



NewsTribune photo/Kemp Smith

**A field crew with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service** pulls a silver carp from a sampling net Thursday on the Illinois River near La Salle. The crew was checking numbers and location of the invasive fish this week as part an annual "carp corral" on the river. Workers caught hundreds of Asian carp in these long gill nets. This fish was 26 inches long.

# Carp explosion continues on river

**By Jeff Dankert**  
NewsTribune Reporter

There is no sign that numbers of Asian carp are leveling off on the Illinois River.

In fact, biologists point to several signs that the fruitful fish continues explosive growth since first discovered on the river in 1995.

Perhaps most troubling is that last summer biologists documented that the carp spawned at least three times —

twice in July and again in mid-August — in the 80-mile stretch between La Grange and Peoria.

Native to Asia, bighead and silver carp were brought to the United States in the early 1970s, and by the early 1980s they had escaped to rivers. They can eat three to five times their body weight per day in plankton and can grow to 80 pounds. A bow hunter recently arrowed a 92-pound bighead carp on the Illinois River.

Silver carp jump so vigorously that

they threaten the safety of boaters.

Kevin Irons, large-river ecologist with Illinois Natural History Survey in Havana, said silver carp appear to be outnumbering bigheads.

Last year's preliminary data indicate roughly 4,000 silver carp per mile between La Grange and Peoria, Irons said. Those numbers did not include what Irons called the "zillions" of larval

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# Carp

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and first-year carp. It appears these very young inch-long carp survive winter in good shape, he said.

The actual carp density might be twice that of the estimate, Irons speculated.

"Four-thousand per mile for silver carp — if you add the bigheads it might be as much as 8,000," Irons said.

Irons and Pam Thiel, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service project leader for the fishery resource office in La Crosse, Wis., suspect the carp must be nearing their population peak in the Illinois River.

"I think that their limit would be to eat themselves out of house and home," Thiel said.

Animal populations follow an S-curved trend line, rapidly increasing at first, then peaking, followed by a leveling off or steep crash, Irons said.

"Around here we've got to be close (to peaking)," Irons said.

As the population climbs, so do chances for disease outbreak, Thiel said.

This week the biologists from several agencies plied the Illinois River in their annual effort to monitor the number and location of Asian carp and round gobies.

Asian carp invaded the river from the South while the invasive round goby moved from the Great Lakes into the

river near Alsip and Lockport. Biologists will cover nearly 200 miles between Alsip and Havana looking for carp and gobies.

In 2002 authorities installed an electrical barrier near Romeoville and later, a bigger one just downstream to prevent carp from moving toward Chicago. So far, few carp are living near the barrier.

"We think the barrier can control them but we don't want thousands of them just below it," Irons said.

The carp are abundant from Starved Rock downstream to the Mississippi River at Grafton, but there are low numbers upstream of Starved Rock.

"From Starved Rock to Lake Michigan, those numbers do thin out," Irons said. "We don't see large numbers racing toward Lake Michigan."

Should that happen, biologists have an early warning system. This year they will implant transmitters in the carp and release them. A receiver near the barrier will let them know if any tagged carp are moving upstream.

Asian carp are the most cultured fish in the world, Irons said. They have invaded Russia and the Middle East.

"And they're over-fished almost everywhere they are," Irons said.

Ironically, these carp are declining in their homeland of

China, Irons said. In the Yangtze River, large carp are rare. Authorities are maintaining populations through stocking.

If West and East could meet in fish trade, it might strengthen the market and compel commercial netters to haul more Asian carp out of the Illinois River, Irons said.

This might help reverse a population decline of two native Illinois River fish: buffalo and gizzard shad. These fish have dropped between 5 percent and 7 percent in six years, Irons said. Asian carp eat plankton, as do buffalo and shad.

"And they're very good at it and more adapted (for plankton eating) than our native fish," Irons said.

Biologists this week also will test carp for viruses. In May, viral hemorrhagic septicemia (VHS), which can be lethal to many fish, was confirmed to be present in Lake Michigan.

In 2005 and 2006 the virus killed untold numbers of game fish in lakes Huron, St. Clair, Erie and Ontario, and in the St. Lawrence River.

"The really troublesome thing about VHS is this virus affects a lot of different families of fish," Thiel said. "It's a bad actor."

*Jeff Dankert can be reached at (815) 223-3206 Ext. 177, or perureporter@newstrib.com.*