

Invasive plants are growing problem on Texas waters

Invasive plants, once established, choke other life out of ecosystem

By **Shannon Tompkins** Updated 8:48 pm, Saturday, December 5, 2015



Boaters who absent-mindedly (and illegally) allow invasive aquatic plants to hitch rides on boat trailers are responsible for the spread of the alien plants that damage and destroy fisheries.

As it has too many times in Texas, it took just one mistake - a single ill-considered, irresponsible action - to doom a wonderful little fishing and waterfowling Garden of Eden. And it involved a metaphoric snake in the person of whoever introduced the first sprig of giant salvinia to the oxbow lake and adjacent swampy/wetlands complex off the lower Trinity River.

Within a month or two after we noticed the first floating fist-size clumps of a strange plant with leaves that looked like they were covered with Velcro, almost every inch of open water was covered with a carpet of plants so thick

it was impossible to get a boat, much less a fishing lure, through the mess.

That autumn more than 15 years ago, the swarms of ducks that had poured into the shallow areas to feed on the native aquatic plants and seed didn't come; the blanket of salvinia, which holds no food value for fowl or almost anything else except a weevil from the plant's South American home, had smothered the native plants. Nothing for ducks to eat and not even a patch of open water on which they could land and rest.

By spring, the fish - the bass and crappie and bream and even minnows - were gone. Just gone. So was every other living thing in the water - the scuds and crawfish and aquatic insects. The entire ecosystem was dead, the life smothered from it.

"What makes salvinia so devastating is it grows so fast (doubling in volume in a matter of days) that it becomes a solid mat on the water surface," said **Tim Bister**, Marshall-based district fisheries biologist for **Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's** inland fisheries division. "No sunlight can penetrate into the water, so it shades out and kills plant life."

Devastation in months

Without those aquatic plants, which produce oxygen through photosynthesis, and the exchange of atmospheric oxygen as air mixes with water on the surface, dissolved oxygen levels plummet and fish suffocate in the sterile, oxygen-starved water.

In a matter of months after the first sprig of salvinia found its way into the oxbow and adjacent swamp, the devastation was complete. Paradise lost.

Sadly, what happened to that little piece of fishing and fowling heaven is a parable perpetually playing out on Texas' inland waters where, through ignorance, apathy or criminal irresponsibly, anglers, boaters and even waterfowlers are sowing the seeds of economic and environmental disaster by spreading non-native invasive aquatic plants that can choke life from

freshwater ecosystems.

But it's a problem that, if not wholly solvable, can certainly be reduced if Texans act responsibly to prevent spreading invasive aquatic species, most of which hitch rides on boat trailers or in live wells or even in duck hunters' decoy bags, and report any suspicious aquatic plants they see on Texas inland waters.

That point was driven home late this past month with the discovery of giant salvinia on Lake Fork, Texas' premier trophy largemouth bass fishery.

"If there's anything good that comes out of this, it could be that it's raising awareness about the problem," said **Kevin Storey**, TPWD inland fisheries biologist whose district includes Fork. "When you have something that threatens Fork, it gets people's attention."

Except that it took a while for the salvinia on Fork to get anyone's attention.

A close call

Storey estimates the salvinia, which was found in two coves in the **Chaney Branch** area on the reservoir's southern end, had been introduced "at least a couple of months ago." In that time, it had expanded to cover a little more than 3 acres.

It was reported by an angler who contacted a game warden about the suspicious plants, with the warden relaying the information to fisheries staff. Staff from TPWD and the **Sabine River Authority**, which controls the reservoir and understands the economic and environmental threat salvinia poses, scrambled to address the situation. They placed floating booms across the mouth of two coves to contain the infestation, waded in the shallows to remove plants tucked in shoreline cover and have begun what will be multiple herbicide treatments of the mats.

The SRA has offered to try dropping the level of the reservoir to strand plants

on shore.

"I'm hoping we caught it and manage to prevent it from spreading," Storey said.

TPWD, which is the lead agency in attacking invasive aquatic species, has done just that in a handful of instances.

"We've been lucky in a couple of cases and found the plants before they really spread," said Bister, whose district holds several waters suffering salvinia infestations, including Caddo Lake where salvinia has covered as much as 6,000 acres of Texas' side of the iconic lake on the Texas/Louisiana border.

In all of those cases, the infestations have been discovered around boat ramps.

"It's clear the plants are coming in on boat trailers," Bister said.

Anglers and other boaters who load their boats on a waterway infested with salvinia - and there are scores of such waters, public and private, in eastern Texas - often have clumps of the plant or other invasive vegetation such as hydrilla and water hyacinth trapped between the boat hull and trailer bunks or clinging to other parts of the trailer or boat. Those plants and parts of plants (salvinia can reproduce from just a fragment of a whole plant) float free the next time the boat is launched.

And once established in a waterway, salvinia is impossible to eradicate and all but impossible (as well as hideously expensive) to control. The easiest and most effective way to prevent the spread of salvinia and other harmful invasive aquatic species is for boaters to clean, drain and dry their boat and trailer after they pull the rig from the water, removing any plants that are clinging to the trailer.

It's the law