

NONNATIVES AND INVASIVES: THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

Nonnative species – bad. Native species – good.

Well mostly. Not all nonnatives invade, and some are beneficial. You don't hear the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife complaining about hordes of daffodils taking over the wetlands, but you do hear about people working to restore Oregon oak savannas fighting those (native) Douglas firs invading like the Ents of the *Lord of the Rings* gone bad. Those bees and earthworms gardeners love? Not native. The wolves returning to Oregon that ranchers are railing against? Well, wolves once were native. For Earth Day, *EW* explores nonnatives and invasives from mute swans – not silent but perhaps deadly – to carp and crawdads to look at what is making its way into our state and what these animals bring to the table, sometimes literally.

– Camilla Mortensen

TODD COOPER



CARPE THE CARP

Stalking the elusive 'Kentucky tuna' in Oregon waters

BY DANTE ZUÑIGA-WEST

In the ponds, rivers, lakes and backwaters of Oregon lurk invaders who have been here for decades. Hard-fighting behemoths, hidden beneath vegetation and murk, they have escaped captivity to wreak havoc. They thrive in our waterways, destroying the habitat, bullying native species and, if their bigger, scarier friends get here, we could be in for a nasty series of events. We must hunt them — all of them — now. I gave it my best shot.

Common carp have been in Oregon so long that most people are unaware these fish are an invasive species. Native to Eurasia and originally imported to aquaculture ponds in the Pacific Northwest, these bottom-feeding warm-water domestic invaders can grow upwards of thirty pounds. Carp in the wild get even bigger. The infamous silver carp can grow to be one hundred pounds in weight and is known to exhibit an unusual jumping behavior in response to the sound of boat motors.

Imagine a hundred pound fish leaping out of the water and smacking you in the head while you are cruising down the Willamette. It happens often on the Mississippi River, where Asian carp are already a problem, causing reports of significant physical injury (broken jaws, concussions, etc). Rick Boatner, invasive species and wildlife integrity coordinator for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), says Oregon will be in "serious trouble" if Asian carp, specifically silver or bighead carp, find their way into our waters to join our common carp invaders. "So far we don't have any

reports of them here, but our habitat in the Willamette Valley is perfect for them," Boatner says.

Most troubling, Boatner says, are YouTube videos from the southern United States where people cruise through carp-infested water with loud motors and bowfish as the fish rise to jump. He worries that these videos will inspire locals to import silver and bighead carp into Oregon's rivers.

Though ODFW has several different kinds of Asian carp on its radar screen — grass, silver, bighead and black carp — it is the common carp that we in the Willamette Valley see the most. They have a bronze-brownish color and, unlike Asian carp, which have eyes oddly placed on either side of their heads, common carp have eyes where you'd expect to find them on a fish — more toward the top. While not as violently dangerous to human physical wellbeing as their silver buddies, common carp are incredibly destructive to the local ecosystems.

"They eat fish eggs, microinvertebrates; they stir up sediment and destroy the vegetation that smaller fish need to hide in," Boatner says. "We encourage people to catch and take them. There's no limit to how many you can take." One \$30 permit and you're good to go.

So the verdict came down from above: Hunt the invaders, go to their strongholds, seek them out and harvest them for the good of Mother Nature — and for Oregon. If you can't beat 'em, catch 'em and eat 'em. This is already happening in the South, and should the carp species boom in the Pacific Northwest it is likely that

ODFW and some conservationist groups will more strongly urge fishermen to do the same. It's not just locavores; now we can be invasivores.

But I found myself somewhat discouraged in my hunt for the elusive "Kentucky tuna." I'd picked up a lead that there were carp in the Alton Baker canoe canal and made my way there with spear and rod. Yes, spear. Because carp are not considered by ODFW to be a game fish (similar to crayfish and bullfrogs), it is permissible to hunt them with bows and spears as well as rod and reel. I searched the canal for any sign of the "Golden Ghost," but saw nothing. A local fisherman and his son responded quizzically to my endeavor: "Why you fishing for carp?" asked the father. "You want a mouthful of bones?"

I returned with my limit of five rainbow trout, but no carp. Absolutely no one I encountered on my trips to the canal, Coyote Creek or Fern Ridge Reservoir suggested I attempt to eat a carp should I catch one. I didn't. Not many of my friends were excited about the prospect of coming along with me, either — carp fishing can be a lonely sport in Oregon. It's best to go in the summer, when the water is warmer.

Though the internet is full of interesting ways to cook and eat carp, the trend hasn't caught fire here in our state. Carp supposedly tastes like a cross between scallops and crab. Russian populations have been known to broil carp, and the fish is a staple among some Asian cultures. I've yet to find out for myself how carp tastes, but I'm not giving up. The invaders remain at large, to be hunted. ☹️

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