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No one wins in a crash with a fish

Tom Meersman, Star Tribune

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Marcy Poppett jumped at the chance to take her personal watercraft for a short run on the Illinois River on a sunny afternoon in October.

It turned out to be a near-death experience.

After driving a few miles, she idled the craft near a bridge and looked at the fall colors.

"Every leaf was just gorgeous," she said. "So I'm sitting there and all of a sudden this big fish flops out of the river literally and hits me right between the eyes," Poppett said. "I'm not kidding. It knocked me completely out."

Poppett was whacked by a silver carp, an import from Asia that moved into the Peoria area about five years ago. The carp have a tendency to shoot out of the water when disturbed by passing motorboats. Weighing 10 pounds or more, they pack quite a wallop.



Marlin Levison

Star Tribune

Poppett quickly revived, but found herself floating face down in the river, bleeding profusely. She saw her watercraft floating away in the current, heading toward a towboat that was blasting its horns. She passed out again, but a nearby boater, alerted by the warning blasts, came to her rescue. Poppett suffered a broken nose, concussion, black eye, injured back and a broken foot. She has recovered from her injuries and expects to be back on the river this summer -- but never again without a companion.

Other boaters along the Illinois, Missouri and Mississippi rivers have reported dislocated jaws, facial cuts, broken ribs and serious bruises. Hundreds have been startled as the thin-skinned carp shot into their boats and flew to pieces as they hit seats, coolers, fishing equipment and depth finders.



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"They shatter when they hit something hard," said Duane Chapman, fisheries biologist for the U.S. Geological Survey in Columbia, Mo. "They just get blood everywhere and they're slimy. If you have a pretty boat, it's going to be a mess."

Chapman, who is 6-feet-6, said one carp jumped high enough last fall on the Missouri River to hit him on the cheek while he was standing in a nearly idle boat. He said it was like "being hit by a bowling ball." He wasn't seriously injured.

Vivian Nichols of Hartsburg, Mo., is another fish-in-the-face victim. Last summer, she and her husband took a friend in their boat to see the jumping carp on the Missouri. As she idled the motor, fish started flying on both sides of the boat and it began to seem dangerous. As Nichols took her eyes off the fish to steer the boat away from them, a carp whacked her on the nose and broke it.

"The riverways aren't safe out there," she said. Nichols and her husband, an occasional commercial fisherman, have outfitted their 20-foot jon boat with protective nets to lessen their chances of injury.

Some people are staying off the water. Steve Kelly, owner of American Sport, a hunting and fishing equipment shop in Havana, Ill., said that most of his customers are unhappy about the fish. "A lot of the women won't go on the river anymore," Kelly said.

The silver carp and its non-leaping cousin, the bighead carp, can grow to more than 50 pounds. They have exploded in portions of the Mississippi and its tributaries since they escaped from southern fish farms in the 1980s. "We're probably talking millions of fish in an 80-mile stretch of river here in central Illinois," said Mark Pegg, director of a field station for the Illinois Natural History Survey. "And they're heading north."

In Minnesota, a commercial fisherman caught a bighead last October in Lake Pepin, downriver from the Twin Cities. No leaping silver carp have been seen in Minnesota.

Upstream, Lake Michigan is threatened by a massive Asian carp invasion, which could spread to all the Great Lakes. Fishery officials in Illinois are scrambling to halt their progress by building a \$7 million electric barrier on a canal 28 miles southwest of Chicago.

Fish farmers in Arkansas and Mississippi imported bighead and silver carp from China in the 1970s to eat aquatic plants and algae that grow in huge catfish ponds.

Now, the carp that helped fish farming have damaged commercial fishing. Dick White has been fishing near Havana for 25 years, mainly for bigmouth buffalo, a fish native to the area that competes with carp for habitat. He sells buffalo to nearby restaurants and said the Asian carp have nearly ruined his business.

"They're just thick," he said. "You put a net out and you'll get 500 pounds of them and you can't raise it out of the water."

Asian carp damage fishing equipment and so far have almost no commercial value, White said.

"I'm mad, I guess," he said. "Somebody turned them loose

No one wins in a crash with a fish

and they got into here. I don't think you can make somebody pay, but it's just a bad thing that this has happened."

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