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Reconsidering the common carp

A choice game fish in Europe and Asia, the lowly carp is beginning to gain acceptance in the States

Though it may lack the glamour of walleye or bass, the common carp has a loyal following among those who target them with bows, fly rods or chunks of hot dog on a hook.

The giant minnow may have failed as a food fish since it was introduced to Pennsylvania waters over a century ago, but as a game species fanciers say it's hard to beat for size, numbers and willingness to brawl.

"Carp are widely distributed in rivers and large reservoirs and they're a good fighting fish," said the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission's chief warmwater biologist Bob Lorantas. "Twenty pounds isn't unusual in Pennsylvania. Besides stripers and muskies, what else can you catch that's easily that big?"

They're also acrobatic spawners, attracting bow fishers to the shoreline at Lake Wilhelm and Presque Isle Bay at this time of year.

"It's part of the carps' courtship," said Lorantas. "You'll hear them or see them splashing about in the shallows and swimming in circles when water gets about 63 degrees. That usually lasts until the water's close to 80."

Lorantas said he cut his angling teeth on carp, growing up in Elizabeth and fishing the Monongahela River. Although the Mon is famous for big carp, the state record -- a 52 pounder -- came out of the Juniata River in 1962. Last year, the Juniata and the Susquehanna River produced three of the biggest carp in the state, weighing 24 3/4 and 26 3/4 pounds.

The Susquehanna also draws anglers who fly fish for carp the way others target bonefish on the Florida flats. Scott Loughner of Rillton is one of them.

"From a fly-fishing standpoint, of all the species I've caught -- and it's considerable -- they're by far the most challenging," said Loughner. "They're the only fish that, whether they're nine pounds or 20 pounds, I'm guaranteed to see my [line] backing."

Loughner's largest carp, caught on a Clouser Crayfish, was a 25-pounder from the Susquehanna. He also fishes the Youghiogheny River and the shallow flats of lakes.

"It's an afternoon game," he said. "Your best shot is when the sun is high in the sky, because the bright light is there, and you see carp feeding nose-down, tail-up. Sometimes the tail breaks the water and they have a visible mud plume behind them. They'll take any fly that resembles a bottom-dwelling crayfish or nymph, like the Clouser Foxy Red Minnow or the Clouser Swimming Nymph. The go-to sizes are 6 and 4."

Because they're easily spooked and, as Loughner said, "intelligent and intuitive," the challenge is in making precise, long-distance casts.

Steve Kohan of Ohio Township has fished for carp for almost 50 years. Although he started with hot dogs and sweet corn, Kohan prefers the European approach, using a rod in the 12 foot range for distance casting as well as leverage against big fish, and a hair-rig that lets him present his bait naturally.

Kohan puts a "boilie," a fancy dough ball of flavored garbanzo beans or maize, onto a short piece of line attached to the hook, which is left bare.

"It guarantees you a good hook set," said Kohan, who fishes Glade Run, Arthur, Wilhelm and other area lakes and rivers. "When carp start to feed on the bait, they hook themselves (on the bare hook), usually in the lower lip, and there's no blowback."

Before casting, he chums the water by catapulting feed across the surface in a water soluble bag. He also packs extra chum around his bait for good measure.

"Everything dissolves but the bait, which stays intact at the bottom of the lake," said Kohan. "If it's really silty or covered with leaves, I'll drill a hole in the boilie and insert a piece of foam to keep it buoyant."

Kohan's Euro-tackle comes with sensors that tell him when a carp is on and which way it is headed. His reels are large capacity saltwater "Baitrunners" that allow fish to take line while the bail is closed. In the European manner, Kohan unhooks his carp on a cushioned mat.

"A lot of anglers are curious about how I fish, but I've seen a real increase in carp fishing in general over the past 10 years," he said. "People are finally starting to realize carp are the greatest fighting game fish in America."