

Eurasian Milfoil Makes Its Way to North Dakota

Nuisance Aquatic Plant Discovered in Ransom County Lake

By Craig Bahrle

Something didn't look right about the mats of vegetation extending out from the shoreline at Dead Colt Creek Reservoir, a popular fishing and recreation lake a few miles south of Lisbon in southeastern North Dakota's Ransom County.

Fisheries biologists, on a routine late-summer survey to assess survival and growth of walleye stocked earlier in the summer, noted some plants that looked out of place among the coontail and northern water milfoil, the lake's native plants.

Closer investigation confirmed the presence of Eurasian water milfoil, an exotic plant that is at or near the top of the "we-do-not-want-this-in-North Dakota" list. A

couple of weeks after that, on a mission to more thoroughly evaluate the extent of the milfoil invasion, fisheries technician Pat John, Jamestown, and special projects biologist Lynn Schlueter, Devils Lake, discovered Eurasian milfoil growing in the water along much of the lake's 4.2 miles of shoreline.

The recent find is the second time Eurasian milfoil has been identified in North Dakota. Several years ago it was found in a backwater of the Sheyenne River near Valley City in Barnes County. That shallow river area apparently froze to the bottom in winter and the milfoil died off, as no plants have been found in the area since.



PAT JOHN

Eurasian water milfoil was discovered growing in water along much of Dead Colt Creek's 4.2 miles of shoreline. Dead Colt Creek is located a few miles south of Lisbon in Ransom County.

The Dead Colt Creek infestation is much more widespread than the first. Fisheries managers immediately posted signs at Dead Colt Creek to warn boaters and anglers of the milfoil's presence. Over the fall and winter, Game and Fish staff, along with the county water board (which owns the lake) and local citizens will be involved in determining the best course of action to at least prevent the milfoil from spreading to other waters, or possibly even try to eliminate the plant from Dead Colt Creek.



Eurasian water milfoil is an exotic plant native to Europe, not North Dakota.

MIKE ANDERSON

Eurasian Milfoil Background

Eurasian water milfoil is an exotic plant native to Europe. It was introduced in the eastern United States and has gradually spread west. It was first documented in Minnesota in the late 1980s and has since spread to more than 150 waters there, at least two of which are within 75 miles of North Dakota's border.

Once established in a lake, Eurasian milfoil can form thick underwater stands that also produce a dense, soggy, floating canopy on the water's surface. This plant's presence can interfere with fishing, boating and other water recreation, crowd out native vegetation, and even lead to unbalanced fish populations.

What's worse is the ease with which it can colonize new areas of a lake, or be moved from lake to lake. Eurasian milfoil reproduces through fragmentation and stem runners. One piece of stem, cut loose by a boat motor propeller, can blow to the other side of a lake and pioneer a new colony. One fragment, stuck on a boat trailer, fishing line or in a livewell, and dropped into a new lake, is all it takes to start a new infestation.

Eurasian milfoil is not necessarily devastating to the fish community and recreation at every lake in which it becomes established, but even those lakes where its presence is minor and controlled are still sources for transfer elsewhere.

It's too early to tell just how the milfoil will affect Dead Colt Creek. So far this fall fisheries managers have focused on making sure people who use the lake know that Eurasian milfoil is present, and that all precautions should be taken to make sure it isn't transferred.

Action and Options

Dead Colt Creek was not devoid of plant life before biologists discovered Eurasian water milfoil this August. It has healthy – perhaps even an overabundant – stands of coontail and northern water milfoil, both native aquatic plants that are found in many North Dakota lakes. This vegetation is good habitat for the panfish-largemouth bass fish population mix in the lake.

Dead Colt, according to Game and Fish district fisheries manager Gene Van Eeckhout, Jamestown, is the best bass lake in southeastern North Dakota, and its popularity with anglers extends not only beyond the borders of Ransom County, but also beyond state borders.

It's anybody's guess whether someone from out-of-state brought milfoil in with them as

an unwanted hitchhiker, or whether someone from North Dakota went fishing out of state and brought the aquatic nuisance species back with them. The source isn't all that important, unless of course the person could be identified, in which case stiff penalties are possible under the state's new aquatic nuisance species laws.

What matters most now is preventing the spread of Eurasian milfoil from Dead Colt Creek to other North Dakota waters. Controlling its presence in the reservoir is also high on the list of topics for discussion over the winter.

Eurasian milfoil has almost certainly existed in Dead Colt Creek for more than a year, and its initial presence was probably masked by the other aquatic vegetation in the lake, Van Eeckhout said. The watershed reservoir, about 1.5 miles upstream of the Sheyenne River, has steep slopes and a maximum depth of about 40 feet. The current plant community extends from the shoreline out to about the 10 foot depth. "We don't have an entire blanket of vegetation out across the entire length," Van Eeckhout added.

But if the Eurasian milfoil got out of Dead Colt and into one of the many shallower, fertile prairie waters in the region, it could easily clog an entire lake within a few years. "If it gets out and goes elsewhere we could have some real problems," he acknowledged.

Under the new state law Game and Fish could have closed down access to Dead Colt Creek for the rest of the open water season, Department fisheries chief Terry Steinwand said. Rather than do that, Steinwand stated, district staff put up signs and worked with local media to alert lake users to the problem.

Several options for addressing the milfoil infestation will be discussed this winter, ranging from the quite drastic to maintaining the status quo. They include:

- Spot treating small areas around the boat ramp and the water outlet from the dam. This could be done with chemicals or a mechanical harvester. Neither method is fool-proof. Chemicals could have implications for human use of the water – like swimming or eating fish – for a period of time after application. Mechanical harvesters can cut the plants into fragments that can float to other parts of the lake, and cutting is required several times during the growing season.

- Chemical treatment of the entire lake. This would likely cost upward of \$50,000 and would also kill most of the good aquatic plants in the lake, with no guarantee of a complete milfoil kill. Even with a complete



CRAIG BIHRLE

Did Eurasian milfoil hitchhike on a boat trailer to Dead Colt Creek? It's anybody's guess.

kill, the threat of a new infestation would still exist.

- Drawing down the lake's water level prior to winter in an attempt to freeze out the milfoil. Eurasian milfoil can be killed if the water where it lives freezes to the bottom. That apparently was the case with the milfoil discovered near Valley City. However, to reduce the water level in Dead Colt to the point where a good kill on milfoil could be realized would also subject the lake's fish to risk of winterkill. In an ideal scenario the milfoil would be eliminated, the fish would survive nicely, and the lake would refill from runoff the following spring. The flip side would be the potential for a fish kill without a complete kill on milfoil, which would set the lake back for a few years.

- Providing a pressure washer for people to use to clean their boats after exiting the lake.

Whatever option or options are eventually selected, the people who use Dead Colt Creek (starting this winter), and every other river, lake or reservoir in North Dakota, can learn from this experience and adjust their routine accordingly so no further milfoil comes in from other states, or is moved within the state.

"It's up to everybody who is concerned, who really cares, to clean their boat after they come off ANY lake, not just lakes that are identified with aquatic nuisance species," said Schlueter. "It's better to take those preventative measures, than have to treat a growing problem."

CRAIG BIHRLE is the Game and Fish Department's communications supervisor.