

Shad Fishing in the Central Valley

American Shad make their way up Central Valley rivers and streams each spring for their annual spawning run. These tough fighting fish have been called "little tarpon" for their fighting abilities and are pursued by sports anglers across Northern California. Native to the Northeastern United States, American Shad have been introduced to the west coast and are now found in large numbers in the Sacramento and Columbia River systems. The best time to target shad in Northern California is April through July depending on the location. In the Sacramento region, the end of April through the middle of May is the best time to fish the Sacramento River.



American Shad are relatives of the herring and spend most of their lives at sea. The males average between two to four pounds while the females can reach up to six or seven pounds. If you decide to keep some shad, they are really good when lightly smoked and canned ([Recipe Here](#)).

One thing to keep in mind is that shad do not feed in fresh water. Much like salmon, they stop feeding once they reach fresh water and begin their spawning run. They strike out of aggression or out of instinct similar to kokanee or river salmon.

American Shad shouldn't be confused with Threadfin Shad, which also live in the California Delta system. Threadfin shad only reach about six inches in length and are commonly used as bait for striped bass and sturgeon in the delta.

Practice catch and release, and good luck!



Regulations

First and foremost, be sure to check the current regulations for the area you are fishing. Some areas have **single hook** or **barbless restrictions**. I personally know of anglers who were busted in barbless areas using barbed shad darts straight out of the package. Don't bet busted, change your gear before you cast!

Tackle

Rod



Most people like to use about a six to seven foot medium rod with a fast tip. Try to go light without getting too light. Ultra-light panfish and crappie rigs are a little too light to bring in shad out of the current. A light trout rod is what you are looking for.

Reel

If casting, go with a small to medium sized spinning reel. Most people stick with spinning reels because the lures we will be using are light and need to be casted far. One important factor is a smooth drag. Shad have soft mouths and we'll be using a really loose drag setting. A jerky drag lead to lost fish.



Line

For your main line, use whatever works. I normally use 6 pound test. For the leader, I use 6 pound test fluorocarbon, just in case some of the fish are line shy.

Lures

There are several lures to choose from when shad fishing. The traditional shad dart works, but here in Northern California most people prefer to use crappie jigs. An 1/32 oz. crappie jig with a 1" curly tail grub is the most popular lure.



Jig Head

The standby color for the jig head is red, followed by chartreuse or pink. For the grub, champagne is the top color, followed by chartreuse, white, and pink. If you buy a shad dart that comes with a tail (like the ones shown here), trim it off or the lure will be too big.



Curly Tail Grub



Shad Darts

My favorite lures by far are flutter spoons like the **Dick Nite size 0** shown to the right. The half chartreuse, half pink kokanee version shown here is my favorite. I also have had success using the half white, half pink, or solid pink versions.



Dick Nite Spoon

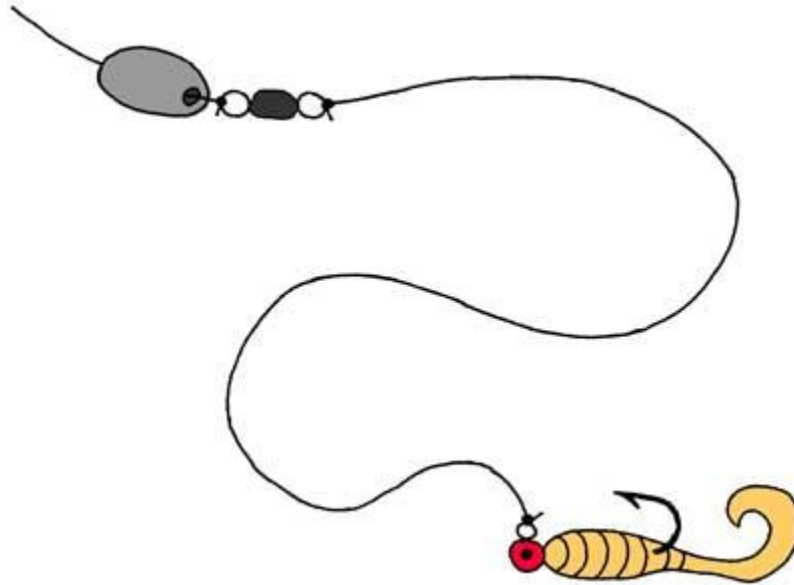
Scent

I usually will rub some krill scented gel onto my lures for good measure. I figure it can't hurt.

Setups

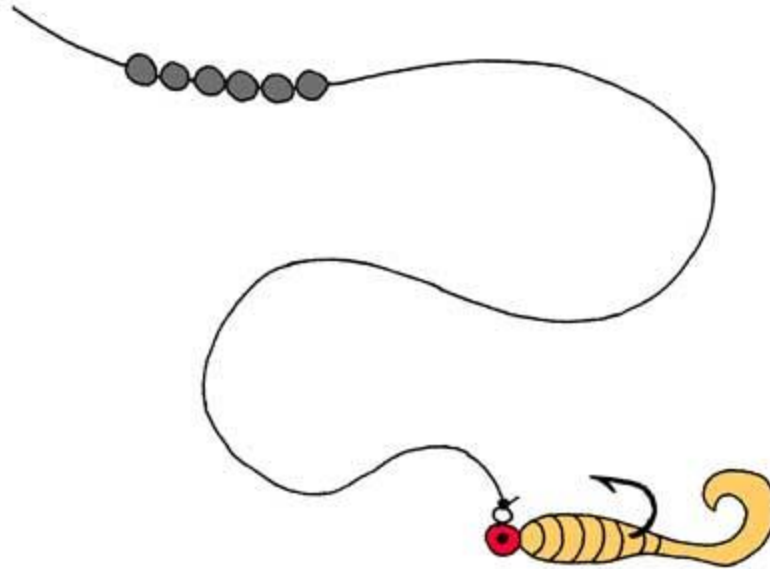
Deep Water Setup for Casting

You'll need to add some weight to get your lure down into the current. When fishing in deep or slow water, tie about a three foot leader attached to a swivel. Above the swivel add a 1/4 to 1 ounce barrel sinker.

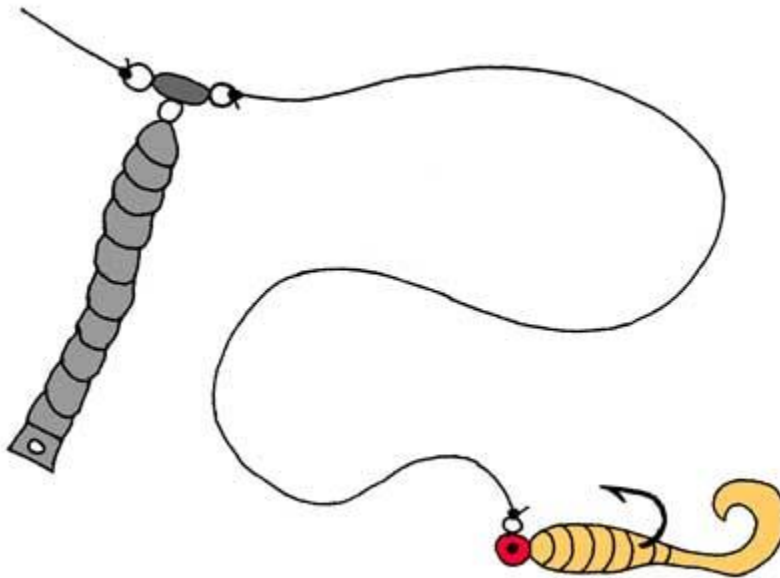


Shallow Water Setup for Casting

In shallow water, you can simply add about four to six split shots about three feet above your lure. This method works best from a boat because using it from the bank will ensure that you get snagged on the rocks often.



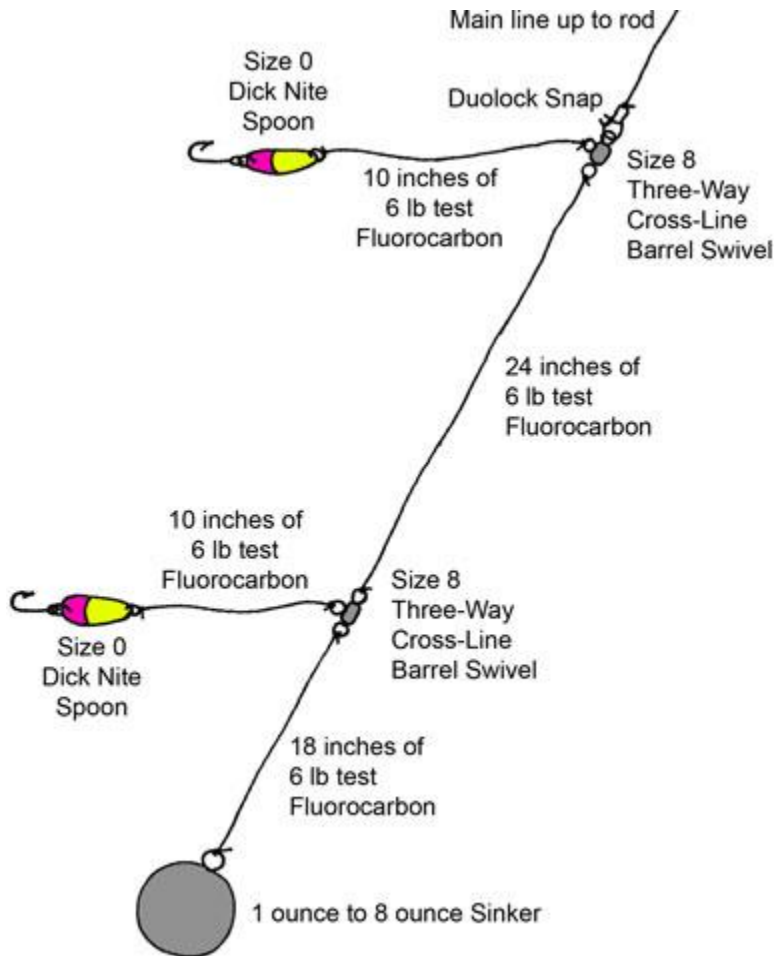
Alternatively, in shallow water you can replace the split shots with an 1/8 to 3/4 ounce slinky weight. This will help to keep you out of the rocks, especially useful when casting from the bank.



Anchored Boat Setup with Flutter Spoons

This is my favorite setup by far. Use size 1 Dick Nite spoons if the current is slow, use size 0 in fast current. Jig the rod up and down about one foot at a time to increase hookups with this rig - especially if the fishing is slow.

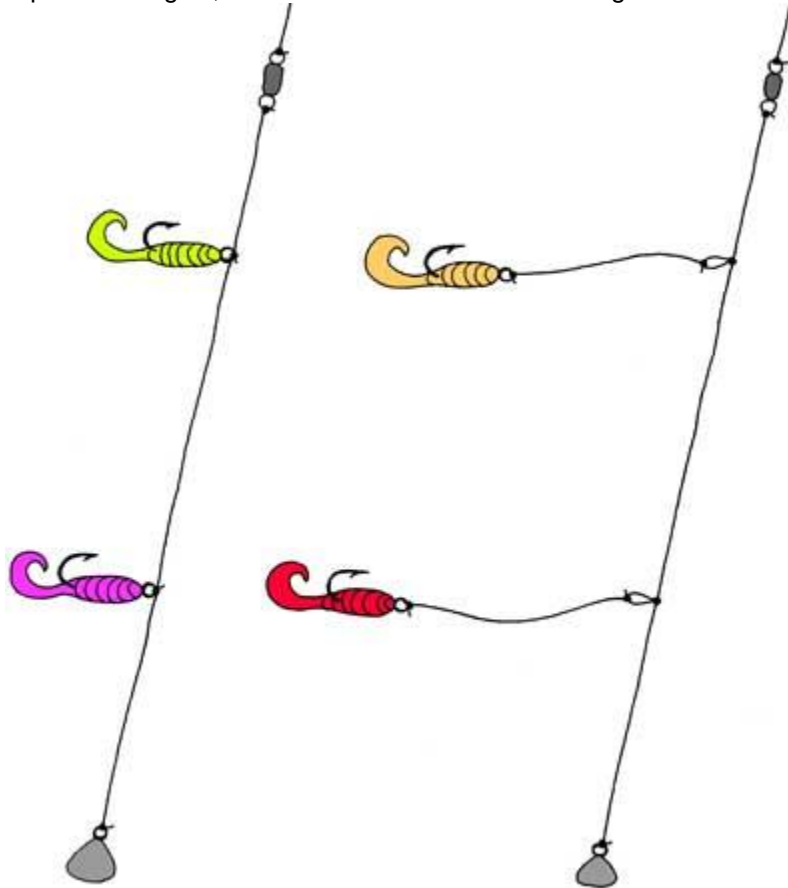
You want to keep your line fairly vertical, so adjust your sinker size as needed. Slowly lower the rig to prevent tangles, and back bounce the sinker along the bottom until it stays put. A lot of the hookups will come while back bouncing.



Anchored Boat Setup with Grubs

Be sure to jig the rod up and down about one foot at a time to increase hookups with this rig.

Again, you want to keep your line fairly vertical, so adjust your sinker size as needed. Slowly lower the rig to prevent tangles, and back bounce the sinker along the bottom until it stays put.



Location

Shad can be found throughout the Sacramento River system. In the lower section of the river, Clarksburg, Freeport, Garcia Bend, Discovery Park and Verona are all popular bank fishing venues. The American, Feather and upper Sacramento Rivers are also great places to catch shad. The faster running, shallow stretches of rivers are more popular with jet boats and anglers using waders to access fishing sites.

Technique

Find a Spot

The interesting thing about shad is that they can be found at all depths and in all types of water. Experience or watching other anglers will clue you into the better places to fish.

Deep Water Casting

If you are fishing in an area that is wide and deep, you simply need to start fishing to see where they are holding. If you are fishing of the bank in slow deep water like the Freeport area, start out by casting upstream at about a 20 degree angle. Let it sink for a few seconds and slowly retrieve your lure as it sinks to the bottom. Vary your retrieve to see what the fish are looking for that particular day. Sometimes the fish want a medium or fast retrieve, while other times they want a slow retrieve. You can also vary the amount of time you allow the lure to sink before you start your retrieve. I usually start with a five second count and go up and down from there until I find where the fish are holding. When the lure gets near the shore reel quickly to avoid getting snagged.

Shallow Water

If you are fishing in shallow water, like the upper American River, you'll need a lot less weight. In shallow stretches of the river, shad tend to hold in water that is five to seven feet deep. Look for water that has a decent amount of current running through it. Use the split shot or slinky weight setups shown above. And don't forget to check the regulations for barbless, leader length, and single hook restrictions!

The Strike

Shad tend to strike the lure fairly lightly. You might feel an abrupt bump followed by pressure. If you feel pressure, use a short quick hook set and start reeling. As I mentioned earlier, shad have very soft mouths and are easy to lose if you apply too much pressure. A huge hook set will tear their skin and cause you to lose the fish if they are hooked in the side of the mouth.

Fish On

Be sure to keep a loose drag on your reel. Your goal when fighting a shad is to keep light and steady pressure on the fish at all times. When the fish make a run, let your drag do its job. It should take several minutes to land each shad.

Time

Times that shad will bite can be unpredictable. Most people fish for shad either at mid-morning or late in the afternoon. Sometimes shad will bite like crazy right before dark. I've had some really good early morning trips myself.

Success really depends on being there when the school is moving through. Shad seem to travel in tight, single file schools. If I'm fishing and I see the boat anchored directly below me hook up, I know it's on! If boats below me off to the side start hooking fish, I will veer my boat in their direction or cast my lines to the side where the fish are moving. It really does make a difference.