Illinois sportsmen take aim at exotics, gaining a new sport while helping to curb the population explosion.

Targeting Asian Carp

Story By Mike Garthaus
Photos By Gretchen Steele

Sportsmen across Illinois have joined the fight against the spread of aquatic invasive species. Bow anglers have been shooting fish for decades and the introduction of Asian carp to Illinois waters has increased opportunities for bowfishing. One shot at a time, bowfishers are helping to remove invasive, aquatic species from Illinois waters. One may think bowfishers could not remove many fish, but a tournament held on the Illinois River in 2009 removed more than 25,000 silver carp.

In 2010, the Department of Natural Resources and the Bowfishing Association of Illinois sponsored the first Director's Shoot. The Spring Valley tournament was held to promote the sport of bowfishing and increase the awareness of Asian carp. Conducted in a "Big 6" tournament format, the grand prize was awarded to the person possessing the heaviest stringer of six silver carp.

Bowfishers are playing an important role in helping to remove rough fish, including silver carp, from Illinois waters.

One of the issues with bowfishing tournaments is what to do with the fish. Fish taken during the Director's Shoot were processed into high-grade emulsion fertilizer. The same company that processed the fish for fertilizer can make a variety of tasty foods from fresh Asian carp, as evidenced by the silver carp fare available to tournament participants and spectators.

Even though many seasoned tournament bowfishers have elaborate boats with generators and lights for night

(Photos courtesy Chris Young)

fishing, a novice can walk the shoreline and find plenty of Asian carp activity.

Ed Devries, from the Bowfishing Association of Illinois, said that beginners can walk the shorelines near the smaller tributaries of the Illinois River and have plenty of chances to shoot Asian carp.

Gearing up for bowfishing can be as simple as grabbing your bow, arrow, some line and a system to reel in your fish.

"I suggest people concentrate on smaller tributaries flowing into the Illinois River between the Fox River and Peoria," Devries said. "One also can increase their odds of finding Asian carp fishing smaller tributaries from a canoe or small boat."

Having a fully equipped boat provides even more opportunities to bowfish for Asian carp. Devries splits the Illinois River into two large segments, above the Starved Rock Dam and below the dam. The higher concentrations of silver carp are below the dam, and Devries encounters more bighead carp above the dam.

Members of the Bowfishing Association of Illinois organization utilize three basic techniques to harvest Asian carp from the river.

The first technique is used during the day and involves having the driver keep the outboard motor down as far as it can go and positioning the bow anglers at the back of the boat. As the boat driver varies the speed and RPM of the motor, silver carp in the area will begin to jump. If you are having trouble picturing bowfishers shooting flying silver carp, think of skeet shooting on the water with a bow.

A similar technique can be used at night utilizing lights to illuminate the water. The driver varies the speed and RPM of the motor while the bowfishers shoot from the front of the boat. While many of the Asian carp will swim next to the boat, be prepared for large numbers to take flight. Anglers can opt to target either the swimming carp or those jumping out of the water.

The last technique is to target bighead carp and grass carp feeding near grain docks. Slowly troll your boat with the trolling motor near feeding areas for carp, looking for carp feeding at the surface. Devries noted that bighead carp do not like noise or bright lights and suggested using DC lights instead of lights from a generator. More details of these techniques and areas to target Asian carp can be found on the Bowfishing Association of Illinois Web page.

Asian carp are not the only exotic carp found in Illinois. The common carp, found across the state, also is from Asia and competes with our native fishes. Bowfishing tournaments are held across the state on lakes to promote the removal of common carp.

The best way to learn how to bowfish is to contact one of the bowfishing clubs in Illinois. There are at least three bowfishing clubs in Illinois: The Bowfishing Association of Illinois, Illinois Bowfishers and the Bowfishing Association of Southern Illinois. Members of

Many public lakes allow bowfishing, but before you head to your local lake for bowfishing, check the site-specific fishing regulations.

Some lakes are classified as two poles and line only, a regulation that prohibits the use of devices other than fishing poles. To increase bowfishing opportunities, some lakes with this regulation have an exemption to allow bowfishing.

Even though a sportfishing license is required to bowfish, sportfish cannot be taken by bow. However, carp, carpsuckers, shad, drum, buffalo, suckers, gar (except alligator gar) and bowfin may be taken with a bow. Current fishing regulations can be found at www.ifishillinois.org.

Like other forms of fishing, bowfishing is a great way to introduce youth to an outdoor activity as old as the ages.

Bowfishing tournaments are becoming popular activities on Illinois' rivers and lakes.

these clubs are eager to share their equipment and knowledge about bowfishing. For the competitive type, each of these clubs also hosts tournaments on lakes and rivers in Illinois.

With the assistance of the bowfishing clubs, in 2010 DNR implemented state records for spear and bowfishing. Thirteen fish species are recognized for spear and bowfishing state records, but carp, gar and buffalo are the main fish groups targeted. The current state records and eligible fish can be found at www.ifishillinois.org/awards/bow_table.html.

The Redneck Fishing Tournament held at Bath on the Illinois River has taken another approach to removing Asian carp. Started in 2005 as a result of frustration with silver carp invading the Illinois River, the tournament has turned into a world-famous event.

Instead of using a bow for harvesting the fish, a dip net is used. Since silver carp take sail, tournament participants catch the fish on the fly with a dip net, but only one hand-held dip net is allowed per participant. Tournament rules do also allow keeping fish that land in the boat. A helmet is recommended as numerous silver carp can be airborne at once. Granted, the Redneck Fishing Tournament is more about recreation than removing Asian carp, but it has helped spread the word about the impacts of aquatic invasive species and is a perfect example of turning lemons into lemonade.

As we struggle with the issues of invasive, aquatic species, sportsmen are finding ways to increase recreational opportunities in Illinois. If you see a lighted boat trolling the water at night or an angler carrying a bow on a boat, there is a good chance someone is taking part in an effort to remove an exotic species from our waters.

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Only carp, carpsuckers, shad, drum, buffalo, suckers, bowfin and certain species of gar may be taken with a bow.

(Photo courtesy Kevin Irons.)

Learn more

To learn more about bowfishing, contact one of these Illinois organizations:

Bowfishing Association of Illinois: illinoisbowfishing.net

Illinois Bowfishers: illinoisbowfishers.com

Bowfishing Association of Southern Illinois: http://ultimateoutdoorsnetwork.com/basi

For details on the annual Redneck Fishing Tournament, visit www.redneckfishingtournament.com.