

# Aquatic Invaders Among Us

**By Megan Birzell**

As we watch the ice melt off the lakes, we can't help but think about the coming summer and lazy days spent tooling around the lake in our boats. But there's something else we should be thinking about and watching for, as well: aquatic invasive species.

Unfortunately, noxious weeds are not limited to dry ground. Aquatic weeds like Eurasian watermilfoil and flowering rush have been wreaking havoc on lakes in the western US for years and have recently infiltrated Montana. Eurasian watermilfoil has been found in Noxon Reservoir, and flowering rush has been found in Flathead Lake and the lower Flathead and Clark Fork rivers. These aquatic plants form dense mats and stands in lakes and slow-moving rivers that create habitat for invasive fish, clog irrigation canals, and impair recreational uses such as swimming, boating, and fishing. There are no natural enemies to these plants in Montana, and no one in the US has had success mitigating or eradicating these weeds once they inhabit a water body.

Perhaps of even greater concern are invasive mussels. Two species, zebra mussels and quagga mussels, are of particular concern. These species are native to the Black and Caspian seas in Eurasia and originally traveled to the US in 1988 via the ballast water of shipping vessels. They were first spotted in Lake Erie but had spread through most of the eastern half of the US by 1998. Only in the past five years have they spread to the western US. They are commonly found in Lake Mead.

Zebra and quagga mussels are relatively small, can attach to almost anything, and grow in dense congregations. They can reproduce in water over 52 degrees Fahrenheit, and adults can survive in air for several days, making it easy for them to be transported from lake to lake via recreational boats. Importantly, they have not been eradicated in any large bodies of water in which they have been introduced.

These invasive mussels devastate the water bodies they inhabit. They outcompete native mussels and clams. They disrupt the entire aquatic food web by filter-feeding algae that would otherwise be available to fish. By removing up to 80% of edible plankton in the water, they deprive juvenile and smaller fish of food and cause crashes in fish populations. They also concentrate toxins in their tissue and waste and can contribute to toxic algal blooms.

Beyond their ecological effects, zebra and quagga mussels clog intake pipes and distribution networks for municipal, agricultural, and power plant water supplies. Over \$7 billion has been spent trying to control this species since 1988. Further, they cause decreases in recreation and fishing opportunities when fish populations crash, water bodies are closed to recreation due to mussel infestations, and beaches become unusable due to mussel shells.

While the rapid spread and devastating effects of Eurasian watermilfoil, flowering rush, and zebra and quagga mussels are cause for concern, there is some good news: none of these species have yet been found in the Clearwater Valley. We would like to keep it that way, and there are some easy things you can do to help with that effort. First, wash your boat before you put it on a lake in the Clearwater. This is particularly important if you've taken your boat to other water bodies outside the valley. When washing your boat, it's ideal to have hot water and a pressure washer. However, it is most important to wash it

far enough away from a body of water so any possible invasive species don't wash into the water bodies. Second, learn how to identify Eurasian watermilfoil and flowering rush so you can spot them on your boat or others' boats. See the Clearwater Resource Council's website, [www.crcmt.org](http://www.crcmt.org), for links to more information, or stop by our office.

With everyone's help and commitment to this effort, we can keep the Clearwater Valley free of aquatic invasive species and thus preserve our high water quality and enjoy recreating in our lakes.

Insert Photo:



Caption: Invasive mussels cover a boat motor, rendering it unusable.

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