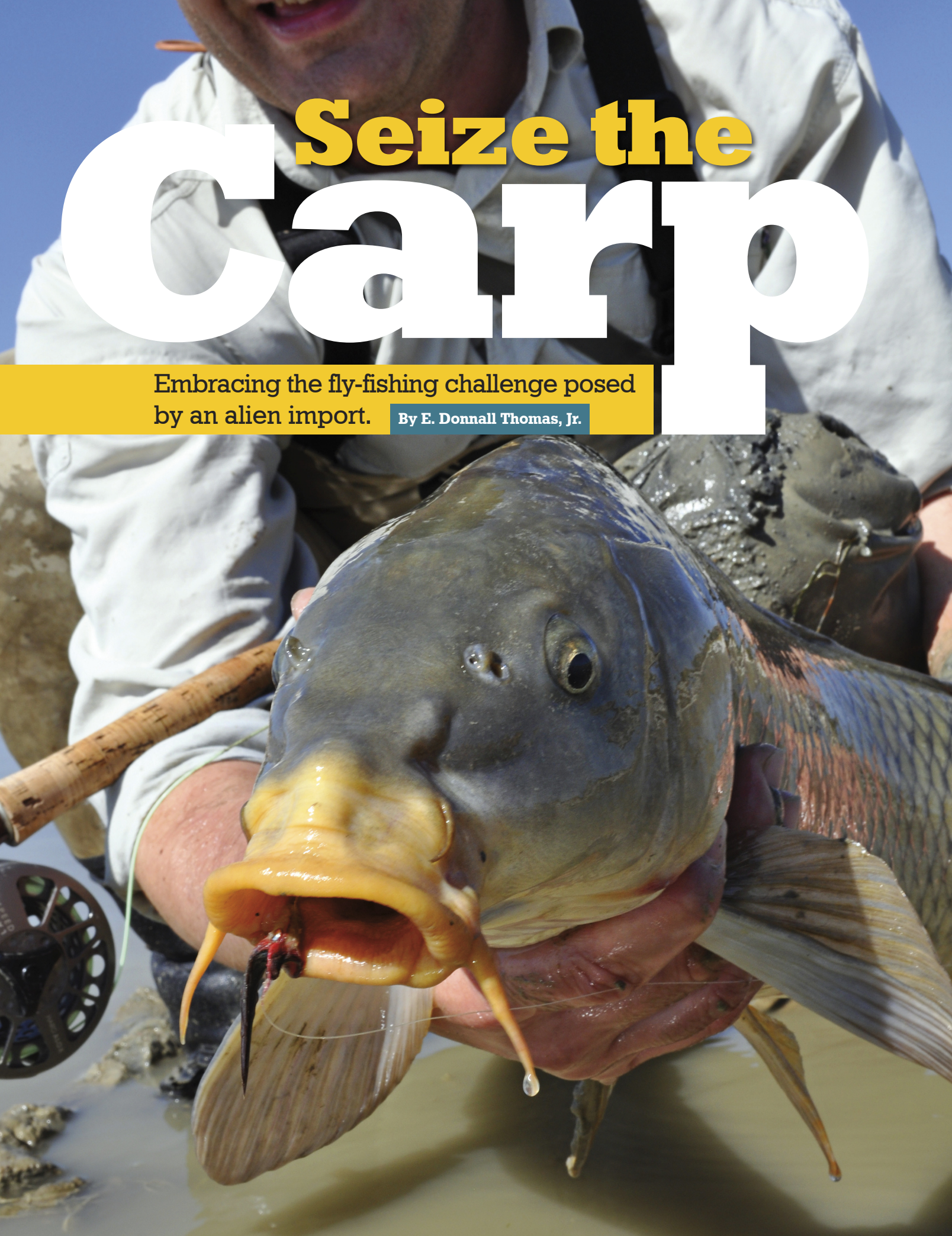


C Seize the Carp

Embracing the fly-fishing challenge posed by an alien import. **By E. Donnell Thomas, Jr.**



Like many reservoirs in eastern Montana—especially Fort Peck, the mother of them all—Deadman’s Basin strikes the eye as an anomaly: all that water in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by dry plains and hills. Located about 20 miles east of Harlowton, it’s a popular weekend destination for anglers in a part of the state where fishing opportunities are scarce. As my wife Lori and I rolled into the parking area, small boats dotted the lake with local anglers trolling for hatchery-reared trout and tiger muskies. We grabbed our tackle from the back of the truck and set out along the shore with something different in mind.

We had come in search of carp. The previous summer, I had begun experimenting with catching carp using flies. Now it was early June, when carp would be up in the shallows where we could wade and sight-cast to them much the same way I pursue two of my favorite saltwater quarries: bonefish and red drum. While I didn’t consider myself a carp expert, my vest contained several patterns that had worked for me before. Lori and I made our way down the shoreline carrying nothing but fly rods, with one of our Labs plodding happily along behind.

“Queen of Rivers”

The common carp (*Cyprinus carpio*) is not native to North America. The species originated in central Eurasia, but, thanks to human encouragement, it traveled early, often, and well. Carp have fascinated people for thousands of years. Aristotle wrote about them, and they were the subject of the world’s first treatise on fish farming, written in China in 473 BC. Monks brought carp to the British Isles in the 13th century, and angling icons Izaak Walton and Dame Julia Brenner both admired these oversized mem-

ber of the minnow family. Walton described carp as “...the Queen of Rivers, a stately, a

Outdoor writer E. Donnell Thomas, Jr. has written hundreds of articles and essays and more than a dozen books. He lives in Lewistown.

bers of the minnow family. Walton described carp as “...the Queen of Rivers, a stately, a



“Carp and Waterweeds,” ink on silk hanging scroll, by Yōgetsu, a Japanese monk who lived in the late 15th century.

good, a very subtil fish...” before going on at length about how to catch them.

No one knows exactly when carp reached American shores, but the first official account dates from 1877, when Rudolph Hessel, a biologist working for the federal government, imported carp from Germany to a pond in Maryland. Political patronage in the nation’s nearby capital fueled their dispersal from there. Because of the carp’s size, novelty, and culinary qualities, demand grew.

At first, the then-called the U.S. Fish Commission shipped live carp only to prominent citizens. In this manner carp first reached Montana. In his 1971 book *Fishes of Montana*, Dr. C.J.D. Brown, a former fisheries professor at Montana State University, reports the following quote from a Helena newspaper in 1886: “Hundley and Pruitt... received from Washington [D.C.] 100 German carp and put them in a pond in their valley.... The fact that they can be cultivated successfully here will be worth millions to the territory.”

By the early 1900s, the federal agency was shipping carp by rail to anyone who wanted some. Recipients picked the fish up at rail stops and released them in local waters. Through this process, carp were eventually introduced throughout the Missouri and Yellowstone drainages and into almost every major reservoir in eastern Montana. Carp don’t do as well in cooler waters, so they never became prevalent west of the Continental Divide, though the species does swim in several lakes and rivers there.

Environmental problems

The carp is an invasive species. After years of reading about invasive mussels, spotted knapweed, leafy spurge, and the lake trout threatening native cutthroats in Yellowstone Lake, most Montanans now recognize the environmental peril that can follow the introduction of non-native plants and animals. In fairness to the carp, it’s worth noting that many of the state’s prized game fish

LEFT TO RIGHT: USA BALLARD; THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART; PUBLIC DOMAIN



FOOD FOR THOUGHT Above: Though carp can be found in some of the cleanest waters of North America, including Lake Superior, they are a remarkably hardy fish able to survive in water far warmer and more polluted than most other species. This has led to their reputation as a “dirty” and thus unappetizing fish. Below: Yet in much of Europe and Asia, carp are raised as live prized livestock and revered for their culinary qualities.

species are not native to Montana either. Like carp, they were intentionally dumped in Treasure State lakes, rivers, and reservoirs—both legally and illegally, depending on the species and the water. The list includes brown trout, walleye, largemouth and smallmouth bass, and brook trout. One angler’s invasive species can be another’s favorite quarry.

Still, there’s no denying the environmental problems caused by many non-natives, including carp. Fortunately, their preference for warmer temperatures keeps these whiskered fish away from headwaters inhabited by native trout and char. But in warmer waters, this highly productive species sometimes outcompetes other fish. “Any body of water can only support a given carrying capacity of biomass,” says Jim Vashro, retired FWP regional fisheries manager in Kalispell, who for years tracked the spread of invasive fish species. “A thousand pounds more of carp eventually means



● **Throughout much of the world,**
 ● **carp are a highly regarded food fish.**
 ● **Whole carp are still served at traditional**
 ● **Christmas dinners throughout Eastern**
 ● **Europe and parts of Germany and Austria.**

a thousand pounds less of other fish.”

Carp also degrade water quality, especially in shallow lakes and ponds. They feed mainly by rooting the bottom for insects, seeds, and vegetation. Disturbed sediment rises into the water column, making it diffi-

cult for sight-feeding fish like bass and northern pike to find prey. Suspended sediment also blocks sunlight from reaching aquatic plants like bulrushes and cattails used by waterfowl and other wildlife. Too many carp can turn a vibrant prairie pothole

into a bowl of muddy water.

One way carp spread these days is via bait buckets. Baby carp are often collected along with fatheads and other minnows. That’s why Montana law makes it illegal to empty bait buckets in any Montana water or to bring bait into this state from another state or province.

In addition to the common carp, other carp species like the bighead, black, and silver are wreaking ecological havoc on waters west of the Mississippi River, but have yet, knock on wood, to appear in Montana.

Delicious to many, but not all

Throughout much of the world, carp are a highly regarded food fish. Gefilte fish, a poached mixture of ground deboned carp or other fish, is eaten in many Jewish households worldwide on holidays. Whole carp are served at traditional Christmas dinners throughout Eastern Europe and parts of Germany and Austria. *Larousse Gastronomique*, the bible of French cuisine, identifies carp as the “dish of kings” and provides multiple recipes for its preparation. So much carp is consumed in China and elsewhere in Asia

that the species ranks as the world’s most widely eaten freshwater fish.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, carp’s culinary appeal was strong in the United States, too. But then attitudes here changed. One theory is that, because carp thrive even in warm, sewage-filled waters, their taste was degraded by the nation’s increasingly polluted lakes and rivers. As water quality improved with passage of the Clean Water Act, the culinary appeal of carp in this country rose slightly, especially in Southern states.

I’ve cooked all kinds of wild-caught fish but have never found carp to my liking. The fish is laced with floating bones and can have a vague muddy flavor. People who like carp say the fish tastes best when taken from clean, cooler water. (Europeans bring a carp home from the fishmonger and let it swim in the bathtub for a few days to clean itself out.) They also note that scoring fillets allows hot cooking oil to penetrate the meat and disintegrate tiny bones, while larger ones can easily be picked from the meat. Several YouTube videos show how to fillet and prepare carp. The consensus among my friends who have learned to enjoy carp is that smoking offers the best means of making them palatable.

Big and smart

Just as Europeans regard carp on the table more highly than we do, recreational anglers across the Atlantic have long endorsed Walton’s “Queen of Rivers” designation. European anglers have developed complex, specialized techniques for catching carp, which are then carefully released to swim another day. There are carp fishing clubs, carp angling societies, and professional carp fishing circuits, not to mention countless books and magazine articles.

One reason for the carp’s popularity is its size, especially after generations of selective breeding in Europe started to produce fish like the 100-pound world record, taken in 2019 from a pond in France. Adding to the species’ appeal is its finicky nature. As fish go, carp are as smart as any brown trout, especially after being caught and released a few times. Carp anglers in Britain commonly fish for 48 or more hours straight through a weekend and thrill to catching a single fish.



MONTANA “BONEFISHING” Carp will take a wide range of flies, including surface patterns like hoppers. But mostly they feed on lake and river bottoms, making crawfish, leech, and aquatic nymph patterns most productive. Below: Fly-fishing for carp is a lot like fishing bonefish flats in the Caribbean. Some anglers fish from boats, casting to feeding fish spotted with the help of polarized sunglasses. Others wade lake or reservoir “flats” and do the same.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LEFT: WILL PHELPS; JEREMIE HOLLIMAN; JESS MCGLOTHLIN; SHUTTERSTOCK; SHUTTERSTOCK

American anglers have been catching carp for more than a century, but usually unintentionally while bait-fishing for game species. They often toss carp and other “rough fish” up onto the bank to suffocate under the misguided notion they are helping game fish. But over the past couple of decades, the carp’s status has improved greatly. You can now join the American Carp Society or the Carp Anglers Group, subscribe to *North American Carp Angler* magazine, and hire carp fishing guides in every state, including Montana.

The appeal is the same as it is overseas, though North American carp don’t grow quite as large. The Montana state record, for instance, is “only” a 40-pounder taken from Nelson Reservoir in 1998, but that’s still a huge fish for anglers accustomed to 15-inch trout.

Fly rod anglers were slow to recognize carp’s recreational potential, as was once the case with bonefish and redbfish, which have now become saltwater glamour species. One reason is that carp suffered from a reputation as bottom feeders. In *The Compleat Angler*, Walton recommends chumming carp into casting range with “chicken guts and the like” and baiting hooks with pastes made from dead cats and similar unappealing sub-

stances. Tying chicken gut flies didn’t sound all that appealing to fly anglers.

In fact, carp are omnivores that will eat almost anything, including foods that can be imitated by artificial flies: worms, nymphs, dragonflies, crayfish, leeches, grasshoppers, and minnows. Tom Dickson, the editor of this magazine and co-author of a book on rough fish angling, *Fishing for Buffalo*, says he has his best luck sight-fishing for carp then stripping a Woolly Bugger in front of their snouts. A friend from the Midwest recently sent me samples of his own favorite carp pattern: a dark chenille “dry fly” meant to imitate a floating mulberry. Carp feed on the purple berries in late summer as they fall off bankside bushes. We don’t have many mulberries in Montana, but perhaps a chokecherry imitation would work.

In contrast to fly-fishing for trout, about which every possible technique already seems to have been analyzed to death, carp offer a new frontier, with plenty of room for imagination and innovation. That’s one reason fishing for them is so much fun.

Many anglers who agree compete in the

The only pricey item I wore was a good set of polarized sunglasses, one of the few necessities on a carp expedition.

annual Bighorn River Alliance Carp Tournament based out of Fort Smith, southeast of Billings. (The tournament this year is July 9. Call 406-534-2915 for details.)

“Then her reel started to whine...”

Back at Deadman’s, Lori and I hiked about a mile of shoreline before we reached the shallow, weedy cove we planned to fish. Wearing an old surgical scrub shirt, cut-off jeans, and Crocs, I hardly looked like the stereotypical tricked-out fly-fisherman. The only pricey item I wore was a good set of polarized sunglasses, one of the few necessities on a carp expedition.

We immediately spotted carp tails dimpling the water’s calm surface, a sight that

brought back memories of “tailing” redbfish on saltwater flats. As with redbfish, tailing carp indicate fish feeding with their mouth down on the bottom. Ever the gentleman, I offered Lori the first shot at a nearby fish. She had rigged her rod with a Bead-Head Hare’s Ear nymph, a pattern that had worked for me before. Unfortunately, the fish ignored what appeared to be a perfect presentation. Even experienced carp anglers can expect a lot of refusals.

“Try this,” I suggested, handing her my rod, which had a large San Juan Worm attached to the tippet. She took a minute to study the fish’s position as its tail bobbed up and down, then made another accurate cast. As she gave the worm a slight twitch, the fish accelerated toward the fly, leaving a broad wake in its path. Then her reel started to whine as the 10-pound fish, solidly hooked, bulled its way toward deeper water. It had been a long time since Lori had hooked a Montana fish capable of taking her into her backing, and we both thrilled at its power.

We landed and released another dozen carp weighing between 6 and 12 pounds before packing up and heading home. *Carpe diem* is Latin for “seize the day.” I guess you could say what Lori and I did that afternoon, and anglers across Montana are doing more frequently, was *carpe carpium*—“seize the carp.” 🐟

LUCKY CATCH Top: A fly angler hoists a trophy carp taken from Lake Helena. Carp are one of the few fish species that regularly take fly anglers into their backing. Below: Throughout Japan and China, people fly carp flags to bring good luck. Considering how challenging it can be to catch these finicky fish, that might be something for Montana carp anglers to consider.



GETTING A SECOND LOOK Long disparaged by North American fishermen, carp are now gaining respect from anglers who appreciate the species’ speed, power, and willingness (at times) to take a fly. As for the fish’s appearance, beauty is in the eye of the carp-holder.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: JOSHUA BERGAN; JOHN CHAFFEE; SHUTTERSTOCK