



This year and last, a DNR Enforcement helicopter was used to drop herbicide on exotic cattail beds in Minnesota. Photo courtesy of Minnesota DNR

By **Tori J. McCormick**  
Contributing Writer

**W**aterfowl hunters scouting for ducks and geese in wetlands and shallow lakes across the state, particularly in southern Minnesota, are no doubt familiar with cattails.

Indeed, native broad-leafed cattails once were ubiquitous in Minnesota. They stood among bulrushes, smartweed, and other native aquatic plants as pillars of wetland and shallow-lake health.

But times have changed. Native cattails are being replaced at an alarming rate by exotic narrow-leafed cattails or their hybrid offspring. The exotic newcomers – a relative term, wildlife managers say, because they’ve been around for decades – are taller and have darker-green leaves and slimmer so-called spikes at the top. More urgently, the exotics out-compete native cattails by creating what biologists describe as a “monoculture of habitat” that’s less than desirable for native plants and animals, particularly ducks and other migratory birds.

“Some wetlands are just completely choked with

the hybrids, which isn’t good for bird life or hunters,” said Ricky Lien, wetland habitat team supervisor with the Minnesota DNR in St. Paul. “Hybrids upset the ecological balance. The impact on individual wetlands is dramatic. They almost become a biological desert for wildlife.”

In early September, Minnesota DNR roving habitat crews finished their second year of spraying – and with any luck, killing – stands of hybrid cattails throughout Minnesota.

While the agency has been managing narrow-leafed and hybrid cattails for years (some through mowing and even grazing), in the past two years they’ve introduced a new weapon to the fight: a DNR-owned helicopter armed with a recently purchased sprayer, the tank of which is filled with DNR-approved herbicide. The goal: kill as many nonnative cattails as possible and restore the ecological health to as many watersheds as possible.

“We’ve used fixed-wing planes in the past in the northwest on larger wetland complexes and it’s worked pretty well,” said Donovan Pietruszewski,

habitat projects supervisor for the Minnesota DNR in Thief River Falls. “In other parts of the state, however, like the southwest with the region’s smaller basins, using the helicopter and having its maneuverability helps a great deal and wouldn’t be possible with a plane. It’s another tool we haven’t had access to until now.”

Narrow-leaf cattails likely came from Eurasia and reached North America decades ago, hybridizing with native cattails. Beginning in the eastern United States, hybrid cattails gradually have spread westward, DNR managers say, finding a home in Minnesota, particularly in wetland-rich southern Minnesota.

“Unfortunately, they’re pretty much widespread throughout the state now,” Pietruszewski said.

Native cattails have several ecological functions. They stabilize marshy borders around lakes and ponds, as well as protect shorelines from wave erosion. They provide spawning habitat for some fish.

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## Exotic Cattails

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In addition, native cattails provide cover and nesting sites for waterfowl and marsh birds, and their stocks and roots are eaten by muskrats and beavers.

Once established, hybrid cattails eventually displace native cattails. They grow thicker and denser, disrupting the natural life cycle of marshes. Entire wetlands become "cattail-choked" and have little value for migratory birds and other wildlife.

According to Lien, DNR habitat teams last year sprayed 2,850 acres covering 40 individual sites across 11 wildlife management areas from northern Kittson County to Lac qui Parle County to Carlos Avery Wildlife Management Area. The total cost, which came from an Outdoor Heritage Fund grant, was about \$88,000. That's \$30.90 per acre, which includes expenses for aircraft, pilot lodging and meals, and application and herbicide costs. In year's past, fixed-wing per-acre cost ran \$32.30.

"So the use of our own pilot and helicopter doesn't look too bad considering some past helicopter contracts have run us \$78 per acre for appli-

cation alone and with bids on some larger projects of around \$45 to \$50 an acre, including herbicide," said Lien, adding the funding for the \$50,000 sprayer came from a state grant, too.

This year, DNR crews sprayed about 2,425 acres covering 108 individual sites across 36 wildlife management areas and shallow waterfowl lakes, some of which are privately owned. According to the DNR, most of this year's spraying took place in southern Minnesota. Lien said the cost for this year's work, which has yet to be tallied, will be similar to last year's.

Wildlife managers say treating cattail-choked wetlands in the state's Prairie Pothole Region is vitally important, because not only have more than 90 percent of the region's basins already been lost to drainage, many remaining wetlands also have been over-taken by hybrid cattails.

"Roughly 30 percent of basins in the region are in good condition," Lien said. "We're hoping to increase that considerably."

The DNR's Ray Norgaard said managing hybrid

cattail-choked wetlands also has value beyond the ecological.

"Some wetlands are so dense that you can't even walk into them, if you were so inclined," Norgaard said. "For duck hunters, that means less access for hunting. We're trying to fix that problem, too."

Lien and others say the early returns from treated sites appear to be positive. More openings in wetlands have been created from the herbicide treatments. As a result, ducks and other birds are back to using those sites again. Additional spraying may be needed on some sites as DNR officials monitor managed sites over the long term.

"It appears we're having pretty good success so far, but we'll keep evaluating our work on all treated sites," Lien said, adding that additional funding is secure for cattail management in 2019.

"It's good to see some of these biological deserts turn back into productive wetlands again and have wildlife magically appear in the openings created from the treatments," he said.

## Kayak Fishing

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several anglers scattered across the river as we fished deep holes for sturgeon.

Again, sturgeon jumped all around us, but none would go to the bottom to take our baits.

After about four hours of watching sturgeon, I pulled anchor and made the move to fish for northern pike again, hoping to repeat or better what I'd done the previous day.

I lost count of the number of pike I boated, but nothing came close to the big fish I'd

I was so close to the sturgeon when it jumped I was able to maneuver my kayak and anchor in the center of the rings left from its splash-down. I thought to myself that this was nuts, but I knew a sturgeon was there just moments earlier.

After about 15 minutes of waiting, I felt a solid tap on my line, then another. I knew it was about to get serious, so I released my anchor system.

Then it happened. The rod doubled over and I began reeling. I was using circle hooks so

who was even farther down the river.

The sturgeon put up a good fight and moved my kayak several hundred feet upriver, but in the open water I had better control of the fish, and after a couple of fish runs I was finally able to grab the tail of the fish and flip it into the boat.

The sturgeon measured 37 inches – not a big fish by Rainy River standards, but still a fish I was proud to have landed.

Eventually, the others made their way to me and after some photos the fish was returned to the depths of the river to be caught again by another lucky angler.

Our night ended with another great meal at the resort and the day's events were recounted. I never would have dreamed that I'd fish out of a kayak, targeting fish that could pull me where they wanted to go. But after having done it, I can't wait until I can do it again.

## Judge delays grizzly hunt in Rockies

By Matthew Brown  
Associated Press

Billings, Mont. (AP) — A U.S.

abide by Christensen's order but was disappointed.

"Wyoming Game and Fish has

female bear were killed. No hunting is allowed in the two parks.

Idaho's hunting quota is one