

Hunting for Exotics

By Ron Wilson

The search for aquatic nuisance species in North Dakota intensifies as the threat of some exotic critter or plant causing disorder in our waterways remains.

North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries staff began monitoring waters in 2002 for ANS while conducting fish inventories. This effort continued in 2003-05, but was amplified last year when a seasonal aide was hired to scrutinize dozens of waters where the threat seemed most logical.

"Last summer we looked at 87 different waters," said Lynn Schlueter, Department special projects biologist. "Some of these waters were sampled on more than one occasion, at more than one site, with more than one sample taken at each site."

What that means is that nearly 4,000 samples were taken from approximately 1,400 sites on 87 North Dakota waters. Lakes, reservoirs and rivers were selected because they receive a lot of use by visitors, are frequented by North Dakotans who also fish out-of-state, plus have water conditions that would support aquatic nuisance species.

"In today's world of travel – where the angler thinks nothing of pulling a boat to the Great Lakes to fish for salmon and then is back on our waters soon thereafter – none of these aquatic nuisance species are that far away," Schlueter said.

The cause for all the scrutiny of North Dakota's waters include Eurasian water milfoil, curly leaf pondweed, spiny water flea, zebra mussels, the list goes on. These alien environmental offenders have no place in North Dakota, but oftentimes thrive, suffocating the natural order of things. In the case of milfoil, the plant grows under water,

forming thick mats that make boating difficult; provides too much cover, leading to stunted fish populations and few large fish; and hinders small ducks from swimming through the mats. In short, when milfoil takes over, habitats are degraded and wildlife populations decline.

Tools used to sample for ANS are simple – a garden rake to pull vegetation from the water, fine mesh net to collect invertebrates, and a posthole digger to grab bottom sediment – but methods to exterminate exotics are more troublesome.

When Eurasian water milfoil was discovered at Dead Colt Creek Reservoir in Ransom County in 2005, the fishery was drawn down about 10 feet at freeze-up. The idea was to expose the exotic plant's roots to the elements and freeze them over winter. This effort was successful in killing most of the milfoil in winter 2005-06, but had to be repeated again this past winter.

The findings at the 87 waters monitored in summer 2006? They're encouraging, really, considering news of a new nonnative plant or animal that threatens the natural balance



Aquatic nuisance species don't belong in North Dakota waters. These alien invaders – and there is a long list of them – threaten fishing and other recreation pursuits in the state.

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Map: Thousands of samples were taken from North Dakota waters in summer 2006 as biologists searched for aquatic nuisance species. Just one new infestation was found in the state. Curly leaf pondweed was discovered (noted in red on the map) in the Sheyenne River near Valley City.

Below: Among other preventative measures, anglers are encouraged to check their boats for hitchhiking plant fragments before moving from one lake to the next.

of things in waters beyond our borders is seemingly a weekly occurrence nowadays. According to Schlueter, only one new infestation – not counting those infestations known to already exist – was found. Curly leaf pondweed was discovered in the Sheyenne River near Valley City.

Going into the 2006 ANS sampling season, Schlueter said Department officials knew where nonnative plants had already taken root: curly leaf pondweed in the Missouri River, Riverdale Spillway Pond, Lake Audubon, Lake Sakakawea and McDowell Dam in Burleigh County; Eurasian water milfoil in Dead Colt Creek Reservoir, Dead Colt Creek and the Sheyenne River. The Game and Fish Department will continue to monitor for aquatic nuisance species in 2007.

It's apparent that all the talk about preventing the spread of aquatic nuisance species is starting to catch on. "It's an ongoing educational campaign and people are becoming aware of the

need to take responsibility for their actions," Schlueter said. "We're seeing a few more people drain their livewells and bilges and pulling vegetation off their boats and trailers. If this would become more commonplace, we could reduce, maybe even eliminate the potential of more ANS infestations in North Dakota."



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All it takes, for example, is a tiny plant fragment to hitchhike on a boat, trailer, the sole of wading boots, or whatever, for Eurasian water milfoil – or other ANS, for that matter – to introduce itself to new waters.

In late winter, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources deemed Lake of the Woods and the Rainy River as infested waters for spiny water fleas. Education and prevention are key to keeping this tiny invertebrate, which competes for food with young game fish, out of North Dakota. Livewells will need to be drained and water dumped from bait buckets once anglers leave these infested waters. “Again, when you think about how mobile today’s anglers are, not to mention the number of North Dakota anglers who fish Lake of the Woods and the Rainy River, spiny water fleas would travel very easily to our state,” Schlueter said.

Another threat of concern is viral hemorrhagic septicemia discovered in the Great

Lakes, a popular salmon and walleye fishing area for anglers who also visit North Dakota’s waters. This virus causes internal hemorrhaging and death in a number of fish species such as walleye, yellow perch, northern pike and baitfish.

Anglers who fish in the Great Lakes region are asked to thoroughly clean fishing equipment, drain and disinfect livewells and bilges, and take precautions for boats and trailers before using them in a new body of water.

While the fallout is uncertain if the virus were to make it to North Dakota, Game and Fish Department fisheries biologists don’t want to find out. “We can speculate all we want, but until we get it, we don’t know what the answer is,” Schlueter said. “The best and cheapest precaution is to keep this and other problems out of our waters.”

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.

ANS Prevention

The following guidelines help keep aquatic nuisance species from hitchhiking to our waters:

- Inspect your boat or personal watercraft, trailer, fishing or scuba gear, and remove all plants, plant fragments and mud before leaving the lake.

- Drain water from the boat motor, livewell, bilge, and behind the transom before leaving the lake.

- Powerwash your boat, motor or PWC, and trailer with water 110 degrees Fahrenheit or hotter.

- Disinfect livewell and bilge with a bleach solution (one part chlorine to 20 parts hot water). Wash using water 110 degrees Fahrenheit or hotter.

- Disinfect fishing, hunting, scuba or other gear with the aforementioned bleach solution and hot water. Allow equipment to air dry thoroughly.

- Don’t dump bait, or the water in which the bait was transported, into the lake. Do not transport bait or fish from one lake to another, it’s illegal.

- Place excess bait in fish grinder, garbage, or bury at home.

- Return fish into the lake from which they came.

- Do not release aquatic pets or aquatic garden plants into the wild. Dispose of unwanted aquatic pets or plants properly.

It takes just minutes to prevent ANS problems. For more information, contact the nearest North Dakota Game and Fish Department office.

Proposals for ANS Prevention Regulations

Up to now, the Game and Fish Department has established guidelines and provided recommendations for reducing potential for aquatic nuisance species transfer.

Proposals under consideration for 2008 would make some of these voluntary guidelines into laws. These proposals include:

Aquatic nuisance species possession

No person will be able to possess any aquatic nuisance species included on the state’s ANS list without a special director’s permit.

Transportation equipment

Any presence of state-listed ANS on watercrafts, motors, trailers, recreational equipment used in fishing, hunting and boating, and construction equipment, in or out of the water, would be prohibited.

Aquatic vegetation

Presence of any aquatic vegetation found on watercrafts, motors, trailers, and recreational or construction equipment when out of water would be illegal.

Water containment

All water would have to be drained from watercrafts (including built-in structures such as bilges and livewells), motors, trailers, and recreational or construction equipment when out of water.

Inspections

Operators and haulers of all watercraft and recreational or construction equipment would be required to inspect their equipment for aquatic vegetation when removed from any water in the state, or upon entering North Dakota from another state.