

Invasive species make lake jumping dangerous

LET'S SAY you hit the Eagle River Chain early for walleyes, head to Little St. Germain Lake for some crappie action, and then finish up the day catching the rest of your daily walleye limit on Kentuck Lake.

Sounds like a plan. Similar scenarios are played out again and again this time of year — especially on a busy three-day Memorial Day weekend — as anglers make the most of their days.

It's called lake jumping, and it's an inseparable part of Wisconsin's fishing tradition. But at no time in history has the practice become more controversial, or more dangerous, because of the increased chance of spreading aquatic invasive species to uninfested waters.

One concern is that anglers are more mobile than ever before, possessing the technology and knowledge to more quickly locate new spots as they search for the species of their choice.

The trend has become even more common since tribal spearing gave us three-walleye and two-walleye bag limits, where anglers are forced to change lakes in order to legally harvest five walleyes — still the daily bag limit statewide.

The lake-jumping scenario involving the Eagle River Chain, Little St. Germain and Kentuck is as real as any, and also a cause for alarm. The downstream portion of the 28-lake Chain of Lakes, you see, is infested with Eurasian water milfoil (EWM). So are portions of Little Saint. But Kentuck Lake and more than 90% of our lakes don't have it.

EWM appears to be the fastest spreading invasive species. It's a huge problem because the aggressive exotic chokes out native species and forms dense mats at the water's surface, hampering navigation, skiing and swimming.

The most recent Department of Natural Resources (DNR) study shows 80% of the boat owners who reported moving their boats to different water bodies actually checked their trailers, propellers, anchors, ropes, livewells and bait buckets.

But the battle is ongoing and far from being won, because it only takes one careless angler or boater to pick up an invasive species in a livewell or on a trailer and transport it to another lake. Once there, plant fragments and juvenile animals can take hold.

Because two of every 10 anglers are still a potential hazard to our water resources, town lakes committees will again coordinate boat inspection programs at landings throughout the area. Their purpose is twofold — hands-on prevention and public awareness.

My plea to anglers and other boat owners is one for tolerance and patience. If we really care about the lakes and the fisheries in them, there is no room for defying a simple request to check over a boat and trailer.

While I can't cover all the potential problems that might arise at a busy boat landing, it should be understood that this isn't a sting operation. These inspectors can't write tickets. They are not confrontational. The only thing they're enforcing is a personal conviction to keep exotic species out of the lake.

Here are some of the main tips from the DNR:

— inspect your boat, trailer and boating equipment and remove any plants and animals that are visible before leaving any water body.

— empty your bait bucket on land before leaving the water body. Never intentionally release live bait into a water body, or release aquatic animals from one water body to another.

— drain all water from your boat in order to prevent the spread of any invasives, whether it be the perch parasite found on the Eagle River Chain or viral hemorrhagic septicemia (VHS), a deadly fish virus known to exist in Lake Michigan and the Lake Winnebago system.

That last one is admittedly frustrating, seeing that anglers don't have livewells so they can empty them at the landing — then drive home 30 minutes and clean dead fish. But it's the law.

Here's a list of 19 lakes that are known to contain invasive milfoil: Arrowhead, Boot, Big Sand, Long, North and South Twin, Upper Gresham, Forest, Little St. Germain and 10 lakes on the Eagle River Chain — Cranberry, Catfish, Voyageur, Eagle, Scattering Rice, Otter, Lynx, Duck, Yellow Birch and Watersmeet.

Anyone fishing Lake Metonga in Crandon, which harbors invasive zebra mussels, would be entirely irresponsible if they went to any other lake without cleaning and disinfecting their equipment. Zebra mussels are harder to detect and to wash off than vegetation.

The public can rest assured that the DNR and the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission go to great lengths to clean and inspect their boats, nets and other equipment. Maybe it wasn't always that way, but today, the protocol used by these agencies is far superior to anything anglers are doing.

This issue is a serious one, for careless lake jumpers could someday destroy the sport of fishing as we have known it for decades.