

Invasive Species Awareness Month

When it comes to tracing the origins of plants and animals, some names should tip you off immediately: Oriental bittersweet, Chinese yam, European buckthorn, Japanese stilt grass, Asian longhorned beetle, Brazilian elodea and Asian carp. Others aren't quite so obvious: Spotted knapweed, giant hogweed, mile-a-minute weed, Bradford pear, emerald ash borer and fish hook water fleas.

These are just a few of the hundreds of invasive species known to occur in Illinois. Unfortunately, the list grows almost daily.

Why should we be concerned about the introduction, whether intentional or accidental, of plants, animals and diseases not native to Illinois?

If unchecked, invasive species can limit how lands and waters can be used by future generations. In some cases, that dark future has arrived. Imagine losing your favorite turkey hunting location because the turkeys avoid the dense and impenetrable stand of autumn olive. Or a bird-watching trip devoid of avifauna where buckthorn is the dominant woody vegetation. In some spring woodlands, morel-hunting expeditions now mean parting dense stands of garlic mustard just to see the ground. What if the fisheries of your local lake were suddenly turned upside down when an invasive virus wiped out the bass population?

Invasive species disrupt the ecological balance that has evolved in specific habitats, introducing unfamiliar flora and fauna into the communities of life in our wetlands, forests, prairies, rivers and lakes.

The introduction of exotic species into new environments isn't new. Life on



Earth has moved around for millions of years. But today's sudden and rapid translocation of species globally is without historical precedent. In his book "Bringing Nature Home," Douglas W. Tallamy asks the question: If an alien plant has been in this country long enough, doesn't it become a native? *Phragmites australis*, or common reed, is a large,

perennial grass introduced to North American wetlands more than 300 years ago. In its native range, *Phragmites* supports 170 species of herbivores. Here, only five species feed on the plant. Thus, after more than three centuries *Phragmites* hasn't become a beneficial component of North American wetland ecosystems. Meanwhile, the invasive plant continues to spread and choke out native flora and fauna that required thousands of years to evolve here.

The longer we wait, the more expensive it will be to control these invaders. The current Asian carp control efforts are an attempt to halt a species that could have a major economic impact on resources throughout the Midwest. Pres-

ident Obama's administration continues to take a proactive, collaborative approach in the battle against Asian carp (see article page 2). On December 14, 2010, the president signed into law the Asian Carp Prevention and Control Act, adding bighead carp to the nation's list of injurious species. Also that month, a multi-tiered, multi-agency strategy was released outlining 45 actions to prevent Asian carp from establishing self-sustaining populations in the Great Lakes (see www.asiancarp.org).

Governor Pat Quinn has signed a proclamation declaring May Illinois Invasive Species Awareness Month. Visit www.invasive.org/illinois to learn about educational and volunteer activities taking place in your area and what you can do to prevent the spread of invasive species.

Please, grab your favorite pair of work gloves and gather a few friends this month and devote a few hours of your time to help preserve the natural community we know as Illinois.

Marc Miller, Director

