

Supplying Illinois lakes with threadfin shad means getting up early and crossing fingers.

The Shad Fishermen

Story and Photos
By Joe McFarland

And then it dawned on Mike Hooe. It was morning, which meant his work here would be finished in a matter of minutes.

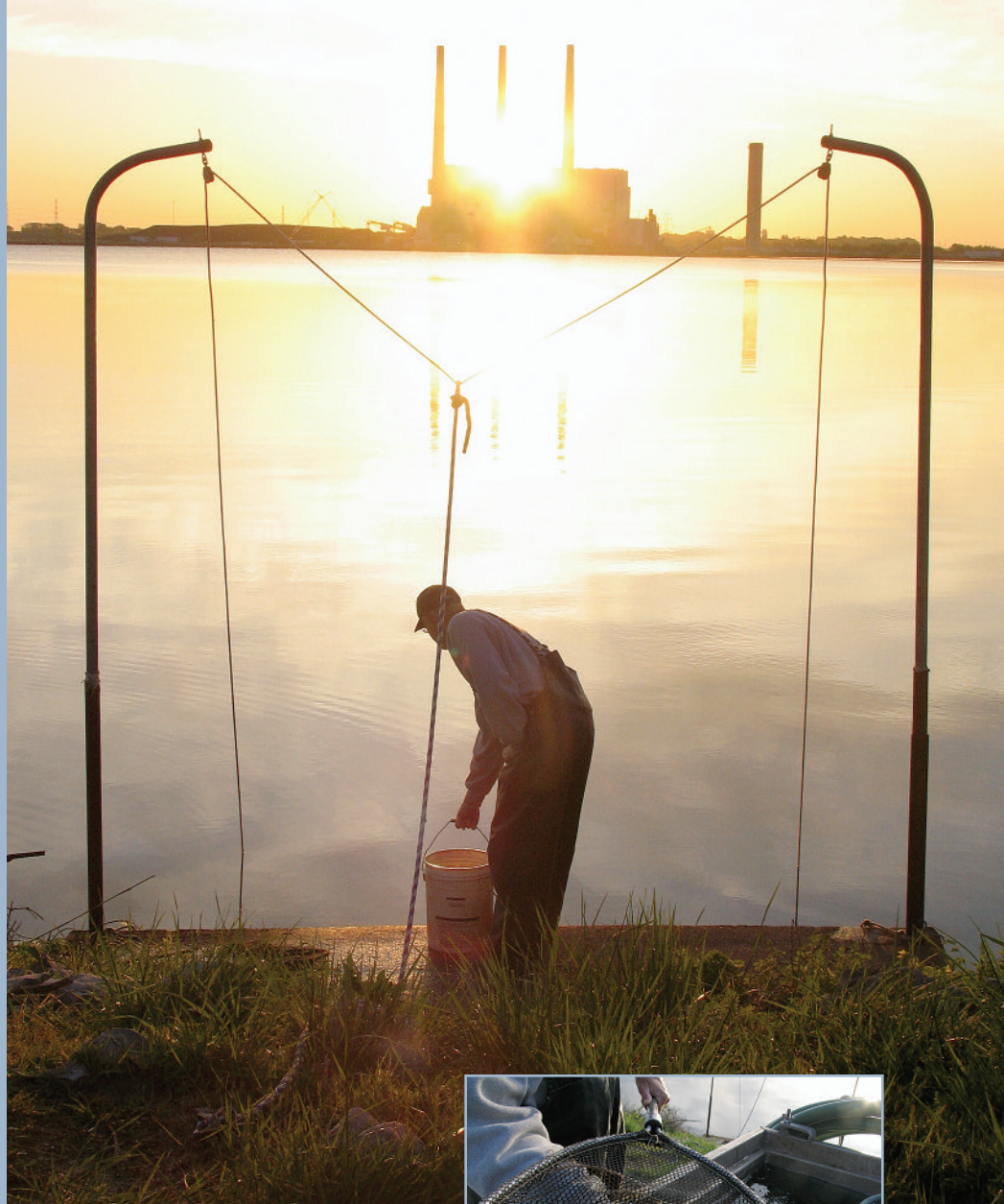
Nothing happens before sunrise at Baldwin Lake, and nothing happens much later. A fisheries biologist might pull nets from the water hundreds of times long after sunrise and never catch a threadfin shad. Or maybe they will.

"You never know if it's going to be a good day," the Department of Natural Resources biologist said, peering into an oxygen-packed tank on his state truck one morning last April. "You just show up and set the nets."

The moment the glow of sunrise replaces night at this southwestern Illinois power-plant cooling lake on the Randolph-Monroe county line, that's the time to be at the shore, pulling the net. The goal is 3,000 shad. Hooe, the district 19 fisheries biologist in southern Illinois, had caught about 1,000 so far. Whatever else he caught in the next few minutes he'd drop off in Rend Lake, and hope for a very good summer.

Like the sunrise itself, the moment to catch schooling shad happens just once a day. Miss it, and you've missed everything.

Threadfin shad (*Dorosoma petenense*) represent a tremendous forage for Illinois game fish, feeding everything from catfish to crappie to largemouth bass. They don't grow very large, about 5 inches tops, and that makes them ideal food for all sorts of predator fish.



DNR Fisheries Biologist Mike Hooe uses a lift net to catch threadfin shad at Baldwin Lake. The shad provide forage for other fish at state-managed lakes.



Of course, pouring a few thousand shad into the massive Rend Lake will feed a few fish for just a little while. But the biologist hoped for bigger returns.

"These fish alone won't make a significant difference in the forage base," Hooe said, explaining how the quick-maturing species can multiply exponentially throughout the summer. "Threadfin shad become sexually mature in less than a year, and if the offspring of these shad manage to spawn before the end of summer, the resulting forage supply will be a tremendous food resource for fish going into the fall."

All of the threadfin shad will die in Rend Lake, eventually. The water is too cold in this climate to sustain the southern

species. Baldwin's power-plant waters remain tepid enough during winter to allow survival of the species. That's why, for more than 20 years, state fisheries biologists have risen in the middle of the night and come to the shore of Baldwin in April to harvest loads of threadfin and transport them to other lakes.

When you purchase your fishing license this spring, know that you're paying for more than just a piece of paper. If you manage to catch a whopper bass, or lift a magnificent crappie from a public lake, remember those behind-the-scenes biologists somewhere who get up at 2 a.m. in April, doing the job you support.

