

Bighead Carp

Hypophthalmichthys nobilis

Iowa Aquatic Invasive Species Fact Sheet

Description: Bighead carp are large, heavy-bodied fish that can grow to about 60 inches and 110 pounds. The back and upper sides of the body are dark gray fading to off-white on the lower



sides and belly. There are many dark irregularly-shaped blotches scattered over the entire body. The scales are very small, resembling trout scales. Bighead carp have very large heads with eyes located far forward and projecting downward. The large mouths have a protruding lower jaw and no teeth.

Distribution: Bighead carp are native to large rivers of southern and central China. They were first brought to the United States in 1972 by an Arkansas fish farmer to improve water clarity and increase fish production in culture ponds. Bighead carp began to appear in the wild (Mississippi and Ohio Rivers) in the early 1980's, likely the result of escape from aquaculture facilities. They quickly spread to other rivers in the Mississippi River Basin and have been recorded from within or along the borders of at least 18 states. Bighead carp have been reported in Iowa since the mid 1990's and inhabit rivers and streams in the Mississippi, Des Moines, Iowa, Cedar, Chariton, Missouri, Platte, Nodaway, and Big Sioux watersheds.

Threats: Bighead carp are plankton eaters and compete directly with native species that rely on plankton for food including paddlefish, bigmouth buffalo, gizzard shad, all larval fishes, and mussels. Because bighead carp grow to large sizes and populations can reach high densities, they have the potential to deplete plankton populations and reduce populations of native species. Bighead carp also pose a threat to commercial fisherman because they are so prolific. In some areas of the Illinois River, they fill commercial fishermen's nets to the point that they cannot be lifted and fishing sites have to be abandoned. The fish can "pile up" in large numbers below dams on many midwestern rivers. Bighead carp grow up to 12 inches a year in the Missouri River. This growth rate outpaces most fishes native to the Missouri River and enables these carp to quickly become too big to be a part of native predatory fish diet. Bighead abundance has been increasing exponentially in parts of the Mississippi River. High densities, large sizes, and fast growth rates pose a risk of competition for food and space with native fishes.

Bighead Carp

Hypophthalmichthys nobilis

Iowa Aquatic Invasive Species

Fact Sheet

Page 2

Control: To help control the spread and introduction of Bighead carp, become more informed about the spread of non-native species nationwide. Consult your local, state, and federal conservation authorities as to the threat of non-native species in your area, and to the laws and regulations governing the importation, culture, maintenance, and stocking of non-native species. Utilize care in the purchase and use of baitfish in lakes and streams. Ask your bait dealers where their baitfish originates from, and never release any unused baitfish into the water; always destroy them or return them to your bait dealer. Support your local, state and federal natural resources agencies in all of their efforts to stop the spread of non-native species of any kind.

Law: Iowa law makes it illegal to 1) possess, introduce, purchase, sell, propagate, or transport aquatic invasive species in Iowa, 2) place a trailer or launch a watercraft with aquatic invasive species attached in public waters, and 3) operate a watercraft in a marked aquatic invasive species infestation. The scheduled fine is \$500 for violating any of the above regulations. The law also requires the DNR to identify waterbodies infested with aquatic invasive species and post signs alerting boaters. The DNR may restrict boating, fishing, swimming, and trapping in infested waters. Not approved aquaculture species.

