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hydrilla's (somewhat) evil twin

A LOT OF us use the names hydrilla and milfoil interchangeably. Look at any massed mat of surface weeds and you can probably get away with calling it either milfoil (Myriophyllum spicatum) or hydrilla, unless you have an aquatic botanist in the boat. Whatever you call it, it's bassy!

But there are subtle differences in these two invasive weeds, and learning to tell one from the other can put more fish in your well.

Eurasian milfoil has been here so long that most boaters and anglers think of it as a native plant - and in fact there is a native milfoil in America, often occurring in the same lakes with the invader. Botanists at the University of Florida say milfoil is thought to have first arrived in the bilge of ships in the late 1800s in the brackish upper end of Chesapeake Bay. From there, it has spread nationwide, as well as into Canada and Mexico.

It's so tough it can grow under ice, and its ability to sprawl is legendary: North Carolinana biologists surveyed one area with about 500 acres of it in Currituck Sound in 1965, and by 1975, that patch had become 78,600 bass-loaded acres! The only state that's not rife with it is Florida - so far.

On the other hand, milfoil can go away as rapidly as it comes - changing water conditions wiped it out in Currituck Sound in the early 1980s, and with the 'toil went the great brackish-water bass fishing. Lowering water levels for two or three days in freezing weather wipes it out wholesale, and it can readily be killed by repeat treatments of aquatic herbicide - for a while. Any relaxing of the spraying regimen and it comes back as strong as ever.

Milfoil looks and grows much like hydrilla, and in many of the same areas. Sometimes it is closely mixed with the 'drilla, thus the tendency most of us have to just fish it as "mildrilla," as Guntersville guide Tim Chandler calls the vast grassbeds there.

Basically, milfoil is a softer, more feathery plant in the water - but also is more likely to poke visible pink flowers and green shoots tipped in red slightly above the surface. Like hydrilla, it forms surface mats when it tops out in late summer, with the

mat sometimes as much as 3 feet thick. An open cavern underneath forms prime shaded bass habitat.

Hydrilla is a stronger plant with more clearly defined leaves, usually five around the central stem in repeated pods. And though it lays over to form a solid surface mat, it usually does not push shoots up off the water; its tiny white flowers float just on the surface. When you see a mat that looks like a lawn shooting new sprigs of grass, it's likely to be milfoil.

Out of the water, milfoil completely loses its shape and becomes almost moss-like, while hydrilla's stiffer stems and rough-bottomed leaves hold their shape.

Like hydrilla, it can be spread by sprigs broken off from the mother plant, and thus has been transported to hundreds of new on props and boat trailers.

Milfoil is more cold tolerant and starts growing sooner in spring than hydrilla, so it presents the first patches of green on weed flats in many lakes. These locations are frequently bass magnets, so knowing where the milfoil grows can be useful.

“Wherever you see that greenup, you can burn a lipless crankbait or spinnerbait and tear them up prespawn” said Chandler. He also likes milfoil when targeting bedding fish, which he most often catches on Texas rigged worms or creature baits on jigs. In summer, as the weeds just begin to top out, a small buzzbait does the job. And in fall, when the surface mats are fully formed, the somewhat softer structure of milfoil makes it easier for bass to blow up through the cover on a weedless frog than in tougher stands of hydrilla and coontail, Chandler said.

Hydrilla tends to outgrow milfoil where both are present, and though it starts later in spring, it's usually the first to the surface. Both have been recorded to take root in depths up to 30 feet in clear lakes. By early summer, hydrilla often overshadows milfoil, leaving it exposed only in

Boats and trailers are often the way that invasive grasses are spread to new waters.

Photo by Don Schmitz, FWC Invasive Plant Management Section

Milfoil is hardy and prolific, as evidenced by the way it has taken over a bay in this lake.

Photo by Scott Culpepper

patches here and there - but those patches, where the mil· foil is green, can be very bassy spots. Black weeds, which are dead or dying and thus consuming oxygen, generally hold fewer fish.

Milfoil is a "clingy" weed that tends to drape itself over lures with any bulk, so thinner, more streamlined offerings are best. And some anglers make use of scented oils to help soft plastics slip through the weeds.

Elite Series pro Timmy Horton of Muscle Shoals, Ala., noted that areas where clear edges form between milfoil and hydrilla can be prime flippin' spots.

"Where you see another type of vegetation meeting the milfoil, or maybe a laydown in the milfoil, those are always going to be worth fishing," said Horton. "I like to punch through the mat and feel where the bottom of the weeds is in relation to the bottom of the lake, and then just yoyo the bait several times on the bottom and then next to the mat before I make my next drop."

Though milfoil is a bass magnet just like hydrilla, biologist caution that it's possible to have too much of either, or of both in combination.

"A number of studies all over the Southeast have shown that the optimum weed coverage is between 20 and 40 percent of the bottom in most lakes' said Florida Fish & Wildlife Commission biologist and water weed expert Marty Mann. "Less doesn't provide enough cover for juveniles, and more makes it too difficult for the fish to navigate - and for the fishermen to locate them."

Of course, the other issues of excessive exotic weed growth are also present with milfoil. Difficulties for swimmers, skiers and boaters, unhappy waterfront homeowners, and jamming of intakes on powerplants and municipal water systems are among the problems milfoil has caused.

And too much of it is definitely a bad thing; in some areas, biologists have found low oxygen content and increased eutrophication caused by decaying milfoil.

Washington state, among others, spends more than $1 million per year trying to control it.

"You don't want either milfoil or hydrilla in lakes where they're not already growing," said Mann. "A native mix of plants between that 20 and 40 percent range is the ideal because they're self-limiting and won't clog the whole lake. But once the faster-growing exotics get into a large system, you pretty much can't get rid of them. Our focus in recent years has changed to managing the exotics, both through limited selective spraying and through drawdowns, and that seems to be a very effective approach."

The bottom line is that Eurasian milfoil is here to stay, and bass anglers might as well take advantage of it.