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THE HAMMER COMES DOWN

This summer, the state will come out in full force against the spread of invasive species in our waters.

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Department of Natural Resources conservation officer Lisa Kruse has extracted an angry raccoon from a suburban hot tub and thwarted the picture-window rampages of a kamikaze-style ruffed grouse — two unusual types of “invasive species.”

Now she and the DNR’s 136 other conservation officers will focus their considerable enforcement powers on far more threatening critters — zebra mussels, Asian carp, round gobies and spiny water fleas, as well as Eurasian watermilfoil and other invasive aquatic plants.

Armed with tougher invasive-species laws expected to pass the Legislature this session, more costly penalties for violators and support from Gov. Mark Dayton and thousands of concerned anglers and lake-property owners, the DNR this summer will be on heightened alert for anyone toting destructive aquatic hitchhikers on their boats or trailers as they travel from lake to lake.

“Written citations will be the norm this summer for invasive-species violations, rather than the exception, as they were last year,” said DNR conservation officer Lt. Jason Jensen.

A bill passed by the Senate this session calls for a \$500 fine for boaters who launch boats with zebra mussels attached to them into state waters. The penalty would double for a second violation.

High stakes warrant the high fines, officials say. At risk in the fight against invasive species are the state’s fabled 10,000 lakes and its nearly \$3 billion sport fishing industry. Already, zebra mussels have infested

Minnetonka and Mille Lacs, two of Minnesota’s most popular fishing lakes.

The intensified invasive-species enforcement effort this summer will kick off what might become the most prolonged natural-resources protection undertaking in Minnesota history, as the DNR tries to accomplish what no other state has: stopping the spread of zebra mussels and other evil aquatic critters and plants.

But it might be too little, too late. Already, zebra mussels infest at least 20 Minnesota lakes, along with the St. Croix, Mississippi and Zumbro rivers, among other state waters. Round gobies are in the Duluth harbor. Spiny water fleas inhabit various northern Minnesota waterways, and a bighead carp — one of four species of highly destructive

Invasive continues on C6 ►

Asian carp — was caught this spring in the St. Croix River by a commercial fisherman.

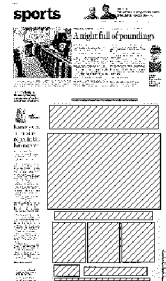
The destruction these invaders can wreak is considerable. According to one report, bait fish dropped from 450,000 tons in Lake Michigan in 1989 to 30,000 tons in 2008, a record low, due in part to zebra mussels.

“I think we can make a difference,” DNR invasive species program supervisor Luke Skinner said. “Are we going to completely stop the spread? That’s the question. But I think we can reduce the risk.”

Some watershed districts and lake associations want to increase protection for their lakes by requiring that boats be inspected before being launched into their waters.

A pilot program proposed by the Minnehaha Creek Watershed District, for example, would allow only inspected boats bearing stickers of a certain color to ply some west-metro lakes.

But it’s unclear whether watershed districts, or any government other than the state, can restrict



access to Minnesota lakes and rivers, and the attorney general is reviewing it.

Bigger dams, inspection stations

To thwart the northward migration of Asian carp in the Mississippi River, the Legislature is expected to appropriate \$15 million this session to upgrade the Coon Rapids dam, making it largely impermeable to fish movement — except, perhaps, in years of excessive flooding.

And the DNR has met with companies that manufacture sonic bubblers similar to those used in Chicago to keep Asian carp out of Lake Michigan. A bubbler perhaps could be installed at Prescott, Wis., to stop, or slow, the advancement of carp into the St. Croix.

Additionally, this summer, along roads leading to and from Mille Lacs, Minnetonka and other popular fishing lakes, boaters can expect to encounter portable “stop-and-inspect” stations staffed not only by conservation officers, but in some cases by sheriff’s deputies and special invasive-species inspectors.

Portable “decontamination” boat washers will be set up at some of the inspection stations to spray down watercraft and trailers thought to be carrying invasive species.

The boat washers cost about \$15,000 and are similar to larger, more permanently positioned decontamination stations used by some Western states to wash boats seeking entry into Lake Tahoe and other waters.

“We have a new sense of urgency,” said Minnesota DNR regional enforcement supervisor Capt. Phil Meier, who also is a water resources enforce-

ment specialist.

“People who enjoy spending time on the water in Minnesota realize the importance of preventing the spread of invasive species,” Meier said. “We in the department take the threat seriously and are stepping up our enforcement efforts.”

Supported by state fishing and other conservation groups, Dayton wants to pay for a new \$4 million invasive-species program by increasing a \$5 boat registration surcharge, good for three years, to \$20. The surcharge hasn’t changed since 1993.

Instead, the Republican-controlled Legislature wants to redirect a one-time, \$4 million biennial appropriation from lottery funds to invasive-species control.

Whatever the money source, the funds will underwrite the added enforcement hours by conservation officers and also pay for the corps of perhaps 20 specially trained boat inspectors to be stationed at popular lakes statewide.

The inspectors won’t write tickets; if necessary, conservation officers will be contacted to do that. But they could deny boaters access to lakes or rivers, or direct them to remove their contaminated boats from the water.

“You are now seeing the building blocks in Minnesota of invasive-species control,” said Jensen, the conservation officer. “Before the 1950s, it was uncommon for people to carry life jackets in boats. Then the state began to require it, and people accepted it, over time.

“We need to get the message out that all boaters need to take responsibility for not moving these species around.”

