeable from day to day—often hour to hour--so religiously watching other anglers is often the best way to find out where to find schools or located, what depth they're at (angle of cast upstream) the of color lures fish prefer, also retrieve speed.
- 5. Prepare to experiment *with all the above* on your own! (You might be the angler all the others watch.)

### Special Regulations:

- 1. For Oregon regulations and license applications, please check [ODFW](#). For limits, closures, and reg changes to the Columbia and John Day Rivers, visit <http://www.dfw.state.or.us/RR/columbia/>
- 2. Washington anglers can buy an Oregon license as early as 4:00 a.m. at Dinty's Market, on the Oregon side of the border just as you head south over the bridge at Biggs, 541-739-2236; also at he Rufus General Store, 3 miles west of the fishery, beginning at 6AM, 541-739-2534, where you'll also find a fine supply of shad flies. For more options see "Location Details," page 6.



# Equipment

- 1. Waders (not hipsters or boots), and **quality** wading boots with **felt** soles and good ankle support.
- 2. A light- to medium-action spinning rod, 8.5 to 10 feet long, and a reel spooled with 8 pound test Maxima Ultra Green. Using a long rod helps an angler make longer casts, control a lure's swing, and guide fish while landing them among slippery rocks.
- 3. Two small or one large (300 + yards) spool of 6lb Maxima Ultra Green for leaders.
- 4. One inch long, ¼ ounce **BRASS** (attracts shad) sliding worm weights, the type bass anglers use with a Texas Rig.
- 5. Size #5 or #7 **GOLD**-colored swivels.
- 6. A hook sharpener.
- 7. A long handled net.
- 8. A long neck hook disgorger:



## Lures, in order of preference:

- 1. Find 1/32 ounce "Shad Killers" in red, chartreuse, and pink, manufactured and sold by Bill Ezell, (541)567-8201; 943 E. Ridgeway Hermiston, OR 97838 [cwezell@eot.net](mailto:cwezell@eot.net). Shad Killers are also available at stores along the Columbia: Dinty's Market, 541-739-2236; Fishermen's Marine and Outdoor, in Oregon City: (541) 557-3313; Big's, in Biggs; at the Rufus General Store, 3 miles west of where you fish; 541-739-2534, also at Wind Mountain Resort. 50561 Highway 14 Home Valley / Stevenson, WA 98648 (509) 427-5152.
- 2. Order triangle-headed jigs with gold colored hooks in 1/32 oz and 1/16 sizes, red, or with a bare, gray metal finish. *Don't add tails or bodies to these triangle-head jig heads: you will fish them without any. Do paint the bare heads in advance*, or bring Magic Markers to the river to make on-the-spot choices based on immediate conditions. One of many places to order on-line is [www.landbigfish.com](http://www.landbigfish.com) (see "panfish" lure pages)
- 3. A third option: Buy standard shad darts, in 1/16 to 1/32 oz. (and remove all hair and thread!) NOTE: 1/8 ounce is too big!
- 4. With the jigs/darts identified in 2. and 3. above, get these colors:
  - a. Weak-pink with chartreuse.
  - b. Forest-green with chartreuse.
  - c. Cerise with white.
  - d. All chartreuse (yellowish, not greenish.)
  - e. Red with white.





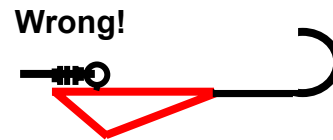
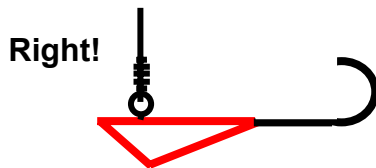


# Preparation & Rigging

Fishing the John Day well means losing tackle to the bottom. Prepare in *advance*:

- a. **De-Barb and sharpen hooks.** "The barbless hook is more efficient, and makes it easier to release non-targeted species (such as juvenile salmon) that you may accidentally catch." *From "Shad Fishing in Washington" WDFW*
- b. **Clear any paint from the hook eyes of extra jigs and darts.**
- c. **Pre-tie darts and jigs on an 18-inch leader.**

- 1. Slide a 1/4 oz **BRASS** worm sinker onto your line. (Brass *really* seems to attract shad here!)
- 2. Tie on a size #5 or #7 **BRASS-colored** swivel.
- 3. To the opposite end of the swivel tie on enough 6-lb Maxima Green to create an 18-inch leader.
- 4. To the end of the leader tie a shad dart or jig. **Make certain to clinch the knot at the top of the hook eye, very tightly, and not pointing forward.**



- 5. Fishing two darts or jigs can help you discover what color or size of lure the shad prefer today, and thereby help you learn more quickly, and increase hook-ups by 25%. When doing so:
  - a) First knot on the lure you think will work best, since it will be harder to change, with a 2" dropper;
  - b) Tie the second lure 19" behind the 1<sup>st</sup> lure.
- 6. For your own safety, net any fish hooked on the lower lure.

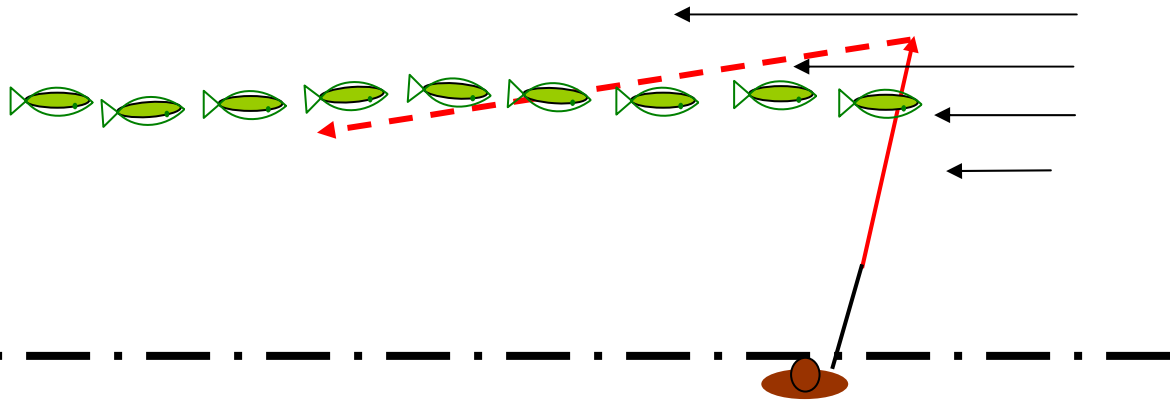
# Jig-casting Technique

*If while using the cast and swing technique described here your line tangles often with anglers who are "still-fishing/plunking," note that traditional local protocol gives them the "right of way."*

- 1. Walk carefully! These rocks can get slick. (If that's not a "technique," consider that a fall might make all the techniques below irrelevant.)
- 2. Location is **the #1 key**, so--
  - Pay special attention to the specific flow/location information in Location Details below.
  - Camp right at the park (see Location Details), so you can start *casting* at the crack of dawn.
  - Immediately begin searching for fish, using four casts every 20 feet to find out where the schools are stationed.
  - If you have several anglers in your party, spread out to find the best spots quicker.
- 3. Shad have soft mouths, so set your drag lighter than usual. (Dale likes to turn his anti-reverse off, which gives him greater control when releasing line to a hard-running fish.)

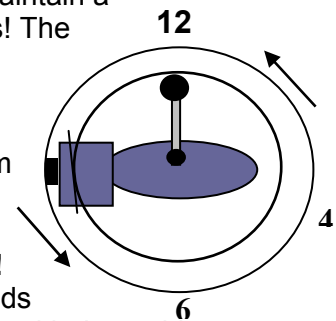
# Jig-casting Technique (con't.)


Shad schools typically travel in a single file, with similar-sized fish lining up head to tail rather than bunched together. Such chains be scores of feet—or yards—long; and separate schools may swim parallel to each other some distance apart.



4. CAST and RETRIEVE:

- a) Make each cast 25 degrees upstream (but experiment with this angle!);
- b) Mark a spot on the far shoreline (or the dam) and cast toward it, to maintain a consistent angle from cast to cast, or to deliberately adjust your casts! The further upstream your lure lands, the deeper it will sink.)
- c) Begin reeling immediately (see below) or count down to assure your lure reaches a consistent depth when aimed at your mark.
- d) In normal current, start with 2/3 of a reel handle turn per second—from 12 to 4 on a clock face, for example. In strong current, start with 1/2 turn a turn per second. Note: **Time yourself with a wrist watch, since: most anglers reel faster than this. Consistency is the key!**
- e) When you fail to get a strike on a swing through a zone you know holds fish, retrieve quickly after your lure has passed through to save time and help avoid snagging on rocks near shore.
- f) By pointing your rod tip upstream, you can begin the dart's swing early—good when fish are farther out.. Pointing your rod downstream will cause the swing to begin later—good when the fish are closer in. **Shad will "only" hit when the head of your dart is pointing UPSTREAM.**



8. If you miss strikes, experiment with a smaller lure in the same color. Do the same if the fish you do land are barely hooked. If fish are hooked too deep, experiment with a bigger lure.
9. Whenever possible while fighting fish, keep your rod at a right angle to the line of pull.
10. After fighting a fish or hanging up—and every hour—check your hook to make sure its sharp.
11. After a strike or hang-up, make sure the knot is properly positioned at the top of the hook eye! 
12. Watch other anglers closely to see what colors and sizes of lures produce best! Each day at your destination, try to talk to (and learn from) four or more anglers!

**NOTE:** later in the day shad often more farther from shore. If they get *too* far out, you might need to use an unusual John Day Rock-Throw Still-fishing Technique. It's odd, it works, it might be legal, and you'll have to see it to believe it. If interested...best to watch anglers, ask at local stores (see Timing and Location Details) and consult the DWFG.



John Day Shad

## Location Details



- 1. Fish the southern (Oregon) side of the river, just below John Day Dam in Giles French Park, accessed from a clearly marked spur off Highway 30.
- 2. The largest shad schools in a 60 mile section of river below are concentrated here in a *400' stretch!* Limit your fishing to an area beginning at the downstream end of the Giles French parking lot, upstream to the fishing deadline marker. Keep in mind that, even in this stretch, many areas will hold very few fish, relative to the best spots; and that best spots will often change hour by hour!
- 3. The location of shad schools depends on changes in current: weaker currents move the hotspot upstream, stronger currents, downstream. Flows are usually strongest from 6AM to 9AM. After 9:00, try working upstream.

### Services and Facilities:

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- 1. **Camping:**  
**Giles French Park** (right where you fish!)  
**Lepage Park** has campsites with and without electrical hookups, a picnic area, a beach and a dump for RVs. See. [Lepage Park](#)
- 2. **For tackle and sundries**  
[Dinty's Market](#) 541-298-8139, 806 E 2nd St, The Dalles, OR  
Fishermen's Marine and Outdoor, in Oregon City, (541) 557-3313;  
Rufus General Store, (3 miles west of where you fish; 541-739-2534)
- 3. **For tackle, sundries and lodging:**  
[Wind Mountain Resort](#) 50561 Highway 14 Home Valley / Stevenson, WA 98648 (509) 427-5152.
- 4. **For other lodging and services, maps and general information**  
<http://www.recreation.gov/detail.cfm?ID=241>



## John Day Shad Beyond Basics

- 1. For even more detailed (although somewhat older) information about shad fishing on the John Day and Columbia Rivers, see Fishing Coaches' President Dale Dorcas's article on the next page, or at <http://www.gamefishin.com/wa/features/shad.htm>.
  
- 1. Shad's reputation as high and low cuisine has changed a dozen times in American history. While they *are* bony, the meat is excellent, so see <http://wdfw.wa.gov/outreach/fishing/shad/shad.htm> for cleaning instructions and recipes. Also consider pickling, which FC Director Seth Norman considers the best way to go.

### ~~Herring~~ **Shad in Sour Cream** Serves 6

Ingredients	Method
5 Herring, soaked in brine	Soak herring in cold water in the refrigerator for 24 hours. Change the water several times during this period. Fillet herring and cut into bit sized pieces. Combine the remaining ingredients, add the herring pieces and mix lightly. Place in a glass jar or bowl and cover. Store the herring in sour cream in the refrigerator for about 12 hours before serving.
1 cup Sour cream	
2 tbsp. Cider vinegar	
1 tsp. Worcestershire sauce	
1/2 tsp. Dry mustard	
2 Onions, sliced	
Dash Cayenne pepper	
Parsley, chopped	

Recipe from a Cornell Cooperative Extension Holiday Seafood Sampler



John Day Shad

## Beyond Basics

# Columbia River Shad

By Dale Dorcas

From "Gamefishin.com"

*Columbia River for shad, immediately below John Day dam, on the south side of river.*

*This report is in 2 parts:*

1. Main tips, from my notes over the years
2. "Too-detailed" tips you'll need to follow if you want to hook 100 shad per day (don't bother reading unless, a. you aren't satisfied w/catching a few dozen shad per day, or b. you have way too much time on your hands, like me!)

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### MAIN TIPS:

Why fish at Bonneville when you seem to catch more shad (and don't have to put up with quite so many people) at John Day? How about the fact that there's an almost unlimited number of super camping spots 100 feet to 2 miles away from the fishing area!

At John Day, my tests indicate that shad darts and the "Shad Killer" brand lure noticeably beat those plain walleye-style round-head jigs, and those crappie-style jigs, that are both so popular at Bonneville! If you only have those round-head jigs, add flashabou to them!

Shad "NEVER" seem to strike while your dart/jig is pointing downstream or sideways to the current. On a dart, "ALL" strikes come as the lure is swinging or pointing UPSTREAM!

One day here I was catching a fish about every 4 casts, but a guy next to me was catching them every 1.5 casts! His secret: adding a ONE INCH LONG BRASS weight (the kind bass fishermen use in front of rubber worms) about 23 inches in front of his dart. It ATTRACTS the fish he said! I use these 3/8 oz. BRASS weights now as my tests indicate it's the best way!

DON'T USE 1/8 OZ. DARTS/JIGS....here, shad hardly bite unless it's 1/16 or even 1/32 oz. darts/jigs.

Best dart colors are:

- Chartreuse w/red head
- Shiny/bare jig head
- Red
- Green

To get flows & fish counts I go to: <ftp://ftp.nwd-wc.usace.army.mil/pub/cafe/r091.txt> (yes, "ftp://")

One biologist I called said don't bother going to John Day if flows are 450,000 or higher.

I feel that if flows are much under 280,000 that the shad (the main horde of fish, anyway) congregate upstream of the fishing boundary, where you can't fish. I don't go until John Day shad counts are 10,000 per day or more. My notes indicate this usually occurs between June 10 and July 6.

At Bonneville I have always had bad fishing BELOW 20,000 shad/day, and good fishing when it's OVER 20,000/day.

At John Day, I don't fish the north side of the river, I fish the south side. At the usual June flows, the south fish ladder has 2 to 8 times as many shad traversing it as the north side.



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"TOO-DETAILED" TIPS TO HOOK 100 SHAD PER DAY (if you're happy catching a few dozen shad per day, then relax and don't waste your time reading this):

For you Washington anglers, you can get an Oregon license 24 hours at Dinty's Market which is immediately on the Oregon side just as you head south over the bridge at Biggs. Phone 541-739-2236.

My notes indicate that if you like bigger shad, or like shad roe, fish after about June 25th. The females are bigger than males, and mostly arrive about 10 days after the males.

My studies indicate that people "naturally" reel at about 1 turn per second. But my notes indicate, that in current, you'll catch way more if you don't reel in at more than 1/2 of a turn of your reel handle per second. The shad don't like to fight the current much to chase your lure.

If you buy darts with hair tails, cut off the hair, or else lure is too big!!

More current flow pushes the bulk of the fish downstream, less flow and the fish move upstream. The flows here vary by 80,000 cfs per day! Locating the fish is the key, and experience has taught me that when the cfs flows at John Day are the following, the best starting point will most likely be:

360,000 cfs: At the end of the parking lot, which is about 80' upstream from the end of the rip-rap.

330,000 cfs: A large white line is painted on the rocks, in about the middle of the parking lot. Fish where the line hits the water.

320,000 cfs: immediately below that huge "sluce" that transports the salmon smolts downstream.

300,000 cfs: 80' upstream from "sluce" (1/2 way from "sluce" to 1st Indian platform upstream.)

290,000 cfs: Within 50 feet of the upstream most fishing deadline, right below the dam.

The current is strongest from 6AM to 9AM (power requirements are highest, since customers are getting ready for their day) so during this time the shad are pushed DOWNSTREAM a bit from the normal spots. After 9AM I work my way UPSTREAM slowly, as the perfect current flows will not be in the same locations as during the peak flow periods of 6AM to 9AM. This is important since the water all looks the same, but the biggest shad schools are concentrated in maybe a 60' section of the 60 miles of this part of the river!

I almost KNOW that your town probably does not sell the best shad lures! Shad darts are so hard to find that no place in Bellingham has them, and the nation's #1 fishing tackle mail-order place, Bass Pro Shops, doesn't have ANY of them either! But with this tip you can reach over to your phone by your computer and get all the darts you need!: Call Fishermen's Marine and Outdoor in Oregon City and mail order stuff at 1-800-718-2628. It's shad section alone is almost one third the size of my local Fred Meyer's entire fishing section. Rufus General Store (3 miles from where you fish) has licenses (opens at 6AM), and the 2nd largest supply of shad darts I've ever seen. Phone 541-739-2534.

The "Shad Killer" lure is sold almost exclusively by it's manufacturer, Bill Ezell from Hermiston Oregon. Email me if you want his phone number, or mailing address to mail-order.

Don't use normal colored hooks on your darts/jigs! ALL highliners I've ever interviewed use shiny GOLD colored hooks on their darts/jigs! OR they use normal colored hooks but tie Flashabou to the collar of the jig. Paint an eye (just a black dot, a felt tip pen will do fine) on each side of the head of your jigs.

White w/red head is the all-time #1 shad color. It's #1 on the Willamette, it's #1 on the Yuba River. It's often the only color sold in stores...but many people have told me it sucks at John Day!

I've noticed people catch way fewer fish if they use (like I've done inadvertently many times) a weight that's over about 1/3 of an ounce. You'll have to reel too fast, to keep it off the incredibly grabby rocks, for the shad to really want to grab it in the strong current.

Don't use big lures. I was fishing next to a guy, and we were both using the same color and style of lure, but I caught a fish every other cast and he was skunked until I gave him that lure in the 1/16 oz. size. Then he started outfishing me!

Flows data is given in arrears (you know, it's like a rear view mirror - doesn't tell where you're going, only where you've BEEN!) So I call the Columbia River flows FORECASTING people at 503-808-3941. I call the day before I go, or plan to go, to know what exact spot to fish, and whether it'll be worth going or not.

The following site is the most detailed fishing-information site for one river in the world! It has so much info that you could even find out (not that you'd really want to) what the barometric pressure, counts of all species of salmon/shad, water clarity, flows, etc. at any Columbia River dam was on any date in the last 20 years, nicely graphed out for you!:

<http://shazam.cqs.washington.edu/dart/adultpass.html>

Technically, highliners say the best indicator of when you should go right below John Day or not is how many shad went over the Dalles Dam about ONE WEEK week ago. It takes the shad about one week to go from Dalles to John Day.

Looking at JOHN DAY shad counts technically only tells you how many shad LEFT the fishing spot in question, not how many are IN it.

The real fancy way to determine how many fish are in this general section of the river is to take the current Dalles CUMMULATIVE total and from that subtract the John Day CUMMULATIVE total! (Don't you wish you could tell exactly many fish of one species are in EVERY section of a river you fish!)

My experiments indicate that (only the shad know why!) I roughly double my catch rate if I tie the knot to the TOP of the hook eye of the dart and not to the FRONT of the hook eye of the dart, where you'd THINK it should be tied. This might allow the dart to wobble from side to side just a tad more? After every strike, or fish, or hang-up, I make a point to glance at my dart to see if the knot is still on the top, or has migrated to the front of the eye.

The rocks are so slippery when they get wet here that I've slipped and hurt myself a bit. So now I only use FELT covered footwear here.

For BONNEVILLE shad info, such as catch-rate per angler-day, go to:

<http://archives.seattletimes.com/cgi-bin/texis.mummy/web/vortex/search>

(Searches the Seattle Times site for the fishing report. Does not give John Day info, however.) Practice catch and release!