

Our Mississippi

PARTNERING TO KEEP
AMERICA'S RIVER GREAT

SPRING '11



Holding an invasion at bay

Multi-front 'war' aims to stop invasive species spread

HEAD TO THE INVASION FRONT of one of the country's most heavily publicized battles, and you'll find seasoned fishermen, muscles honed from long days hauling net-loads of massive, wriggling Asian carp.

For much of the coming month, government-funded crews will be hauling the voracious eaters, several tons at a time, with the goal of clearing as many as possible from the Illinois River, and as quickly as they can, before the fish can spawn.

Nearby are the scientists. On any given day, biologists like Kelly Baerwaldt of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers can be found implanting the invasive silver and bighead carp with special tracking devices to monitor their movements or sampling the water column to see if their DNA has spread to new locations.

In all, the Asian Carp Regional Coordinating Committee has initiated some 45 projects funded with more than \$50 million in federal resources. The intent is to halt the potential spread of these two species of Asian carp from the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers before they can reach the Great Lakes and potentially destroy the prized fishery. Nearly \$50 million more is budgeted for the coming year.

At the same time, the Corps is moving forward with a groundbreaking study designed to find a permanent solution. The study's goal is to stop not just Asian carp—but dozens of other invasive fish, algae, water fleas, snails and more—from spreading into one basin or the other and wreaking potential environmental and economic havoc.

"The scope is monumental," John Goss, the Asian Carp director at the White House Council for Environmental Quality said of the Corps study. "It will change the ballgame in invasive species management and will make a huge difference for the whole country. And a lot is riding on it."

On the front lines

One of the more visible study leaders is Dave Wethington, the project manager for the Corps' Great Lakes and Mississippi River Interbasin Study (GLMRIS). He's spent the last three months traveling the Midwest with other Corps leaders and "Carp Czar" Goss, soliciting public ideas for halting an epidemic of aquatic invasive species.

In all, he and others visited 12 cities and heard from some 180 speakers, collecting the thoughts of many others on study websites and social media outlets. What did they hear?

"A big call for action," Wethington said.

Over the years, more than 180 invasive species have been introduced into the Great Lakes, mostly through the ballast water of ocean-going ships. Dozens of those, including the sea lamprey and the zebra and quagga mussels, have subsequently spread into the river system and beyond, crowding out native fish, clogging water intake structures and causing untold damages. Some estimates put the economic cost to the country of all invasive species at over \$120 billion a year.

The most unusual and exciting part of GLMRIS is its potential, Wethington said.

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Chefs battle carp with the fork

“DON’T UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF COOKING.” That’s the message shared by a Baton Rouge chef recently to a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers panel soliciting ideas on how to stop Asian carp from spreading from the Mississippi River system into the Great Lakes.

“These fish are laughing at us,” Chef Philippe Parola said in a New Orleans hearing. “But not for long because the skillet is ready, I guarantee.”

The “invasivore” movement is striking a chord nationally as environmentalists and business people alike seek ways to eat away the problem of invasive species, creating both a new health food source and potential jobs along the way.

Taking a page from Parola’s playbook, a Milwaukee chef has added an invasivore night to his regular tapas menu, featuring delicacies like carp cakes, smoked carp steak and carp napoleon. A Rockford physician’s taking scraps from fish filets being sent to China and creating a new powdered protein supplement. And an article in Middlebury College’s quarterly magazine recently highlighted Chef Richard O’Donohue’s “kitchen with a cause.”

The Michigan-born chef has served some 800 pounds of “Rock Island sole” (a reference to the Illinois city near where the fish were caught) in Indian dishes or a favorite potato, feta and carp casserole. Students were quoted as liking both the taste—and the cause.

But Parola doesn’t think a feel-good campaign is needed to restore the river’s natural balance. Once people have tasted the fish he’s redubbed silverfin—in cafeterias, on their home grills, or as the pecan crusted, Cajun blackened and classic fishcake forms he has planned for grocery-sold frozen filets—he’s convinced we’ll have another case of the redbelly. That species was nearly fished to extinction when Cajun chef Paul Prudhomme came up with a wildly popular recipe for blackened redbelly.

“I don’t have a Ph.D., but I can guarantee one thing: I know food. I know food marketing, and I know what consumers want. My weapon for this problem is a fork.”

The owner of Inland Fisheries Processing and Marketing Research Center, Parola has a history of both culinary success and marketing unusual products. He’s launched culinary campaigns for Louisiana alligator meat and even the rat-like nutria. He launched the Asian carp plan when two jumped into his boat as he fished for an alligator gar to take on a filming of a Food Network special. “This fish,” he noted, “sure jumped in the wrong boat.”

He took it straight to the kitchen, cooked it up and says it’s one of the best fish he’s ever tasted, better even than catfish or tilapia. While its tiny bones make preparation labor intensive, it’s also devoid of contaminants like mercury, high like salmon in healthy Omega 3’s—and plentiful.

“This fish is incredible,” he said. “I just need to convince the guys at Congress to let me make a presentation. Thirty minutes of time, and I guarantee you they’re going to be blown away. I want to cook for (carp czar) John Goss.” —K.S.

“I don’t have a Ph.D., but I can guarantee one thing: I know food. I know food marketing, and I know what consumers want. My weapon for this problem is a fork.”

—CHEF PHILIPPE PAROLA

Silverfin Steak & Fresh Berries

SERVES 4



- 4 Silverfin steaks
- 2 ounces each: raspberries, blueberries, seedless grapes
- 2 tablespoons pecan oil
- 2 ounces unsalted butter
- 2 tablespoons heavy cream
- 3 ounces white wine
- 1 lemon, juiced
- 2 oranges, juiced
- seasoning to taste

Preheat oven to 325°. Heat oil and butter in an oven-proof skillet until very hot. Place seasoned Silverfin steaks in skillet and brown both sides. Add white wine, lemon and orange juice. Bring to a boil. Add fresh berries. Transfer to oven and bake for 12 minutes at 325°. Serve topped with sauce and berries.

FIND MORE SILVERFIN RECIPES AT CHEFPHILIPPE.COM

ABOVE: Chef Philippe Parola holds an Asian carp caught on an outing with commercial fishermen Rusty Kimble (captain) and Preston Terrell (deckhand) in Simmesport, Louisiana.

The Corps’ secret weapon: its army of volunteers



Bob Morris spends his days as tour guide, wildlife photographer, historian and host—in other words, a Mississippi River volunteer.

The retired U.S. Air Force colonel is among the thousands of volunteers who work along the Mississippi River and its tributaries, helping to keep the river clean, setting up eagle cams, teaching water safety, leading tours, handling camping emergencies and much more.

Bonuses come regularly, usually in the form of some great wildlife spotting. In Morris’s case, perks also include the chance to meet visitors from around the world and share his contagious love for—and knowledge of—the mighty river.

He leads tours at the National Great Rivers Museum in Alton, Ill., and the Melvin Price Locks and Dam. While explaining how the engineering marvel is used for both barges and flood control, he may also share the typical meal eaten on a barge on a Saturday night or the wing span of a pelican.

The engaging volunteer has learned plenty since the museum opened in 2003, both by studying the river history and picking up fascinating trivia from visitors like the 80-year-old towboat captain he took on a recent tour, or the couple fresh

In 2010, nearly 10,000 volunteers logged 186,352 work hours throughout the Mississippi Valley Division of the Corps, an estimated \$3.8 million in work value to the nation.

off oil spill cleanup duty in Louisiana. With everyone, he loves sharing his personal passion for the river—both through one-on-one interaction and through his donated nature photography on display throughout the museum.

“My role is to give people an appreciation of the river, an appreciation for the environment and also an appreciation for the people who help support this navigation system,” he said. “There is also a great heritage of the Mississippi, and it is always changing.”

For agencies like the Corps, volunteers are a godsend, says Deb Griffith, head ranger at the Cross Lake Recreation Area, located in an idyllic northern Minnesota setting alongside one of the river’s first dam and reservoir structures. They’re the face of the Corps, she says. They’re also some pretty cost-effective hands.

In 2010, nearly 10,000 volunteers logged 186,352 work hours throughout the Mississippi Valley Division of the Corps, an estimated \$3.8 million in work value to the nation. Thousands more slogged through forests with trash bags, GPS units or binoculars to clean up or track eagle nests or identify invasive species within the Upper Mississippi National Wildlife and Fish Refuge.

Free camping’s a perk for some volunteers like Sandy and John Hillmer, who work as campground hosts at Cross Lake. In return, they help with after-hours emergencies or field critical questions such as “where are the fish going to bite today?”

Others, like Jerry Goran—2010 volunteer of the year for the Winona District of the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge—are happy for the compensation of some provided garbage bags. Those, Goran uses to clean sandbars of glass, cans, towels, abandoned clothing, even make-shift toilets. This year, he’s taking a GPS along to register coordinates of invasive plants like purple loosestrife, which are causing problems in many river pools.

“I love the river. I love the sandbars. We picnic on them, barbecue on them, swim on them. I didn’t want to look at the garbage people leave, so I started cleaning it up.”

For Mark McGrew, volunteer work at the Corps-run Saylorville Lake reservoir was a literal lifesaver.

He first volunteered in the spring of 2006 as a way to improve his health while recovering from a massive heart attack and waiting for a possible heart transplant. He’s since logged 1,110 volunteer hours, most days arriving at dawn to get his day’s work assignment—usually involving the operation of heavy machinery to help with reforestation or cultivation and planting of deer food plots.

When too ill to work, he says, staff would “welcome me back with open arms.” He was at work when word came that his transplant list number came up; two weeks after he left Mayo clinic with a new heart, he was back on the job.

“What I get out of volunteering at Saylorville is quite simple,” he said. “I get to feel like a contributing man again, but I still have time for when I need to be sick.”

In part, I fought all those years for life because I felt like I would miss out on the magic of Saylorville if I hadn’t made it.” —K.S.



Mark McGrew



John and Sandy Hillmer

Campground host, Cross Lake Recreation Area, Minn.

Best advice to volunteers: “You have to be able to talk to people and not be embarrassed or afraid and be able to take on odd questions and just work with them.”

Favorite wildlife moment: The mother deer and twin fawns that lived on their campsite one summer.



Jerry Goran

Clean-up volunteer, Fountain City, Wisc.

Pet peeve: Broken glass

Secret clean-up weapon: Rosco, a Springer Spaniel who pitches in to help with zebra mussel clean-up by diving for river clams and fetching them for Goran, who cleans them of invasive mussels then tosses them back.



Jeanne and Bob Duncanson

Eagle’s nest trackers between Red Wing, Minn. and Prairie du Chien, Wisc.

What they’ve learned on the job: It’s so much fun to watch eagles carry twigs and weave them into a nest. They also are in couples, male and female, always and forever until one of them dies.



Stan Bousson

Volunteer photographer, Moline, Ill.

Volunteer claim to fame: He set up three new webcams at Lock and Dam 13 so wildlife enthusiasts can watch eagles on their nests or spot migrating pelicans coming up river. SUMRIVER.ORG/WEBCAM.HTML HOST

Stan Bousson photographs eagles along the river near Moline.



Want to volunteer? Go to the Corps’ volunteer clearinghouse to apply for work as a visitor center host, park and trail maintenance worker, water safety program presenter, fish and wildlife habitat restorer, or more, within any of the 2,500 recreation areas run by the Corps of Engineers. The Army Corps of Engineers is the steward of some 12 million acres of public lands and waters at 400 lake and river projects in 43 states. All run in part through volunteers. ln.usace.army.mil/volunteer/