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**Common Carp**

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What's so common about a common carp? At least here in Florida, they are an exotic fish, which means they came from other countries and were stocked here by people. Many Florida anglers turn their noses up at them. However, there is a lot to appreciate about this unique fish, and it has some dedicated aficionados.

They are one of 34 exotic freshwater fish species currently reproducing in Florida waters. Most of those fishes were introduced illegally as the result of individuals releasing



*Mikulicka with a 25-pound plus common carp from Lake Talquin.*

unwanted aquarium or food fishes, and/or the flooding of aquaculture ponds. So what makes common carp both common and exotic? Sounds like an oxymoron to me, but either way they are fascinating.

*Cyprinus carpio*, as scientists know them, evolved in the Caspian Sea, a saline sea or the second largest lake in the world. Today this area is political hot bed with its location between Iran, Russia, Kazakhstan and

Azerbaijan. Common carp then expanded their range naturally to the Black and Aral seas, and west to the Danube River, which originates in the Black Forest in Germany. That all sounds pretty exotic to me and not at all common.

As one of the earliest fish to be cultured, carp were a major staple in the diets of Eurasians throughout history and among the most genetically modified fish species ever. The Chinese created unique looking variants during the process of rearing them in aquaculture for food more than a thousand years ago. Monks are reported to have selectively bred a variant that was easier to prepare for the table called mirror carp (with a few large shiny scales), and the nearly scale-less leather carp. In the 1820s, the Japanese began breeding beautifully colorful koi, with fancy flowing fins and other genetically selected features, which sell for thousands of dollars apiece. Yup, koi are still common carp - just like Chihuahuas and bull mastiffs are both considered domestic dogs. Want to know another exotic fact about the common carp? One famous scarlet koi, named "Hanako" (1751-1977) lived for 226 years.

Ultimately, common carp also became one of the first recognized sport fishes in Europe, known as German or European carp. Izaak Walton said in *The Compleat Angler*, "The Carp is the queen of rivers; a stately, a good, and a very subtil fish; that was not at first bred, nor hath been long in England, but is now naturalised."

Although stories vary, the most credible explanation seems to be that five common carp from Germany were imported into the United States in 1872 by J. A. Poppe of California for commercial purposes. He bred and sold them as a food fish. In 1877, the U.S. Fish Commission imported additional carp from Germany and for 20 years or so stocked the species as a harvestable food fish throughout most of the United States; often the fish were released from railroad tank cars at bridges directly into streams. More recently introductions of common carp resulted from use of juvenile carp as bait fish.

Within Florida, common carp are only known to be breeding in the Apalachicola and Ochlockonee rivers in North Florida, where they are found from steep



*Duane Raver sketch: Common carp are actually large minnows with an arched back small triangular head and two pair of barbels (whiskers) on the upper jaw. The body color is brassy green on top, grading to bronze sides and a yellowish white belly.*

natural banks to gentle banks and near dike fields, sand disposal areas, rocky outcrops, and backwater sloughs with or without submergent vegetation. They are not nearly as abundant in Florida as most other states, possibly because of our short, mild winters. This population seems to have resulted from those early U.S. Fish Commission introductions and subsequent range expansions. Isolated collections of common carp in South

Florida are believed to be the result of released bait, with this species as a contaminant. Use of carp for bait in Florida is illegal.

In the United States today, the common carp is often regarded as a pest fish, because of its tendency to destroy vegetation and increase water turbidity by dislodging plants and rooting around in the substrate, allegedly causing a deterioration of habitat for other fish and animals that require vegetation and clear water. These effects have not been documented in Florida, where they are ecologically similar to native species such as carpsuckers. Adults feed by sucking up bottom silt, and selectively removing insect larvae, crustaceans, snails, and other small food items, and organic debris (muck) itself may be an important component of the diet. Because they have been present since the first fisheries population surveys, any impact on native fishes would be difficult to determine. Having been established for so long, common carp would be virtually impossible to eliminate.

In Europe, even when not fished for food, they are eagerly sought by anglers, being considered highly prized coarse fish, which are difficult to hook, and put up a tough fight. The sport has spawned carp angling holiday companies and a multimillion-pound market. According to some accounts, the only European sport fish more popular are Atlantic salmon and rainbow trout.

In the United States, groups, such as the Carp Anglers Group and American Carp Society, have sprung up to promote sportfishing for common

carp. At least one online tournament group is attracting attention here in Florida.



*Hastik with this Apalachicola-caught fish from his third place tournament finish.*

While competing in the Summer TOKS Big Four International ([www.bigfourcarp.com](http://www.bigfourcarp.com)), Pavel Hastik of Florida took third place by landing four carp weighing a total of 100.06 lbs. Pavel Hastik caught these carp from the Apalachicola

River, the heaviest weighing 28 lbs. The Florida record is 40.56 pounds, and IGFA reports the world record was caught in France and weighed 75 pounds, 11 ounces.

If you decide to angle for them, the best baits include dough balls, canned corn, bread crusts, and worms fished on the bottom. They are classified as nongame fish, so there are no bag or size limits, although a license (or legal exemption) is required. Use 2.0-6.0 hooks, with a sinker and no float; typically start with your bail open if you are using a spinning reel and be prepared for a long run and strong fight. Other sportsmen pursue carp using bowfishing techniques. In North Florida, this is legal using crossbow or bow and arrow from a boat or from shore except at the spillways of the Jim

Woodruff Dam on the Apalachicola River. Night bowfishing tournaments with lights are popular and do not require a permit.

Carp are very tasty; in fact, they are considered a delicacy in many countries. However, they have two rows of small floating bones above and below the lateral line. Breaking the floating bones by either scoring the fillet or grinding it up is important to make your meal enjoyable. Boiling, smoking or barbecuing are popular methods of cooking them.

So the name may be common, but nonetheless they are exotic and fascinating fishes.

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