

FishBusters

December 2006

“The Founding Fish”

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I was recently looking for a good read and came across a book with the intriguing title of “The Founding Fish,” by John McPhee. A quick perusal of the flyleaf enticed me to buy the book, which turned out to be a very fun



and enlightening read about American shad (*Alosa sapidissima*—meaning most savory). Not only does the book reveal the author’s piscatorial passion for the fish, but also the biology and role of the American shad in our nation’s history. The title was inspired by a fallacious story that George Washington, a commercial shad fisherman before he became our first president, saved his army at Valley Forge by taking advantage of the shad run up the Schuylkill River in 1778. The author’s research includes not only numerous interviews and site visits, but correspondence from the Library of Congress and research into the contents of the trash piles left by the Continental Army.

The read was fascinating beginning with a humorous depiction of the author’s impassioned pursuit of this ‘most succulent’ fish. Maybe I empathized a bit too much with his description of watching a master fly fisherman:

“I am casting—two, three, four. The numbers refer to casts but not shad. At last he finishes tying on a new dart, and he flings it into the river. It swings through the current, and his rod is bent by another fish. How...Does...He...Do...It? After he casts, he holds his rod at a forty-five-degree angle. His wrist flicks almost imperceptibly at a consistent rate of about once a second. He says he can feel the shad bump the dart in the center of the current, bump it again, and then go for it. His line and lures are identical with mine. I imitate him as precisely as I can. He hooks fish, I hook water.”

McPhee continued on with more historical trivia and a factual accounting of the shad's life history and biology. It is a silvery anadromous, schooling fish that conserves energy and reduces predation by swimming with its shiny, spotted colleagues up rivers to spawn each spring after having matured in the oceans. In the ocean they are 'ram feeder's' opening their mouths and using their gill rakers to strain plankton from the water as they swim through it. Going without food once they enter fresh water, they seek out water temperatures of 72°F to broadcast their eggs and milt. So why do they hit shad darts and other lures, if they all have empty stomachs and even lose 40% of their body weight during the spawning run? In McPhee's words "almost everybody has an answer...but no one-- bartender or biologist—really knows." Then he goes on to explain the most common answer is they're showing irritation and "swing their heads, as swordfish do, to bat an irritant aside." Since they don't swallow, the hook is normally loosely set in the mouth's outer rim, making for a fragile hookup which given the fish's speedy runs and acrobatic jumps creates a true challenge for the angler.

When I began reading the chapter entitled 'shad alley,' the lights really started flashing. Our own home turf, Florida was featured as the southern most range of the American shad and a unique angling opportunity. Having explained Florida's recent (geologically speaking) emergence from the sea and the St. Johns northward flowing quirks, the author goes on to describe "shad alley" as related to him by Fred Cross, one of our very own Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission biologists. Fred was portrayed as the kind of biologist the author and his companion would be if in his shoes—an experimental and practical scientist...a fisherman. Fred explained tides can affect fishing a hundred miles from the mouth of the St. Johns and that shad enter as early as Thanksgiving but are in full flow by December and extending into March, with temperatures between 61 and 66°F. Florida anglers troll during the day from Lake Jessup to Lake Harney (the Mullet Lake stretch) or from the north end of Puzzle Lake to the Highway 46 bridge (the Puzzle Lake stretch), where fly rods or ultralight spinning tackle is *de rigueur*. In 1875 there were reports of commercial anglers taking 11,000 shad near Palatka in one gillnet set, and in the 1950's the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reported 65,265 shad taken recreationally during one season. Now gill nets are banned and anglers (a saltwater license is required, www.MyFWC.com/license) tend to catch-and-release shad, rather than contending with

their bony but flavorful flesh—a practice frowned upon by Mr. McPhee but considered somewhat helpful to restoration of the fishery.

So if you're looking for a new challenge this winter check out the St. John's shad fishery. The current aggregate bag limit for shad and herring is 10 fish, with no minimum length. The current record is 5.19 pounds, and a four-pounder (or 18" long) American shad is eligible for a "Big Catch" angler recognition certificate (see MyFWC.com/Fishing/Bigcatch).

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