

Grass Carp Fever

by Joshua W. Broer

In 1963, a fish from Eastern Asia and a member of the minnow family, the White Amur, AKA Grass Carp, was introduced into the United States to test their effectiveness for controlling the growth of invasive aquatic plants. In 1972, these herbivores were first brought to Florida in an attempt to control a rapidly growing exotic and nuisance plant, Hydrilla Verticillata, or simply, Hydrilla. However, in some cases, at high stocking rates virtually all other aquatic plants were eliminated as a result of the enormous appetite of this unique plant eating fish. Finally, in 1984, a method for producing sterile Grass Carp was developed in artificial spawning hatcheries using a technique that resulted in the fish having three sets of chromosomes rather than its natural two sets. This would become the Triploid Grass Carp that we see in many fresh water lakes in Florida today and a fish that has many lakefront homeowners questioning the wisdom of stocking them.

Usually, Hydrilla is the source of the problem and the reason for stocking Grass Carp. Hydrilla is a submersed plant which can grow all the way up to the surface and form dense mats as long as 25 feet! It is usually accidentally introduced into bodies of fresh water by the discarding of the plant from fish tank aquariums and the transporting of the

plant by boat from one lake or pond to another. This presents problems for all kinds of lake users, including skiers who do not want to fall into such a tangled mess of plants and, anglers who suffer loss of natural bass, bream and bluegill spawning environments. Lakefront homeowner associations have a few choices in terms of how to deal with this nuisance plant, from the stocking of sterile Carp, chemical (herbicide) use, to very expensive mechanical control. It should be noted that Grass Carp stocking requires a FWCC permit which involves a Commission biologist coming out to your lake to evaluate your particular situation. Using Triploid Grass Carp is the most cost effective method with fish costing between \$6 and \$18 each, being stocked at three to ten fish per acre, followed by the less desirable chemical method costing between \$100 and \$500 per acre, and finally mechanical control which can be twice that cost. So, one would think, Grass Carp stocking for Hydrilla choked lakes is a no-brainer. Maybe....

What many lakefront homeowners have discovered over the past 30 plus years is that these fish are sometimes able to produce viable eggs and sperm, albeit in low numbers, and



Bradley Lowman, with a landed 15 lbs fish.

reproduce. In addition, these fish have proven very difficult to get rid of once an invasive plant growth is under control and often eat their way through every piece of vegetation in the lake. Although they mostly favor Hydrilla, Coontail, Muskgrass and Naiad, they are not always selective about the plants they eat and have been known to eat every submersed and floating plant in the lake. They have even been known to wriggle out of the water to eat grass along the shoreline! Thus, the stocking results can sometimes backfire with the lake changing from a clear water, plant dominated system to a murky, algae dominated system. When open-water algae (phytoplankton) no longer have to compete with large plants for nutrients, the algae soon become the dominant plants creating poor water clarity and sometimes a green surface scum. So, what do you do with these plant devouring fish which can live up to ten years and grow up to 50-60 lbs and exceed 50 inches in length? Nets, hook-and-line, electro-shocking, and even poison baits have met with minimal success.

Nevertheless, some homeowners have become clever and learned to train their resident carp population by chumming them with dough balls, goldfish pellets and other types of feed. The result - massive schools of Carp gathering around docks who know when the dinner bell has rung. This is when the fun begins.



The author, Joshua Broer, with a 25 lbs fish.

Hook-and-line Carp fishing has become a hobby for some and an obsession for me. Although these grass eaters are not the best fighting fish in the lake, they are without doubt the largest. It is not uncommon to catch 30 and 40 pound fish back-to-back. Initially, spin tackle and dough balls was the way to hook up, however difficult, with one of these Jurassic looking fish. Though they do have interesting color with light gold to olive green sides and a silvery to bluish-white belly, they are fish "only a mother could love". Namely, they ain't pretty! After landing a few with spin tackle I decided to pull out the long rod and see if they would take a fly. This is where the challenge began. I tried to stay true to the old "match the hatch" adage by chumming with bread and casting a dough ball imitation fly carved out of white mini-cell foam. This had limited success as the fish were wary of the fly and wanted what they had been getting regularly from many of the lake residents – gold fish pellets. So began the task of coming up with a gold fish pellet fly. The answer, spun brown buck tail or craft fur around a tiny #6 hook (they have very small mouths), cut to shape, and cemented lightly. That is your fly! The fish are so trained that one or two handfuls of pellets chucked off the dock will produce a school of 5-20 Carp almost immediately. Best of all, they rarely spook. They mouth the pellets at the surface much like mullet, oblivious to all else.

When casting, you only need to lead the fish by about two feet. A good strip set is important as they will quickly spit out the fly and move on to another pellet. A six weight is all the stick that is needed to haul in these monsters. My big fish to date is 30 pounds but I am after the goliath that I know is out there. On record, the largest Carp ever caught in Florida waters is 75 lbs. So, 76 lbs of big and ugly, here I come. Native plants and fish, you're welcome! ☑

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Friend of the author, Bradley Lowman, playing a fish through the cattails.

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