

Empowering Waterfowl Hunters to Prevent the Spread of Aquatic Invasive Species

By Stephanie Boismenu, Oneida County Land & Water Conservation Department

With the 2022 migratory season underway in the Northwoods, waterfowl hunters have the perfect opportunity to achieve one of the most important habitat conservation efforts possible while out in the field - to prevent the spread of aquatic invasive species (AIS). AIS are threatening Wisconsin's waterbodies. A few minutes of prevention will stop their spread, protect quality waterfowl habitats and food sources, maintain waterfowl populations, and preserve the hunting traditions that have lasted for generations.



Photo: Stephanie Boismenu

Cold, gloomy days of trudging through water and muck to chase ducks comes with the territory and adds to the adventure. However, after a long day in the field, hunters are faced with a boat load of grimy gear: waders, clothing, decoys, decoy bags, ropes, anchors, blinds, push poles, paddles, canoes, kayaks, boats, trailers, carts, ATV/UTV's and other hunting equipment. All of these items could harbor AIS trapped in mud, water, or attached to a plant. Before tossing dirty hunting equipment in the back of the truck and the boat, please remember to drain all water from your boat and equipment and remove all plants, animals, mud, seeds and other debris before you leave the boat landing. These actions will prevent the spread of AIS, especially when hunting different waters within a few days.

But what about your four legged hunting companion? Paws down, a wet and dirty dog is a sign that they had a great day of retrieving birds, be it swimming across a lake, plowing through neck deep muck or through fields of cattails and weed seeds, and rolling in who knows what. Hunters should be aware that mud caked in fur, collars, and vests could hold viable AIS. The tiny seeds that cling to everything could be from an invasive plant such as purple loosestrife. Your



Photo: Stephanie Boismenu

dirty dog has the potential to be a vector of an invasive species and inadvertently spread it to the next hunting destination or even bring it home. Before loading your dog in the truck, inspect their fur, ear flaps, paw pads, belly, matted hair, collars, and vests for anything that doesn't belong. It's important to remove mud, grass, seeds, burrs, stickers, thorns, and ticks. Bathing them before leaving the landing is not always practical, but keeping a few grooming tools, scissors, and pet

wipes with your hunting equipment will make the cleaning process easier. A jug of tap water and a towel kept in your truck will provide a good rinse and wipe down before the ride home.

AIS impact waterfowl populations and habitat

There are several AIS that waterfowl hunters should be aware of. Of particular concern is the invasive faucet snail (*Bithynia tentaculata*) that has been attributed to large-scale waterfowl die-offs in the Upper Midwest. The snail is an intermediate host for three intestinal trematode parasites that are passed from the snail to the waterfowl that consume them. When the infested snail is ingested, adult trematodes attack internal organs and cause lesions and hemorrhage. Infected birds appear lethargic and have difficulty diving and flying before eventually dying. There is no evidence that other wildlife species, including fish, are adversely affected by the trematodes present in faucet snails. The parasite does not pose a risk to humans consuming cooked waterfowl or fish. Faucet snails are not known to be co-hosts for the swimmers itch fluke.



Faucet Snail
Photo: Chris J. Benson

The faucet snail lives in the substrate of ponds, creeks, rivers, and shallow lakes, attached to aquatic plants, gravel, and other solid structures. It grows to a half inch long and has an operculum (trap door) that seals the opening of the shell, which allows it to live for several weeks in dry mud. Since it can survive out of water for so long, it is important to make sure your boat and hunting gear are properly cleaned and all water is drained before moving to a new waterbody. While there are no documented populations of faucet snails in Oneida County, it was discovered in neighboring Langlade County in 2014. This brings the total known occurrence of faucet snails in the State of Wisconsin to 37 locations. Waterfowl hunters as well as anglers must be vigilant against the invader!

Another invasive species that threatens waterfowl habitat is the non-native *Phragmites australis*, also known as common reed. This is a grass that has been used to build hunting blinds and camouflage boats and is famous for making hunting spots disappear. *Phragmites* grows to 18 feet tall with stiff hollow stems that look like canes and prominent plume-like seed heads. It spreads by below-ground rhizomes, above-ground stolons, and seed dispersal. Once established, it aggressively invades exposed lake beds, shorelines, marshes, streams, swamps, rivers, roadside ditches, heavily disturbed sites and other low, wet areas. The dense colonies limit access to hunting areas, can eliminate plant diversity, food sources, nesting habitat, and reduce stop over locations for migratory birds.



Non-native Phragmites Photo: Steph Boismenu

The invasive Phragmites is so aggressive that it will inevitably dominate entire habitats, hence it is an NR40 Regulated Invasive Species in Wisconsin. It is illegal to use phragmites in counties where the plant is listed as Prohibited by the Invasive Species, NR40. This includes Oneida County and counties in the western half of Wisconsin. Consider using other plant species or artificial blind material.

Protecting prime waterfowl habitat

According to the Wisconsin Wetland Association, less than 15% of Wisconsin is currently wetlands. In Wisconsin, 75% of native wildlife species depend on wetlands at some point in their lives, 30% of rare and endangered species rely on wetlands, and 50% of wetlands have been lost since the late 1800's. Wetlands provide many natural benefits beyond waterfowl hunting. They provide clean drinking water, shoreline protection, flood protection, wildlife habitat, and they are an important part of our tourism and outdoor recreation economy. Therefore, protecting wetlands from the introduction and spread of AIS is not just up to waterfowl hunters, but rather it is the responsibility of all of us.

In Oneida County, there are about 222,600 acres of wetlands – 28.2% of the land cover. Several AIS present in Oneida County have the potential to impact our wetlands, such as yellow iris, narrow-leaf cattails, purple loosestrife, reed manna grass, reed canary grass, non-native phragmites, Eurasian watermilfoil, and curly-leaf pondweed. The presence of AIS located deep within a wetland or marsh can be nearly impossible to manage because these sites are remote and inaccessible due to the nature of the submerged and floating peat. Vigilance is needed to stop the spread of the many destructive invaders waiting for an opportunity to make their silent onslaught into our waterfowl habitats.

Controlling AIS and managing their impacts is an expensive business and can be an exhaustive process. However, there are two steps that waterfowl hunters can take to help prevent the impacts of AIS. First and foremost, take a few minutes to clean gear and drain water! These simple steps are the single most efficient, economical, and effective conservation actions to stop the spread of AIS! Second, learn to identify invasive species and alert property owners, the DNR, or the local County Land & Water Conservation Department of their presence. Early detection of AIS will provide effective control measures before it becomes established and out of control.



Sophia Photo by her mom: Stephanie Boismenu

The statewide AIS Waterfowl Outreach program is currently underway during the waterfowl hunting season. Now in its sixth year, staff from the Department of Natural Resources, County Land & Water Conservation Departments, other statewide partners and volunteers meet hunters at many water access points around the state. The goal is to talk with hunters about the impacts of various types of AIS and what they can do to help stop the spread. The program is modeled after the Clean Boats, Clean Waters (CBCW) watercraft inspection program that reaches boaters

throughout summer. Watercraft inspectors conduct a hunting version of the CBCW survey and talk with them about specific aspects of duck hunting that risk moving AIS.

Preventing the spread of AIS is an important component of waterfowl conservation. It takes just a few minutes to do the required AIS prevention steps, which will help protect hunting traditions for generations to come. Before launching and before leaving a waterbody, you must inspect your boat, trailer, motor, all equipment, gear, waders, clothing, duck blinds and dogs. Remove all attached plants, animals, mud, seeds, seed heads, root fragments, and other debris. Drain all water from your decoys, boat, motor, bilge, livewell, and equipment. Other tips include: use a stiff brush to remove debris from boot treads; use non-felt soled boots to further reduce the risk of spreading AIS; use elliptical, bulb-shaped, or strap decoy anchors to help avoid snagging aquatic plants; check storage compartments in boats or kayaks that aren't in use the rest of the year and make sure they are clean and dry; and cut emergent vegetation in accordance with state regulations.



Photo: Stephanie Boismenu

Together, we can prevent the introduction and spread of AIS. An ounce of prevention will conserve our rich waterfowl habitats – with benefits to hunters and non-hunters alike.

For more information about how to prevent the spread of AIS, contact Stephanie Boismenu, AIS Coordinator and Conservation Technician, Oneida County Land & Water Conservation Department at sboismenu@co.onieda.wi.us or visit the Invasive Species page at oclw.org.



Buffalo Lake, Oneida County Photo: Stephanie Boismenu