

Asian Carp Emerge As The New Bullies Of America's Waterways

BY LEE HILL KAVANAUGH
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KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Cold-blooded. Spawning faster than rabbits. Leaping boats in a single swish.

Leaving in their wake, dozens of slack-jawed (and several cases of tooth-loosened) fishermen, kayakers, water skiers and anyone else who dares to trespass through their watery world.

Asian silver carp are becoming the new bullies in America's waterways, said a Missouri fish biologist.

"They're here, they're a problem, they're not going away soon. And they could potentially be life-threatening," said Duane Chapman, a research fish biologist at the U.S. Geological Survey and national expert on invasive carp species.

Last week, a Texas kayaker racing on the Missouri River had a sudden encounter of the slimy, slapping kind in the MR340 kayak race. Although he was OK, he chose to leave the race because of them.

The only warning anyone on the water has that these fish are about to propel themselves in panic is (with apologies to Ross Perot) they emit a sucking sound.

"You hear that ... sound ... and everybody ducks their heads between their legs waiting for the splash," Chapman said.

Watch out especially along wing dikes where the waters are calm. Take care at night, when they can't be seen flying at you. From rivers in South Dakota to the shores of Ohio, they fly out like popping corn without a lid.

That's the image the non-fishing public has of these crazy fish. But anyone who has ever been hit knows there's nothing funny about them.

"These fish can grow into 70 or 80 pounds," warned scientist Tracey Hill at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. So far, the silver carp in Missouri's rivers average around 15 to 20 pounds. Eating 5 to 20 percent of their weight daily, they grow fast.

Hill recently returned to his Columbia office after studying the

density of silver carp populations in the waterways near Chicago. Although few were found there, he knows how bad it can get. In a Missouri River tributary near Columbia, "more were in the air than in the water," he said. He and his crew wore hockey helmets to protect themselves.

Even with the precautions, Hill still took a couple of fish hits in the chest and batted a few from his face. One managed to hammer him right in the kneecap.

"That hurt," Hill said. Asian carp are such a nuisance on the Missouri River that fishermen and other boaters protect themselves with barrier nets, not only to shield the passengers, but also to protect the boat motor's throttle mechanism from damage.

"If they hit the throttle front or back, it'll floor the engine in reverse or forward, and that's dangerous," Chapman said. "Someone could fall out and even be run over by his own boat. There are times when a fisherman doesn't come home, and who knows what happened to him out there on the river?"

Fish biologists are studying whether the silver carp, which were introduced in the 1970s to Arkansas lakes to forage on troublesome algae, might also be sucking in the tiny young of Missouri's native fish species. Other algae feeders clearly are losing the competition for the food, which means less for game fish to eat.

Besides the silver, other Asian species, the black, the grass — which can jump, too, although not as much — and the bighead — which reach 100 pounds — are taking over U.S. waterways, just as they have done the European rivers. When a large section of the Danube River was poisoned by an accidental cyanide spill, 90 percent of the belly-up fish were Asian carp.

Asian carp are causing a big controversy in the Great Lakes region, where five states — Michigan, Wisconsin, Ohio, Minnesota and Pennsylvania — are asking a federal judge in Chicago to close two shipping

locks and install additional barriers to prevent Asian carp from using the canals to reach the Great Lakes. One assistant attorney general dubbed the area "the carp highway."

But that plan has met strong legal resistance from barge and tour boat operators who use the canals.

Fish biologists spotted a big-head carp six miles from the lake, well past the electronic barriers that officials placed to prevent the species from invading.

Catching the silver carp — which like all carp do not take a hook — is like herding cats, Chapman said. Although they leap across boats, they seem to avoid nets. So scientists have gone to Innovative Net Systems in Milton, La.

Greg Faulkner, co-owner of the net company, said he wants to catch these elusive fliers, too, hoping to grab a new growing niche market. But his company's first attempt to corral them failed.

"In 15 minutes we knew we'd brought a knife to a gunfight," he said with a chuckle. "These fish aren't whale smart, but they have a strong natural instinct. They swim into the net, then swim out just as fast. They can haul ass, like fish on steroids."

The company is finding some success with a modified purse net with a wide-enough mesh to allow native species to escape.

Although fish biologists see the invasive carp as a nuisance, Chapman, who is the world's leading authority on them, admitted to having a love-hate relationship, especially after cooking one.

"They taste good!" he said. "They have a lot of bones, but their meat resembles a cod taste. They're low in contaminants, low in fat, high in omegas."

To show others how to fillet, cook and share a few recipes, Chapman teamed up with some Louisiana State University students to make three YouTube videos titled "Flying Fish, Great Dish."

Faulkner likes eating the carp, too. He sees the species as a potential new fish star in the

gourmet world — if people can get over what they look like, he added.

"There's more to these fish than just looking ugly. The yuppie fish of the year was the orange roughy, and if you ever saw it come out of the water, it would scare the hell out of you. Hell, the monkfish is the ugliest fish on the planet. ... Americans say these carp taste bad, but in China, people there have just about cleaned them out, so many eat them."

"... We have the potential for making a cheap, good-tasting protein meal, especially for people who can't afford salmon. I say, get the bones out and bring on those recipes."

TRAVIS HEYING/WICHITA EAGLE/MCT



Jason Goeckler, of the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks, ducks to avoid a Silver Carp that came shooting out of the Kansas River near Kansas City, Kan., recently. The non-native fish is becoming common where the Kansas and Missouri Rivers meet. When it senses danger, such as a boat motor, it comes shooting out of the water.

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Or as Quintus Horatius Flaccus, otherwise known as Horace, might say: Carpe carp. Seize the carp.

In honor of their hard work and dedication, we salute the workers of the South Dakota Human Services Center and thank them for their commitment and dedication to the citizens of South Dakota.



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