



Recreational Carp Fishing Gains Popularity

Long considered a trash fish, carp are starting to get more respect in the U.S.

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by Lauren Brown

The common carp doesn't have the best reputation in North America. In Harney County specifically, carp are considered an invasive species that populate Malheur Lake and are

partially responsible for the murky state of the water. In fact, a Carp Derby and Carp Round-Ups are held annually to lessen the carp population to help rehabilitate the lake. The Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative, a collaborative of High Desert Partnership, has studied the impact of carp on the lake and is looking at different ways to mitigate their impact on the water and surrounding ecosystem.

Because they are non-native, often considered to be invasive and not aesthetically beautiful with their large scales, carp are not usually sought after by anglers. However, that idea is being challenged in some circles.

Catching carp with a fly

Brian O'Keefe, a professional fly fisherman who lives in Vale, has noted a distinct shift in the way carp are viewed in the fly fishing community. "The reason why there has been an uptick in popularity for fly fishing for carp is because they're very, very hard to catch," he said. "It's not a real predator. It is not going to be like a bass that just attacks a lure or a fly. It generally just ignores them. Occasionally, you make a perfect cast and your fly sinks right down near them and they see it and they swim over and eat it. But it is way harder to make that happen than to catch a trout or a bass."

O'Keefe said he often fishes the Snake River near his home. He noted that the carp there average 5 to 15 pounds and are challenging to catch because they spook easily. O'Keefe said he will often go bass fishing and then see carp in the shallows. Sometimes he gets more excited about catching a carp than a bass because they are larger and trickier to catch. "I would say a successful day here is to catch two and generally one is considered decent, but there are a lot of days where even expert fly fishermen won't catch any. They're that hard to catch. You might see 30 and make as many good casts as you can, but they're a picky, finicky fish," he said.

This is because as a fly fisherman, he's trying to imitate a plant rather than a frog, fish or insect. O'Keefe uses subsurface flies that are weighted. The key is to cast away from the carp, so as not to spook them with the plop of the fly as it hits the water and let the fly sink to the sand or gravel bottom. Then he will move the fly a little to catch the carp's attention. "That little up and down movement catches their eye, and they'll swivel over and get it. Not always. Maybe one out of 20 times," he said.

Bowfishing

Burns resident Kreg Breshears uses a different method for catching carp. He too likes fishing for them on the Snake River, but he uses a bow and arrow with a string attached to reel in the fish. He has a jet boat with a platform and an electric trolling motor on the front with a hand control so he can run it while floating down the edges of the river. He has even installed lights so he can fish after dark.

Breshears first got into carp fishing through a friend who used to belong to a bow shooting group in Idaho and attended tournaments. "That's what sparked my interest because it is fun."

He said he has caught up to 40 carp in one fishing trip. Because carp are considered a non-game fish, on the Snake River a fishing license or hunting license isn't needed to catch one. Breshears said the outcome of his fishing trip often depends on the clarity of the water. Sometimes clearer water makes the fish spook easier. "You've just got to be silent and creep up on them," he said. He fishes for carp year-round and tries to fit it in between hunting seasons. While he doesn't eat the carp he catches, he brings them home and has his kids plant them in the garden for fertilizer. "I know that there are people who eat them, but we have not attempted it yet," he said.

Malheur National Wildlife Refuge carp season

Harney County resident Nick Collins fishes for carp at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, which hosts carp fishing from Aug. 1 to Sept. 15 each year on the north bank of the Blitzen River from Sodhouse Lane to the bridge on the boat launch road. There is no limit for carp as per Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife regulations. Boats are not permitted, and vehicles are not allowed beyond the gate on Sodhouse Lane.

While Collins has fished all over the county for a variety of species, he started taking his kids carp fishing at the refuge because of the number and size of the fish. "They are relatively easy to catch, and you can spend the day out there with the kids where they can catch these fish that weigh upwards of 20 pounds. It's just a blast," he said.

The success of the outing can depend on the water level, Collins said. During a high water year, there are cooler, deeper spots in Malheur Lake and then not as many carp will swim up the river. However, there are years when Collins has witnessed thousands of fish in the Blitzen River behind the refuge headquarters. "You can honestly get tired of catching fish," he said. Collins has caught carp that range from 14 inches long weighing a pound to fish that are 35 inches long and weigh 20 pounds. He doesn't eat them, but he takes them home, chops them up and uses them for fertilizer in his garden.



Dominic Bachman, Aquatic Health Coordinator for the Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative, likes to see the carp being put to good use. "I'd love to see more people fishing," he said. Bachman said he met a woman named Amanda Ponti who drove to Harney County from Alturas, Calif., and bought a non-resident two-day license so that she could catch carp at the refuge.

Malheur National Wildlife Refuge Manager Jeff Mackey said that the refuge started allowing carp fishing out of a desire to try and reduce the overall carp population, with the understanding that recreational fishing probably wouldn't make a huge dent in the number of carp in the lake. "But it

was one way that we could passively target carp in the section of the Blitzen River that's open to fishing," he said.

Pictured above: California resident Amanda Ponti on a fishing vacation to Harney County with a carp she caught at Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.

Allowing fishing in one section of the Blitzen River during a specific period of time lets anglers fish for carp without impacting the native redband trout that are also in the river but usually higher up above Sodhouse Dam. "The area that is open to angling is where anglers have the best chance of catching carp," Mackey said. He estimates that there are about 50 people who take advantage of the carp season each year.

Carp for dinner

Because of a tendency to root around in lake and river bottoms eating plants, mollusks and small crustaceans, carp are thought to have a muddy taste not suitable for consumption. While that may be the thinking in North America, carp are far more popular to eat in Asia and Europe. In fact, in some places in Europe it is considered a delicacy that folks enjoy during the holidays.

While most Harney County residents wouldn't go out of their way to eat carp, some have tried it.

Owen Baughman lives in Burns and works for the Nature Conservancy. Last summer a friend gave him a bunch of carp that he canned and this summer he experimented with smoked carp. He said that when prepared correctly, it can be quite appetizing. He noted it is important to cut out the mud vein, which prevents the meat from having a muddy taste. "Figuring out where that is and cutting it out really improves it," he said. "It is white, flakey, firm fish."

He said that pressure canning the raw carp is a great way to deal with the bones in the fish, which can be tricky to eat around. "After pressure canning it, the bones dissolve because they're not made of true bone. They are cartilaginous," he said. "Then you have a canned product that is really easy to use and share, and it's tasty too because you can season it with different things."

To smoke it, Baughman used a recipe that his brother in Alaska uses for smoking salmon. After cleaning the carp and cutting the lateral mud vein out, he used a dry brine that was three parts brown sugar and one part salt. He cut the fish into strips and sprinkled the sugar and salt mixture over the meat and let it sit for 8 to 12 hours. He smoked it at 120 degrees for several hours and finished it at a temperature of 160 to 180 degrees. "It was delicious," he said. "To me, it is just as good as smoked salmon." Having experimented with canning and smoking carp, Baughman is happy to find a way to utilize an invasive species. "Anything you can do with fish, you can do with carp," he said.

This article is provided by High Desert Partnership; a Harney County nonprofit convening and supporting six collaboratives including the Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative.

