

Why Stop Aquatic Hitchhikers?

How you are affected

By now most of us have seen the billboards, commercials, advertisements, and articles telling us to “stop aquatic hitchhikers.” What does that mean and why should we care? What difference does it make to you? New Zealand Mudsnailed have arrived in Wisconsin. They have been found in Black Earth Creek, just outside Middleton in Dane County. The adult animal is only about ¼ inch in length. It didn’t crawl to Wisconsin. It was brought here on someone’s equipment. The New Zealand Mudsnailed is an aquatic hitchhiker.

This mudsnailed was first found in Idaho and has spread throughout the western United States. The nearest population clone of this animal is in Colorado. Based on what we’ve seen out west, it is anticipated that this new invasion may result in a decrease in the number and size of trout in invaded streams. In our agriculturally-dominated watersheds of southern Wisconsin our fish’s diets depend highly on the very bugs that these mudsnaileds are going to replace. The mudsnaileds themselves provide little to no nutrition for fish.

Many other aquatic hitchhikers threaten our lakes and rivers. Aquatic hitchhikers are any plants, animals, diseases, parasites, and anything else that’s moved from one place to another by people. Some of these hitchhikers, such as Eurasian Water milfoil and curly-leaf pondweed, are invasive species. Hitchhiking native plants may have invasive species like zebra mussels and mystery snails attached to them. Water can easily transport diseases like viral hemorrhagic septicemia that can kill fish and parasites that kill ducks. Infants of a variety of invasive species like zebra and quagga mussels, fish hook, and spiny water fleas are too small to see and can be in water and on plants.

Do you know about Yellow Floating Heart? It’s a lovely water garden plant. According to the State of Oregon’s website, a state where this plant is spreading, “Yellow floating heart grows in dense patches, excluding light for native species and creating stagnant areas with low oxygen levels underneath the floating mats. These mats make it difficult to fish, water ski, swim or paddle. It displaces native plants and animals and decrease biological diversity. This troublesome aquatic changes how natural ecosystems work.”

Maybe it’s not such a lovely plant after all. In fact, it’s illegal to possess this plant in Wisconsin because of the devastation it’s caused in areas where it is flourishing. Yet it’s here. Patches of Yellow Floating Heart came to Marinette County as a hitchhiking plant fragment mixed in with other legal plants ordered from an outof- state nursery. This plant showed up in Walworth County a few years ago and this past year was found in both Forest and Dane Counties. How the plant ended up in the new locations is unclear, but it’s likely it was brought by humans. Now the State is spending lots of resources, man-hours, and money to try to eradicate this stubborn and potentially devastating plant. You wonder how this impacts you. These hitchhikers damage the habitat of fish and other critters that need lakes. These hitchhikers negatively impact your ability to fish and to enjoy the outdoors. These hitchhikers cost us all a lot of money!

Take the Red Swamp Crayfish, for example. They are native down south but not in Wisconsin. They are the most invasive crayfish in the world and aggressively compete with native crayfish for food. Red Swamp Crayfish feed on plants, tadpoles, snails, and insect larvae. Burrowing activities cause bank destabilization. Yikes!

A few years ago Red Swamp Crayfish were found in ponds in Kenosha and Germantown. The Kenosha pond was drained, dredged, and filled in with road grindings. Work continues in Germantown. Nearly three-quarters of a million dollars have been spent by the State of Wisconsin and the federal government to try to eradicate these critters. That's a lot of money. Why spend so much money to get these out of a couple of ponds? Read on.

Homeowners have these aggressive large crawfish crawling through their yards frightening their children. Additionally and more frighteningly, when overcrowding or a high water spring occurs, they are capable of overland travel to other water sources. The pond in Germantown is near the Menomonee River, which drains into the Milwaukee River. If the Red Swamp Crayfish gets to the Menomonee, look out Milwaukee River and all those tributaries.

What do New Zealand Mudsnails, Yellow Floating Heart, and Red Swamp Crayfish all have in common? Human introduction. So please, for the sake of the resource, for the sake of the critters that live in and depend on the resource, and for the sake of your checkbooks, STOP AQUATIC HITCHHIKERS.

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