

COLUMBIA RIVER SHAD FISHING

For more information or to book a fishing trip please call numbers below.

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Do you want to go fishing with the expectation of catching 25 or more fish a day? I'm not talking about bluegills here. I'm talking about American Shad. Over five million passed over Bonneville Dam on the Columbia River last year. What's a Shad you ask? Think of them as herring on steroids. They average 18 inches in length and weigh up to six pounds in size. Hard fighting? You bet. We're talking strong runs and an occasional acrobat here. Interested yet? If you are, check out this little known fishery. Once you do, you'll keep coming back.



ABOUT SHAD:

The building of the dams on the Columbia River has had a negative impact on many fish in this river system but shad are not one of them. In fact, these fish have thrived in the shadow of the dams. In 1978, a million shad came into the Columbia River and annual runs have continued to increase to the point that in the last few years we have seen runs of over four million shad passing over Bonneville Dam.

Shad are a brightly colored fish: Silver bodies, green back, with large scales and a deeply forked tail. The bucks run from one to two pounds in size. Females often weigh three to six pounds. They begin entering the Columbia in good numbers in mid-May and by the middle of June a flood of 100,000 fish pass over Bonneville Dam daily. Come July, the runs into the lower Columbia begin tapering off but shad are still caught in good numbers further upriver below John Day Dam.

WHERE AND WHEN TO GO:

Start watching the [Bonneville Dam fish counts](#) in May. Once the shad count hits 40,000 a day, it's time to go fishing. Initially, Oregon anglers will hit the Willamette River while Washington fishermen will try their luck from boats in the area of Camas or from the steamboat landing dock in Washougal. Book your trip early for this truly enjoyable action packed family fishery.

As the season progresses, both shad and the anglers that chase them are drawn to the Columbia River below Bonneville Dam. Boat anglers head to Ives Island, a couple of miles below the huge structure.



When the fish are in, large numbers of anglers gather to catch them, especially on weekends. Anchored in boats, several fishermen at a time might be playing fish. To add to the scene, huge sturgeon, five to eight feet long, can be seen cruising close to shore looking for food. Sturgeon are sometimes accidentally hooked by shad anglers, but they are quickly lost as the slow moving brutes break the line. Meanwhile, osprey and bald eagles frequent the area, and it's not uncommon to see a fish hawk fold its wings and fall into the river like a stone before resurfacing and flying away with a shad in its talons.



There's fishing above the dam too. At Oregon's Cascade Locks, anglers will fish from boats anchored in the current. A few anglers have been known to have 100 fish days there. As the season progresses to July, fishing gets good below John Day Dam near Goldendale, Washington.

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BUT CAN YOU EAT THEM?

There are currently no possession limits for shad in Washington or Oregon. Despite that, I'd recommend only taking what you really need. Any fishery, no matter how high the numbers, can be decimated by over harvest.

There is a great deal of debate on how shad rate as eating fare. Some fishermen allegedly have good results baking them, smoking them, or even deep-frying the fillets. A common complaint about shad is how bony and oily they are. Some circumvent this problem by just taking the eggs. In some circles, parboiled or sautéed shad roe is considered quite a delicacy. On the other hand, many fishermen just use shad as bait for crab or sturgeon.

GO FOR IT:

Despite the crowds at the height of the season, shad fishing is really a low-pressure event and an excellent outdoor sport for kids and families. If you lose one, you know you will likely be into another before long. If you like to battle fish, or want to see a young anglers face light up with a smile, this angling is hard to beat. However long you stay on your first trip, you'll be hard pressed not to come back once you've experienced the fun that the sport of shad fishing has to offer!

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