ENEMIES OF THE STATE: Where Are They Now?

Story By Mark Steingraeber
Photos courtesy U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

This month, teams take to the rivers for the annual surveillance for invasive fish.

It was Tuesday morning, June 12, 2007. Another day of sweltering heat and humidity blanketed the Land of Lincoln. Dave Wedan, a native of Wisconsin's cool north woods, braced himself as he entered the summertime steam bath of suburban Chicago for the twelfth consecutive year…a tough assignment for any northerner.

Businesses there were operating on heightened security since the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Wedan drove past the Stateville Correctional Center, on his way to meet an old acquaintance at a boat landing in Joliet. Following instructions, they were to patrol throughout the day along a sun-scorched route that over the years had become all too familiar, shadowing the Des Plaines River from the downtown waterfront to the Brandon Road Lock and Dam. Tomorrow would bring more of the same dull routine.

Meanwhile, other colleagues quickly made their way through a mosquito-infested forest near Lemont, until the nearby staccato-like cadence of semi-automatic weapons fire froze them in their tracks. Dozens of other members of this modern-day posse, a well-organized team of field experts assembled by the federal government, were likewise scattered about in remote sites as far downstate as Havana.

In 2002, the annual Goby Roundup was expanded to include the Carp Corral, which documents movement of invasive carps upstream toward Lake Michigan.

Many wore bright orange vests for greater safety. Traveling from distant points throughout the Midwest, these professionals assembled into 14 small groups. Each was gathering at the same site where they had met in past years, ready to resume their state-sanctioned, week-long surveillance operation to pinpoint the whereabouts of several previously reported piscine "Enemies of the State."

Does this sound like the first chapter of pulp fiction novel to read at the beach this summer, or perhaps the setting for a blockbuster gangster movie? No. These passages of non-fiction describe some of the annual circumstances experienced by participants in the Goby Roundup/

Carp Corral, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service sponsored surveillance program to detect the presence of several non-native fish in the Illinois waterway system.

Since 1996, the program has documented the annual movement of invasive round goby downstream from Lake Michigan toward the Mississippi River via the interconnected Cal Sag Channel, Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal and Des Plaines and Illinois rivers. In 2002, the program's purpose was expanded to also evaluate the annual movement of invasive bighead carp and silver carp (Asian carps) upstream in the Illinois River toward Lake Michigan.

With the cooperation of staff from a host of federal and state agencies, academia, non-government organizations, private businesses and volunteers, this partnership effort annually identifies the apparent distribution and relative abundance of these unwanted aquatic pests in Illinois. Years of experience have demonstrated that the most efficient gear to detect round goby are baited minnow traps. Traps usually are set by crews in the cryptic, shallow-water habitats that this species seems to prefer. Because one or more traps are typically set about every mile along a survey route, a route that can exceed 150 river miles, the logistics of preparing for this recurring surveillance operation present many challenges. Meanwhile, crews out to detect Asian carps use completely different types of gear (e.g., trammel nets, electro fishing). Successfully coordinating and safely completing this wide-ranging surveillance mission, year after year,

is no small feat and requires great attention to detail by all participants.

These and other recent fish surveys have traced the apparent annual movement of round goby from Blue Island (1996) to as far downstream as Peoria (2004), a distance of more than 160 river miles and halfway downstate to the Mississippi River. Round goby were known to have already passed an electrical fish barrier, located in the CSSC near Romeoville, before it began operating in 2002. Therefore, the continued downstream spread of round goby was not unexpected.

Despite increased amounts of surveillance effort in the Illinois River, no additional round goby have been captured beyond Peoria since 2004. In 2007 however, round goby were detected moving upstream into Jackson Creek. This high-quality prairie stream flows into the Des Plaines River and has been metaphorically described as "the single yellow rose among a desolate demise of concrete" that was formerly the U.S. Army's Joliet Training Area. Unfortunately, the aggressive behavior of the round goby is likely to displace members of the diverse native fish community (46 species including several darters) that has long thrived there amidst an urban landscape.

Both bighead and silver carp were captured in the Dresden Island Pool of the Des Plaines River during 2007, at sites located farther upstream than ever before. Because locks and dams have failed to prevent upstream movements by Asian carps, the only available means of preventing them from reaching Lake Michigan appears to be the deteriorating underwater electrical barrier, now located only 15 miles away. Fortunately, the U.S. Congress has appropriated funds for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to construct a new and improved electrical barrier there that could begin operating before year's end.

In the mean time, Illinois residents are asked to remain ever vigilant and are encouraged to report any suspicious looking "piscine characters" (i.e., fish) to local authorities so that they will continue to know the current whereabouts of these and other lurking aquatic "Enemies of the State."

Mark Steingraeber is a fishery biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service office in Onalaska, Wisconsin.

Baited minnow traps are used to collect the round goby, a native of the Black and Caspian Sea region. Round gobies reach lengths of 4 to 10 inches.