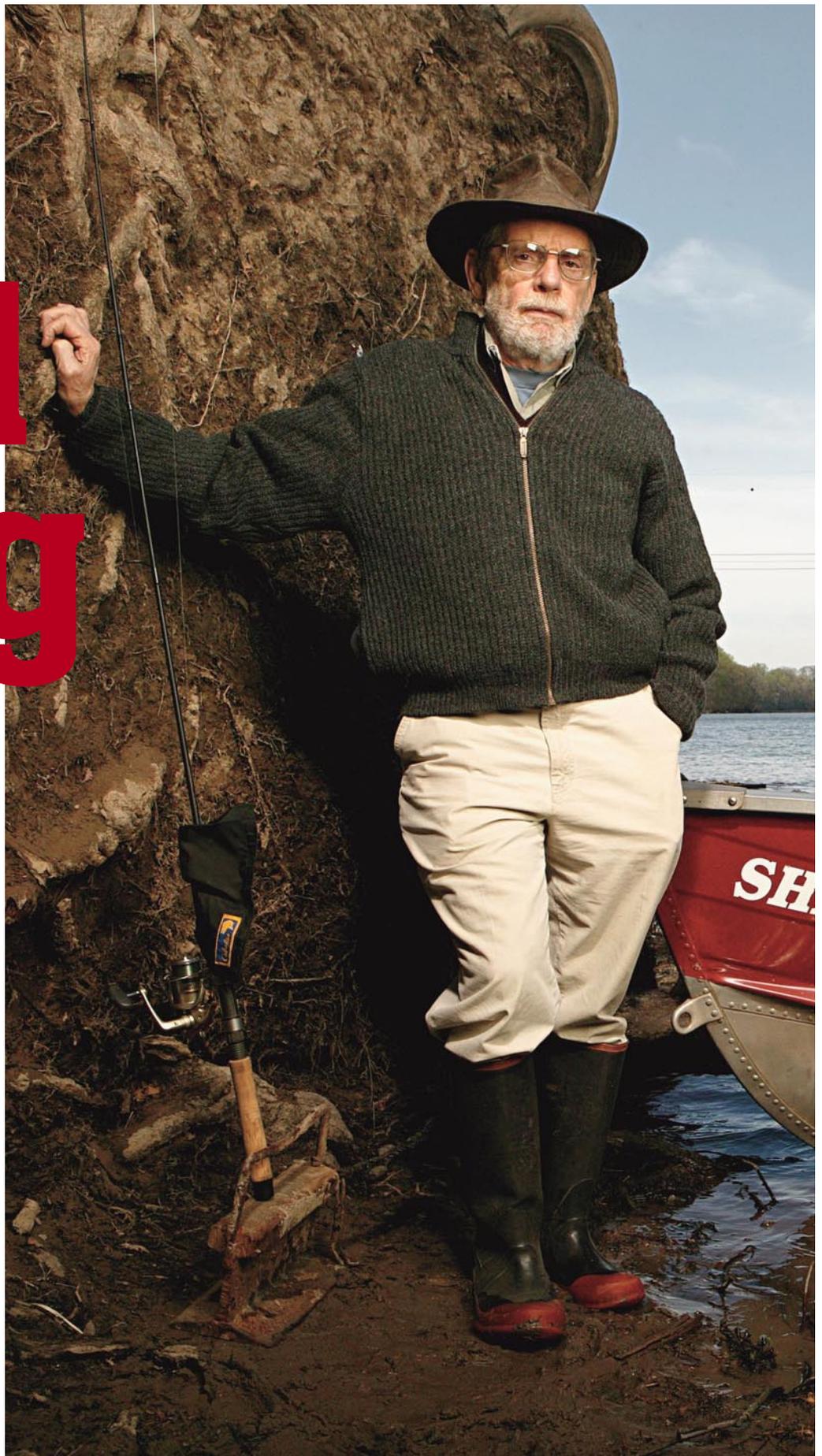


# Fishing With the Shad King

MIGRATING SHAD DON'T EAT, AND THEY FIGHT AS HARD AS ANY FISH IN THE WATER. IT'S A TOUGH GAME, EVEN WHEN THE BOAT HOLDS JOHN MCPHEE, THE FAMOUS AUTHOR OF *THE BOOK ON SHAD*, AND JIM FLYNN, THE SELF-PROCLAIMED MONARCH OF AMERICA'S GREATEST SHAD RIVER

By T. Edward Nickens

**IT IS 10 A.M. ON A BRILLIANT SPRING** morning and the Shad King is sweating. It's not from heat. It is two days before the commencement of "National Shad King Week," as the King's wife describes it, a self-indulgent time in which he and a handful of his cronies, the Shad Heads, do little—do nothing—but fish, sleep, and eat. (Some people refer to this eight-day stretch as the Forks of the Delaware Shad Tourna-





**SHAD MEN** Pulitzer Prize-winning author John McPhee (left) and Jim Flynn prepare for a day on the Delaware River.

ment, based in Easton, Pennsylvania. It is the country's largest shad tournament, and there are a pile of them.) But two weeks ago the worst flood to hit the Delaware River in half a century wrecked the valley. When the water crested, trash, silt, and muck floated 4 feet deep in the Shad King's river cabin. Nearby boat ramps were swept away. Riverside roads crumbled into heaps of macadam and mud-caked concrete. The river was a mess and the shad fishing—well, the King didn't want to think about it.

Then, just a week ago, a beluga whale showed up in the river, under the Trenton, New Jersey, bridge, feeding on about a billion shad and herring every day. Right now it's attracting hordes of onlookers and sending shad fishermen into a tizzy over what measures the tree huggers might take in order to keep anglers a safe distance—say, 6 nautical miles—from the navigationally challenged marine mammal during the peak of the American shad migration up America's greatest shad river.

And there's more, for into this quagmire steps a writer for a national magazine who has come to see just what the Shad King can do, to go where the Shad King says the heart and soul of shad fishing in America is, and to try to figure out why American shad fishing has a heart and soul to begin with.

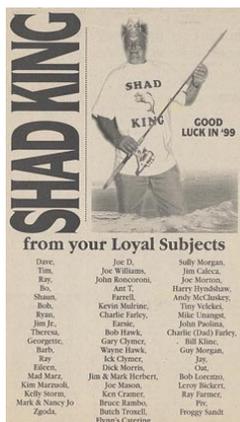
Quickly, now, because it's already late and the Shad King is getting antsy—one more addition to the King's burdens:

Today he and his new writer friend are to meet a man named John McPhee, and the Shad King is a little rattled by the prospect. McPhee is one of the most respected natural history writers of our time. A staff writer for *The New Yorker* magazine and a Ferris Professor of Journalism at Princeton University, McPhee won the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction for his 20-year-long book project *Annals of the Former World*. None of that matters as much to the Shad King as the fact that in 2002 McPhee published his 26th book, *The Founding Fish*, a tome of 358 engrossing pages parsing every possible detail and attribute of the American shad and American shad fishing. During his research for the book, McPhee tried to hook up with the Shad King, but it never happened. Now it's happening.

So the Shad King has a few things on his mind. Months in advance of a migratory period that can shift by weeks on either end, he'd chosen a date for us to fish. Now it's late in the morning, later than he'd like it, and we step into his fishing partner's 19-foot Monark metal skiff, dubbed the *Shad II*. We push off into the Foul Rift pool, a mile-long slack below the largest rapid on the longest undammed river in eastern America, a place where generations of the Shad King's family have cast for the world's largest herring, to see what he can do.



**TWO TACTICS** Flynn (standing) has embraced the modern shad technique of using downriggers. McPhee prefers the traditional method of casting shad darts.



## Winning the Forks of the Delaware Shad Tournament is the regional equivalent of winning the Heisman Trophy.

**L**

et me tell you up front that this is going to be a fishing story in which relatively few fish appear, and that you shouldn't hold it against the Shad King. That's not the way he wants it. It's not what he's accustomed to. But these are American shad, and that is the way it is.

The Shad King is Jim Flynn, a 50-year-old husband, father, fisherman, and field supervisor for a propane gas company from Phillipsburg, New Jersey, hard on the Delaware River. He is red-faced and blue-eyed, boisterous and boyish and blissful that he lives in a small town where being a big kid at 50 years of age does not go unappreciated. There might be more dissimilar figures than the Shad King and the unassuming, self-effacing, professorial John McPhee. It is, for example, unlikely that conditions would ever exist to prompt McPhee to parade up and down the Delaware River in an \$8 Party City crown adorned with plastic rubies, as the King has done. But for all their differences, a few things they share. Each is utterly convinced that this untrammelled, largely agrarian swath of northwestern New Jersey is a little piece of heaven on earth. And each is in love with the American shad.

It could be argued that the American shad presents a greater possibility for future gains in recreational fishing opportunity than any other

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: MICHAEL SUGRUE; COURTESY OF JIM FLYNN (2)

fish. They are native to eastern rivers from Labrador to Florida, and in recent years along the eastern seaboard, dam removals and new ways of passing migratory fish around dams have opened up thousands of miles of spawning habitat closed to shad for decades. On the west coast, the fish aren't native, but they've been there since 1871, when four milk cans of Hudson River juvenile shad were carted by railroad and stagecoach and poured into the headwaters of California's Sacramento River. In the Columbia River states, American shad populations have quadrupled since 1970 and now support an enormous recreational fishery.

Shad fishing is built on the premise that the fish don't eat anything at all during their migrations from the ocean to the freshwater rivers where they spawn. Instead, American shad are said to slash and strike out of annoyance, or irritation, or instinct, or some reason other than hunger. But here's the trick: For whatever reason they strike, when they do, the result can be spectacular. The same morphological attributes that allow shad to swim for an average of 2,000 miles each year give them plenty of ways to trip up a reel drag. They sport the deeply forked tail of tuna, bonefish, and other speedsters. A flat, compressed profile slices through current like a scimitar, and when a shad turns its deep, wedge-shaped body broadside to the current, the fisherman has to fight the force of the entire river, and the fish knows it. Sounding or leaping, American shad are, as an old saw goes, "pound for pound, the fight'n'st fish around."

Which is a good thing, because the odd pound of shad is all we're going to get.

Foul Rift is a half-mile run of ledge-slashed haystacks, souse holes, and standing waves. At certain levels, jet-drive outboards can pick their way through, but not today. We hug the "Pennsie side," as the King describes it, worming our way along boulders silt-blasted to a baby-smooth finish. Tufts of leaves, trash bags, and a pair of gym shorts are tangled 12 feet high in the trees. My stomach knots at the thought of so much water thundering through.

We anchor up at a strong eddy line, what the Shad King calls a "backwash," and he and his buddy Tim Clymer go to work on the downriggers. McPhee draws a finger through a clear plastic lure box and ties on a small dart—pink and white with a tail of pearl Flashabou. He snips off the tag end of line with the scissors from a Leatherman tool.

To catch a shad, according to McPhee, the fisherman must be able to read the river like a whitewater kayaker. Below rapids, where the roiling, swift currents unspool downstream from the rocks, eddy lines form on both sides of the pool. Pods of shad hold beside the seam, and whether the angler is casting or fishing with downriggers, eddy lines are where the action is. When there is action. In good years, McPhee tells me, the fish are everywhere. Most years, however, it's a game of patience, frequently giving way to outright endurance. "It seems like I can spend a month waiting for something to happen," he says, "then you can have your whole season in a day or two."

His right leg is crossed over his left, forming a shelf on which he rests his hands, twitching the rod tip to life every few seconds. "That's all it takes," he explains, "just a little *took...took* every now and then."

But it's not working. Not today, not here. We catch the occasional shad, but none are overly

large or feisty. None are showy or jumpy like shad are supposed to be. They surge for a few moments, but not in a manner that makes memories. It's a long time between fish, but it's still early in the day. There's time.

To fill it, Clymer explains the genesis of the Shad King's royalty. In 1998, the King won the Forks of the Delaware Shad Tournament with a 7.23-pound buck fish. Winning this is the regional equivalent of coming home with the Heisman Trophy; even the lady at the convenience-store checkout knows who wins, and she can likely quote a list of the last decade's winners. "It's big around here," Clymer says. "I'm telling you—people covet that tournament." The following winter, the King's cronies at deer camp dubbed him the "Shad King" and held a coronation ceremony with a cheap party crown. It was an adolescent prank, fueled by deer-camp liquor and small-town friendships. It got better.

That spring, the Shad Heads solicited friends to pony up \$10 apiece to place an ad in the local paper, complete with a photograph of the crowned king with a fishing-rod scepter, wishing the Shad King "Good Luck from your Loyal Subjects" for the next tournament. It was designed to be a "bust"—the Shad Heads' term for good-natured ribbing or practical jokes, such as drilling a hole in a boat angler's pee can—but Flynn seeks the limelight like a shad seeks shade, and he can take as good as he gives. Embracing the name, the crown, and the benefits of local notoriety, he became the darling of tournament boosters and turned into the go-to interviewee for reporters covering shad fishing. He motored up and down the river in his crown. He attracted the attention of McPhee. "If we'd known it was going to be this big," Clymer says with a laugh, "we'd have thrown that crown in the trash can."

**B**ut the King is not delivering today, when the spotlight is on. McPhee tries to relieve the suffocating pressure of no fish. "My being here doesn't bode well," he offers, softly. "I consistently catch the fewest fish. I don't know what it is."

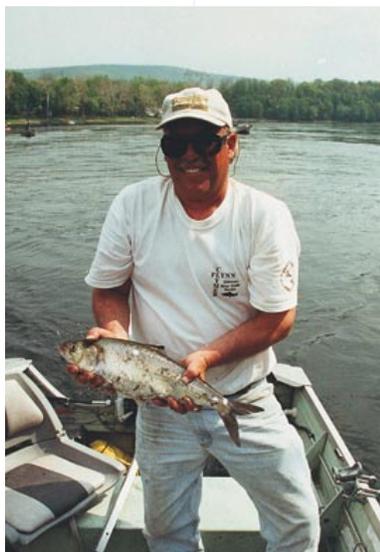
"What it is," says the King, "is that these are not fish. They're damned shad."

"Yes," McPhee says. He's quiet for a long moment, as if that's all there is to say about it. *Took...took.*

We give the spot 45 minutes of effort, changing depths, spoon colors, spoon sizes, the orientation of the boat in the current. Four men in a shad boat on the Delaware in spring shouldn't have to work this hard for fish. "People take off their week of vacation to fish for shad here," McPhee says, shaking his head. "This is the Yankee Stadium of shad fishing."

The Shad King's shoulders slump.

We motor downstream, to a wide spot in the river beneath the 500-foot-tall smokestacks and cooling towers of Pennsylvania Power & Light's Martins Creek plant. It's a surreal atmosphere, fishing for wild fish in the shadow of such a monolithic industrial presence. Clymer is on the throttle, watching the depth numbers on the fishfinder. The Shad King is on his knees in the bow, a white anchor line snaking through his hands. He knows with precision where he wants the boat and keeps one eye on the shore for position, but he's a little handicapped ever since the flood ripped away the (Continued on page 94)



**SUCCESS** The King with an average-size shad caught in the Foul Rift in 2004.

## Fishing With the Shad King

(Continued from page 67) refrigerator that long ago had lodged itself against a tree just opposite the underwater shelf. Now it's all about the numbers telegraphing the bottom profile.

"Eleven feet," Clymer drones. "Eleven. Ten. Ten."

"Keep it coming," says the King. "I want it up on the ledge."

"Ten. Ten. Ten. Nine."

"Now. Shut her down."

In his mind, the King says, he imagines the river's bottom as the shad see it. They are on the run, moving with an urgency that pushes a fish from the deep ocean to river shallows hundreds of miles from the sea. The buck shad are "squirrelly," and they'll venture into shallower water. Not so the roes. "I think they keep their noses buried in the river channel and just go."

He explains the strategy. The Foul Rift pool is deep, 20, 40, 60 feet in places, but at the head of the pool there's a change. The water starts to foam. The fish can hear, or feel, or sense in the way that fish sense the world in a manner fishermen can't understand, the rapids ahead. Below the power plant the river channel snakes away from the Jersey bank to the Pennsie side, and so do the fish. Right there the bottom starts to rise, and so do the fish. "We want metal in their faces right as they bump up the ledge."

McPhee looks out over the broad, nearly featureless run. He deadpans: "I don't see how we can miss."

Five seconds later the Shad King's rod bends deep. "Right as I was feathering it over the ledge." He nudges me and crooks a finger at me, at the rod, at the place where the line disappears into the Delaware, grinning, a red-faced cherub of a man for whom it's all a little better now.

Clymer is right there for him. "Don't get all puffed up. One isn't the magic number," he says. I can hear the air leave the King. "You'll know when we have them dialed in."

So we wait for the next fish—hoping, wishing, trying to believe that the shad just landed was the first or second or 50th in a phalanx of migrating shad that at this very moment stretches from Foul Rift to the sea. We're greeted with nothing. An hour of nothing. Two.

It's not a bad way to spend a pretty spring day. But I'm glad I'm not the Shad King.

IT'S TWO O'CLOCK NOW, AND BEFORE every cast, every time, without fail, the Shad King first checks the action of his flutter spoon. He studies it for flotsam fouled in the split ring or draped over the willow blade. He dips it in the river current beside the boat, quiet for the moment, making sure that it flutters just so. Because when the spoon is fluttering, so too is the bright gold long-shanked hook hand-soldered to it. And it is that agitated, quivering action of the gold hook, the King is convinced, that entices the shad to strike.

"Not the spoon itself?" I ask.

**“I'd come as close as possible to touching a migrating shad, and it left me speechless.”**

"Nah," says the King.

"What about color?" McPhee queries. Most shad fishermen carry spoons in at least a dozen color combinations, all hand-painted, all requiring multiple coats of pigment and clear coat and glitter. Pink-on-white. Orange. Chartreuse-on-green. Some are speckled, others striped. "Does color seem to make a difference?"

"Nah," says the King. "It's the flutter of that gold hook. The shad just can't take it."

But the shad are tight-lipped despite the flutter spoons fluttering all around our boat. In two hours of fishing, our four rods take three fish. The slow fishing means long periods of silence in the boat. We haven't been fishing together long enough for the quiet to feel altogether comfortable, not like guys such as the King and Clymer, who sometimes fish for 14 hours a day, day after day, within a rod's length of each other. The occasional shad yanks the line, but these fish leave in their wake silences that beg to be filled by something—other fish, preferably. Instead, they're filled by the whine of the downrigger wires vibrating in the current.

In McPhee's defense, this is not his pre-

## Fishing With the Shad King

ferred method of fishing for shad. He is an advocate of the traditional shad dart, offered to shad in the traditional manner, meaning cast across the current, with the river's flow swinging the dart into the eddy lines below.

That's how most anglers caught shad for decades. But over the last 15 years or so, downriggers have altered the landscape of American shad fishing, at least in the Delaware River. Just the day before, I'd stood in George "Pappy" Magaro's 19-foot skiff, on a current seam at the confluence of the Delaware and Lehigh Rivers. (This is actually the "forks" of the Delaware; the Lehigh was long considered a branch of the main stem.) The boat bristled with downriggers. Magaro is a retired Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, firefighter, festooned with tattoos and turquoise jewelry, subtle as a gaff. He pours untold hours into the Delaware River Shad Fishermen's Association, of which he is the current president, and fishes this very same current seam 60, 70, 80 days in a season.

For a long time, Magaro told me, it was shad darts and nothing but. Then someone showed up with a downrigger. "My catch rate went up 70 percent," he said. A lot of people don't like downriggers, he admitted. "They think it's cheating. But fishfinders and downriggers put your bait right where the fish are. Since when is that cheating?"

In only one place in McPhee's opus to the American shad does he mention the notion of a downrigger. It is in a passage about one of the Delaware's great icons of shad fishing, Buddy Grucela, a guy who grew up near Foul Rift. In 1982 Grucela wrote *The Original Guide to Better Shad Fishing on the Delaware River*. A man who not only made his own shad darts but had a machinist custom-make his own shad-dart mold, Grucela "spurns downriggers," McPhee wrote. McPhee then observed, not so subtly, "He prefers to do the fishing himself."

NOW IT'S FOUR O'CLOCK, AND WE'RE ALL a little antsy. We've been anchored in a new spot for two hours and the only action has been a fish lost when the downrigger failed to release. If I'd had X-ray vision to see through his hat brim, I am sure I would have seen McPhee wince. A man with a fish pole in his hands might have landed that fish.

We pull anchor to try something new. For

an hour we've watched a small boat filled with Herberts, another stalwart Foul Rift family, pull in half a dozen shad by trolling flutter spoons up the pool, inching slowly upcurrent. With each Herbert fish I could feel the noose tighten on the Shad King. Then, suddenly, as McPhee reels in his line, his rod tip bows. The King tenses, but unfortunately it's not a fish. McPhee's line has wrapped ingloriously around the downrigger apparatus. I reach over to unbraid the snarl, and the line breaks. I wrap the loose line around my left hand, bringing the dart back to the boat, and that's when a silver-green shape slashes toward the surface. After we've spent hours analyzing bottom contours and dialing in downriggers to put our lures within a foot or two of the channel bottom, a fish porpoises in 14 feet of water to take a shad dart a foot deep? Why would a shad do that? What's it doing this close to the surface?

A mere 6 or 7 feet separate me from the fish, so there's no line stretch to work with, nowhere the shad can go. The King and Clymer hoot at the spectacle, and for maybe 15 seconds I fight the fish by hand, no downrigger to blunt the electric jolt of every surge, no limber rod to take the brunt of each swift change of direction when the fish turns its fat, hatchet-head belly into the current.

Shad have notoriously fragile mouths, and I know the papery membrane that holds the hook won't be able to sustain this kind of abuse. It's a fine line shad fishermen walk every time they hook a fish. "Don't horse it!" angling partners yell, unhelpfully, knowing full well that the guy with the rod in his hand is trying his level best to avoid just that. I desperately try to unwrap a few coils of line to feed the green fish a bit of slack, careful not to jerk or pull too hard, and that's when the line goes slack, the shad disappears, and the dart dangles behind the boat. I groan. But there, for a few seconds, I'd come as close as anyone could to reaching out and touching a live, migrating American shad with as few physical intermediaries as possible. It left me momentarily speechless.

Not so the Shad King. He is beside himself. "Craziest thing I've ever seen!" he hollers. Clymer whoops with glee. When I glance at McPhee, he is behind his hat brim, quietly running a finger through his lure box, ciphering the future.

AT SEVEN THE TROLLERS PICK UP AN-  
other shad. We catch nothing. The sunlight  
coming through the trees on the Pennsie side  
is gorgeous, filtering through young leaves.  
Birds begin to sing their evening songs—a  
mourning dove, a meadowlark. We catch  
nothing. Minutes, a half hour, tick by. A pea-  
cock crows from someone's backyard. Clymer  
looks at the King. "That's usually the signal  
that it's getting ready to bust loose," he says.  
We catch nothing. My heart's breaking for the  
Shad King. I know these guys can catch fish.  
The King and Clymer have caught fish so fast  
that they couldn't keep the downriggers locked  
and loaded. They've caught 40, 50 fish in a day  
and more. They've won dailies, won the tour-  
nament. A sparrow sings. Nothing. The sun  
drops down to another branch. Nothing. Arms  
crossed, hands in pockets, McPhee is in the  
right-hand seat, jigging his shad dart half-  
heartedly with a bump of the knee.

The Shad King shrugs. "Sorry there weren't  
many fish. I wish we could have caught a few  
more." It's the shoe-shuffling apology every  
fisherman has heard—and offered.

But nobody's holding anything against  
anyone. No one is here to dethrone the Shad  
King. And that's when it occurs to me that this  
is the heart and soul of shad fishing. Not the  
good days, when you work double hookups  
for hours on end and the paint and glitter and  
depth don't matter. This is when the heart and  
soul of shad fishing comes to the surface—  
when the fish are in the river and you are on it  
and the water temperature is just right and the  
light is low and shade is creeping and the pea-  
cock crows and all day long you have caught  
next to nothing. And then nothing at all. And  
still, you fish.

McPhee seems genuinely happy to have  
spent a half day on the water, in the company  
of a crew of rabble-rousers quite unlike him-  
self, ribbing each other with inside jokes.

Quiet. Then:

"I've been to the Bonneville Dam, on the  
Columbia River, where 5 million shad pass  
through every spring." McPhee tells the story  
softly, as an aside to the falling light and the  
hush of fishermen with few fish to discuss.

The Shad King's thin eyebrows arch over

his glasses. "Five million shad?" In recent  
years, the Delaware has hosted somewhere  
between 100,000 and 300,000 migrating fish.

"Oh, yes. People in this part of the country  
rarely think about shad being in the Pacific  
Northwest, but the Columbia is home to the  
largest run of shad in the world."

"Five million shad?" says the Shad King.  
It's a figure he seems to have trouble grasping.  
It's not a matter of disbelief, not that he thinks  
it can't possibly be true, or that McPhee is  
mistaken or dishonest. But standing in the  
boat dubbed the *Shad II*, afloat on the Yankee  
Stadium of shad fishing, this man whose life  
revolves around shad—he just can't get his  
mind around a river full of 5 million shad.

"Five million. Did you hear that, Timmy?"  
He grows quiet. It is a very un-King-like mo-  
ment. But then he reaches down to study his  
flutter spoon and to pluck away part of an oak  
catkin caught on the shank. It's only the size  
of a mustard seed, but it's just enough to foul  
the flutter. And whether there are 5 million  
fish in the river or the fading hope of a single  
one, the Shad King is taking no chances. 