

Do waterfowl spread zebra mussels?

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Finding evidence against: Although it seems likely, waterfowl actually are not good carries of aquatic invasive species.

Aquatic invasive species (AIS) continue to spread throughout Minnesota. With its many popular lakes, Otter Tail County is certainly not immune to their spread. Indeed, we see popular lakes in Otter Tail County, such as Otter Tail, Lida, West Battle, and Pelican, infested with zebra mussels. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR), as well as countless other natural resource agencies and water quality groups, recognize that the spread of AIS is hastened by movement of boats, docks and lifts, and other water-related equipment from lake to lake. However, there seems to be a lot of misinformation spread among Minnesotans (and others around the country), blaming the movement of AIS on waterfowl and other water birds. We are here to debunk that theory.

Of course, researchers thought that waterfowl could be the culprit, too, and when researchers get an idea, they test it! As it turns out, in “laboratory” settings, waterfowl are not that good at spreading zebra mussels. In one test, researchers placed zebra mussel veligers, or larvae, in one shallow pool near another pool without any veligers in it only a few feet away, and recorded how many veligers were found in the second pool after ducks were allowed to move freely between them. Their results found very few were able to move between the pools, but surmised that because real-world situations would be harsher, their results probably overestimated how many mussels could realistically be moved by traveling waterfowl. Studies on waterfowl and the spread of invasive plants have shown that waterfowl are capable of moving these invasive plants, but no more so than other native plant species. While some organisms have adapted and evolved to be spread by migrating birds and other wildlife, it seems that zebra mussels and some other AIS have not.

But we see more anecdotal evidence that birds are not responsible for moving invasive species like zebra mussels. Otter Tail County is home to more than 1000 lakes and many more small wetlands, each one home to at least some type of waterfowl or other water-dependent bird. With that many ducks, geese, swans, cormorants, pelicans, herons and egrets in the area for up to nine months of the year, there is ample opportunity for birds to fly between lakes on a daily basis. However, despite migration and daily movements during open water season, there are no reports of zebra mussels or other invasive species in anything but more popular, recreational lakes. That is, no shallow wetlands or small, shallow lakes are infested with zebra mussels or other AIS in Otter Tail County, unless they are directly downstream of, or otherwise connected to other infested waters. Even when looking beyond the Otter Tail County border, the pattern holds true. For instance, Minnesota has over 50 designated wildlife lakes that are managed in large part for migratory waterfowl, yet none are infested with a prohibited AIS species like zebra mussels or Eurasian watermilfoil. This is true in spite of the fact that there are many designated shallow lakes within mere miles of other infested lakes.

So, for the rest of the fall, and in future open-water seasons, please follow the simple steps to clean, drain, dispose, and dry your water equipment before moving to new lakes. All we can do is control our own actions to reduce the rate of spread. The lakes of Otter Tail County will be in better shape if we do.

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