



In Search of the Elusive Shad

In this article, Don Hearn, River Keeper and Committee Member of the Barnstaple & District Angling Association - B&DAA - describes work undertaken recently by club members as part of broader research relating to the elusive Shad that is underway on the Taw. But before we hear from Don, here is some background to put this work in context.

For those of you that haven't heard of Shad before, they are a silver fish with a flattened body, a dark back and a deeply forked tail. A member of the herring family, they are anadromous i.e. they are one of relatively few species that live in the ocean but return to freshwater to spawn. As such, they are under constant threat from river pollution and barriers to migration such as weirs. Shad are quite rare, being found in the Severn, Wye, Tamar, Humber and Towy, but are rarely seen elsewhere in Britain's rivers. It's possible to identify two distinct species of Shad, Twaite Shad and Allis Shad – both are rare, the latter particularly so – and both are highly prized conservation species: it is illegal to intentionally fish for or retain Shad in British waters.

In recent years there have been multiple reports of the rare Allis Shad in the Taw, including adults in spawning condition, a very significant development as currently the Tamar is the only confirmed spawning river for Allis Shad in England. This has been the catalyst for further research, led by Natural England in partnership with Westcountry Rivers Trust and the universities of Exeter, Swansea and Bournemouth. The RTFCA and B&DAA have contributed to this work through eDNA analysis of water samples and as Don describes below, tagging of Shad to link up with the

existing extensive telemetry array in the Bristol Channel. The Taw is a particularly interesting river in this context in that considerable work was undertaken between 2010 and 2015 to remove barriers from the river as part of the 'Taw Access over Weirs Project' and it may well be the case that this has contributed to the easier passage of Shad, as well as sea trout and salmon, up and down the river. If we are successful in proving that the Taw supports a regular, self-sustaining spawning population of Allis Shad, this would go a long way to securing funds for additional research into threatened species, and additional conservation measures under the Habitats Regulations.

Don Hearn commented on the recent work as follows;



Volunteers from B&DAA have recently engaged with the Shad tagging project. We did feel the team arrived a little late on the 19th May as the Shad had been prolific on our water with first sighting of spawning on 3rd May. They did show throughout the lower Taw after that but became a bit more elusive as the team needed to find shoals to work with. They did however get enough Data to continue the project next year and we will be happy to assist again. We started by guiding the deep pool installation of sensors in the river from Newbridge to the Mole and we know they were very grateful for the cooperation of the beat owners. We then spent 3 x3 day sessions fishing with them for the Shad. We did use the fly, but the recommended method was using small jighead paddle tails and despite our reservations regarding spinning we didn't have a single bycatch over 9 days fishing! They say that is why they use that method and bycatch of Brownies, Sea Trout or Salmon is extremely rare. They did manage successful tagging of a few fish, and the

anglers found the process fascinating as we watched them anaesthetise, insert the tag and recover the fish in the river. Project leader Dr. David Clarke told us the tagged fish have an extremely low mortality rate and 98% of the fish, particularly the Twaite, make it back to the ocean to migrate again to our rivers with some going round as many as 3 times.

The team will return in a few weeks to remove most of the sensors but will leave a couple in the tidal Newbridge area in case of stray tagged fish from other areas coming up on the bigger tides. We have been left with scale envelopes and fin clipping tubes to take samples for DNA testing from any post spawning casualties found.

It was a pleasure to work with the team on this important pilot project, and we look forward to assisting again next year. We all gained a greater insight into fish movement on the Taw and hope that makes it easier for the future.



Barnstaple & District Angling Association was formed in 1941 and currently offers its members game fishing on the River Taw on the Newbridge Beat and coarse fishing at Aller Lake near

South Molton. Further details can be found at

barnstapledistrictangling.co.uk