

Net workers

Carp seiners are a different breed and passionate about their work

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INDIANFORD

A great blue heron skimmed the Rock River and barely noticed the morning roundup at the carp corral. Just above the Indianford Dam, Tom Monsoor and a crew of fishermen tightened a 1,700-foot noose around their wily catch.

As they tugged the seine through the water in smaller and smaller circles, the carp—bunched beneath the shallow surface—began thrashing to break free.

Tom shouted to keep a tight rein on the writhing herd as fat fish poked their heads above the surface in one last peek at freedom.

At dawn, the fishermen dropped the net, with weights on the bottom and floats on the top. By day's end, Tom and his crew hoped to load at least 10,000 pounds of catch onto a truck bound for New York City, where consumers call the carp "Koshkonong salmon."

"We feed a lot of people," 59-year-old Tom says.

"I've tried to eat carp every way I can. But I can only eat it smoked. Thank God other people love it."

In a good year, he and his partner, Steve Temp, net about 2 million pounds of rough fish, including big-mouthed buffalo and sheepshead, mostly from Lake Koshkonong.

They sell their highly perishable product to six buyers. Some goes to Stoller Fisheries in Spirit Lake, Iowa, where it is used in gefilte fish, a traditional Jewish dish.

Trucks also carry carp to New York City, where it is sold live in Asian markets.

Carp fetches up to 25 cents a pound, while buffalo brings more. In the 1980s and 1990s, the price for carp was almost the same as during World War II. But a worldwide protein shortage has bumped up demand and prices.

"The overseas markets are always asking for more protein," says Tom Opheim of Stoller Fisheries. But right now, the demand for gefilte fish in New Jersey is so high his company doesn't need to sell anything abroad.

Carp fishermen aim to make money during their eight long months of seining. But their work is also critical to the health of the lake.

"We found that, if we can reduce the carp numbers, we can see cleaner water and a proliferation of game fish," says Don Bush, regional fish expert with the state Department of Natural Resources.

In the 1980s, people referred to Lake Koshkonong as a carp hole. In the last decade, contract fishermen have removed 16 million pounds of rough fish.

Today, Bush calls the river system one of the best fisheries in the state. In a recent survey, the Rock River came up No. 8 in a list of Wisconsin's top 10 fisheries.

"We were ranked right up there with Lake Winnebago and Lake Mendota," Bush says. "It is a tribute to the contract fishermen who are out there every day."

Private contractors and state employees used to fish the river and lake all the way from the Horicon Marsh to the Illinois state line. Eventually, the state stepped out of the carp-seining business and turned it entirely over to private contractors.

Today, Tom says he and Temp have half a million dollars invested in five boats, motors, seining nets, including one that is 8,000-feet long, and other equipment.

In the warm and waning days of summer, their work doesn't seem so bad. But wait until the first freezing rain or the first wicked wind out of the north.

"The fishermen work extremely hard at what they do," Opheim says. "They are a different breed."

Day after day of handling carp and buffalo make the crew steely, stoic and strongarmed.

Dick Wateski of Onalaska explains why he likes the job.

"Life isn't quite so complicated," he says, scanning the lush green shoreline as he maneuvers a 30-foot johnboat. "Where else can I get an office job with a view like this?"

Drew Ellifson of Edgerton wears a James Dean quote tattooed to his neck: "Dream as if you'll live forever; live as if you'll die today."

"I love this work," the 30-year-old insists, as he tightens the net around a catch. "I wouldn't do anything else."

Tom feels the same way.

"I'm just a fishing fool," he admits.

Rubber boots and coveralls give away his passion. White hair under his Evinrude cap suggests he's been chasing fish for awhile. A steady hand on the tiller implies he knows where he's going.

Tom watched his first commercial fisherman as a boy and liked what he saw.

He graduated from college in 1977 and has been fishing ever since on the Rock or Mississippi rivers. In winter, when he is not seining on Lake Koshkonong, he competes with top anglers in professional bass-fishing tournaments.

"I was raised a Catholic," Tom says.

"St. Thomas was a fisherman, so maybe it's my destiny."



Matthew Wisniewski/ mwisniewski@gazettextra.com Tom Monsoor's crew sorts buffalo fish into a net while working on Lake Koshkonong. The fish will be sold all over the United States.



Tom Monsoor waits for a his boatload of fish to be emptied while seining on Lake Koshkonong. Monsoor and his crew take about 2 million pounds of carp, big-mouthed buffalo and sheepshead from the lake each year.



Monsoor



Bush



Commercial fishermen have taken more than 16 million pounds of roughfish from Lake Koshkonong in the last decade. Besides being profitable for the fishermen, removing the carp, buffalo and sheepshead also helps the lake's ecology. **Matthew Wisniewski** mwisniewski@gazetextra.com