

Fishing for and Eating Carp in Utah

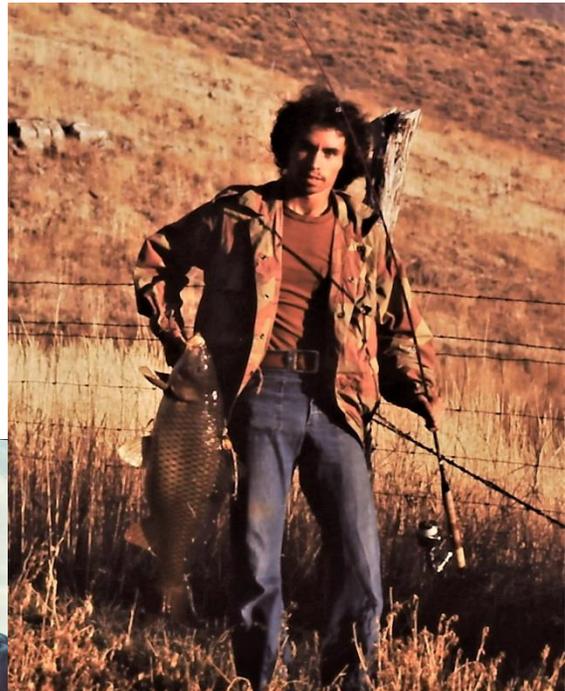
by Dan Potts

History and International Importance

Common (Eurasian) Carp, *Cyprinus carpio*, is native to Europe and Asia, one of a variety of ecologically different "Eurasian" carp species including silver, bighead, and black. Largely because of their fast growth and large size and their ability to live almost anywhere in temperate and tropical areas they have been introduced virtually everywhere in world primarily as a food fish. Over the centuries that species has become the number one freshwater fish grown for human consumption, by far! They are relatively easy to grow and harvest and make great table fare if they live in unpolluted waters. Mostly due the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad they were introduced to Utah in the late 1800s as both a food and sport fish and, have proliferated here ever since. Unfortunately, almost everything our parents and friends have told most us about common carp as we have grown up here in America is untrue!

Me and Carp

I have a lifelong history with carp. They were the first fish I pursued as a kid, riding my bicycle all over the Salt Lake Valley to find them and other fishes. Because my grandfather had helped to start the first duck club (The Utah Duck Club) in Utah, I would bike all the way out to the Great Salt Lake marshes to fish there for 10 to 20-pound trophy carp. My knowledge about the ecology and behavior of species grew as I learned how to hook and land these huge fish. After I received my driver's license, I was able to fish for them everywhere in Utah from the Bear River to Lake Powell.



Dan with a 15-pound Mantua Reservoir (pre-carp poisoning), ca 1972



Few of my workers observe the original introduction of young common carp and Nile tilapia to the fishponds I designed in Zamora, SA, ca 1977

After graduating from Utah State University with a bachelor's degree in Fisheries Management I joined the Peace Corps to gain experience and learn Spanish in Ecuador, SA. I spent a few years teaching the locals to build fishponds to breed and raise fish for food, but mostly designed and supervised the construction of an aquaculture facility in the

provincial capital city, Zamora, located near Ecuador's controversial border with Peru. We raised four species of carps and Nile tilapia, but I also started studying the many local native Amazonian fishes, including several aquaculture candidates. Upon returning to the U.S. I entered Auburn University and its world-renowned International School of Aquaculture to further study many of those un-named species. However, I mostly studied fish ecology for five years as I earned a master's degree in Ichthyology (study of fishes), while focusing my thesis on what tools fish possess to feed on and digest their food. In that process I learned much more about common carp, inside and out, and found that the American Fisheries Society had really begun to advocate this underutilized worldwide food and sport fish.



Customer, world-traveling Dr. William Christensen fighting a 16-pound carp he hooked and played on his fly rod for more than half an hour at Deer Creek Reservoir, ca 1986

Upon returning from graduate school to Utah, I really started promoting fishing for and eating carp. I even ran my own fishing guiding business for about five years as Utah's only multispecies guide, sometimes pursuing carp. *NOTE: Another Utah fishing guide specializing in fly fishing for trophy carp operated primarily on Flaming Gorge about that same time.*

Around that same time, I also helped to start a nonprofit, Wasatch Fish and Gardens (now Wasatch Community Gardens), where I helped to start a fish coop that involved people originally from all corners of the world. At first, we tried to

raise carp in Sears swimming pools until it became obvious that it would be far easier to merely harvest them from local waters, like Utah's duck club ponds, using seine nets donated to us by the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources. It was a win-win, as carp were competing with duck club ducks for food and coop members could harvest over one-half ton in a day! Later, we found that it was even easier to simply purchase them at a very small cost from Utah Lake's longtime commercial carp fisherman and pass the savings on to the many coop members the coop had accumulated, due to their previous familiarity with eating carp, unlike the many other more naïve Americans.



Non-English-speaking WCG Fish Cooperative members harvesting carp for human consumption from a Rudy Duck Club pond (south shore of the GSL), ca 1987

To date I have angled for, reproduced, reared, hybridized, formally studied, netted, and routinely eaten carp for over 50 years. More recently, I have continued my lifelong passion for both carp and the ecological health of Utah Lake, mostly with more than a decade of involvement in the recovery program



Past Utah Anglers Coalition vice president and fly-fishing guide, Brandon Anderson with a hard fought, mere 6-pound Deer Creek carp that he claimed changed his perspectives on fly fishing forever!

to save an endangered, unique native Utah Lake fish, the June sucker. Since they were introduced the lake more than a century ago, the carp population in Utah Lake had grown to comprise about 80% of the lake's fish biomass, becoming some of the most stunted (averaging only about 4½ pounds each). They were roiling the lake's shallow bottom muds with their feeding and spawning behaviors to compromise its water quality. After all that experience and formal education, some think that I am currently the most knowledgeable and biggest promoter of carp in Utah...

Common Carp Ecology and Behavior

Most North American anglers have a very narrow and negative attitude towards common carp, usually referring to them as bottom feeding trash fish, even though their diet and behavior are very similar to both channel catfish, *Ictalurus punctatus*, and rainbow trout, *Oncorhynchus mykiss*, both highly esteemed "game fish" here in America. Ecologically, carp are known as omnivores, which means they can eat and digest almost anything. We all know other omnivores: bears, rats, cockroaches, and, of course, humans. Their ability to eat a wide variety of foods obviously relates to fishing, because they can be caught on almost any fishing bait, lure or fly.

While it is true that carp, channel catfish and rainbow trout all feed on or near the bottom at times, they all

willingly feed anywhere in the water column depending upon available food. To find that food catfish utilize their whiskers to "taste" their environment and vibration-detecting lateral line, that runs down both sides of most fishes. Rainbow trout have no whiskers, but smell using their nostrils like us, can see well and also possess lateral lines. To best both those so-called gamefish species, carp possess two whiskers in the corners of their mouth, have excellent vision with their larger eyes, possess lateral lines, but also possess the ability to actually hear sounds coming from outside the water. Along with other Utah "trash fish" (e.g., suckers), carp possess a "Weberian process" at the front of their front air bladder that operates similar to our own inner ear. Because carp can both feel vibrations in the water created from the shore or boat, and can also hear noises from above, the old adage, "Be quiet or you'll spook the fish." is actually true! Hence, approaching carp can be very difficult, as most avid European carp anglers will attest. Because few anglers pursue them, carp here in Utah are much easier to stalk or bait fish.

Carp are also more intelligent than other common North American sport fishes. Scientific behavioral studies have concluded that carp possess a higher ability to learn. These superior senses and intelligence have all combined to elevate carp to be the only species found in North America that is also included in the top twenty freshwater sport fishes of the world, even though it is not even considered a sportfish here in Utah. In Europe, and especially in the United Kingdom where sport fishing was born, landing a carp is far more highly prized than that of trout or salmon. The Brit's respect for the species is based on the challenge of hooking "educated", highly pursued fish, and the difficulty in landing a species that simply will not give up as easily as most of America's own gamefishes. However, because most of us here have been taught early on to disdain carp, most Utahans do not usually fish for them, making it far easier to hook even trophy (20+-pound fish) here in Utah, as they are not as educated (=not pursued).



Dan with trophy carp from Starvation, ca 1975

Carp actually belong to the minnow family, Cyprinidae, which possess no teeth in their mouths, rather they have a set of them in the bottom back of their throats. Those teeth in common carp almost entirely resemble our own, with incisors, cuspids and molars to help them process the wide variety of foods they eat. The only difference is that their teeth do not impact each other, like our own, rather they work against a flexible plate in the roof of their throat to masticate and crush the foods they are able to inhale. Everything I have learned about fishes, is that they will eat anything that will fit into their mouths, and even things that will not! I recall an 18-pounder I landed on a huge rapala fishing lure trolling it 70 feet deep in Flaming Gorge fishing for lake trout. The carp had inhaled it way down its throat – really?



Classic scaling pattern and color of a mirror carp I landed in lower Hobbie Creek while fishing for Northern pike, ca 2019

Us Americans have even been convinced by our peers that carp are ugly. Nothing could be further from the truth! If that were true the Japanese would have never selected them for enhanced colors and scale patterns, to breed a strain, called koi, that can now be sold for upwards of \$10,000 for a select pair. Used primarily as a larger (than goldfish), attractive pond fish, I have had a very small one in my own home aquarium for years to further observe its behaviors. Here in Utah, carp are found in both fully scaled to almost naked. Partially scaled "mirror" carp are common statewide.

When Where and How to Fish for Carp

Over the decades I have caught carp on virtually every type of fishing tackle, everything from fishing on the bottom with sweet corn to trolling salt water rapalas 70 feet deep in the Gorge for lake trout, snap jigging blade baits to dry fly fishing. Like any fish sought by anglers, it helps to know what where and when to fish for them. Below are a few fishing recommendations:

Dry Fly-Fishing (muddy) Utah Lake?

Over recent years Utah Lake's huge, expensive June sucker project to remove carp has been successful enough to decrease the total weight of them in the lake by at least half, which has essentially doubled the average size of the fish to about eight pounds through a reduction in the competition between them. Due to the low transparency of the lake's generally muddy water its carp are not usually aggressive. However, groups (pods) of carp can sometimes be spotted on the surface on calm summer mornings in protected areas like boat marinas feeding on small aquatic insects and surface "scum". It can be great fun to stalk and dry-fly fish these pods using what I call small "popcorn" flies tied with white packing peanut foam, which is easier to see and sure floats! The challenge, again, is to not spook them all by casting far enough ahead and past the fish to gently pull it in front of one. Applying a little scent should help the popcorn getting sucked under. I try to quickly set the hook with a quick tug of the fly line. Best to have a well-adjusted drag and lots of backing on your fly reel though, as they will not usually stop on the first and even subsequent runs!



Popcorn flies:

smaller, less visible but quickly tied with packing foam on #8 hook (right);
larger, more visible but carefully tied with tying foam on #6 hook (left)
both tied w/. black B "Bigfly" thread

Fishing for Utah's Trophy Carp



Trophy-class carp sight-fished with a black crappie jig from Starvation Reservoir, ca 1995

I consider Deer Creek, Flaming Gorge and Starvation Reservoirs, as well as Lake Powell to all be potential trophy (fish over 20 pounds) carp waters. I would include the duck club ponds around the Great Salt Lake, but access to these mostly private properties is usually difficult unless you have contacts. I prefer to sight-fish and stalk large active (cruising) individual carp feeding on or near the surface, using either a spinning rod tipped with a soft plastic jig or a fly rod using a streamer or large buggy fly presented either from shore or the front of a slow-moving boat. I prefer to using more demure lure colors like black, brown,

and dark green, and flies with matuka-style or with “buggy” legs. Unlike trout and bass, carp are more easily spooked with erratic or classic fly-fishing stripping approaches, so I use a simple slow drag or light hop to elicit takes. Wearing good, polarized glasses to see takes really helps. Carp can be very line-shy, so a lighter leader might be necessary, but those unfamiliar with fighting world class fish that can weight up to 35 pounds here in Utah will find things very difficult. I recommend routinely readjusting the drag during the battle and using a large a landing net for such powerful fish. If fly fishing, be sure to tend any line not on the reel, especially in moving water as carp will always make yet another run. Chasing hooked fish along the shore or with the boat should help.



A quickly and easily tied Hippy fly using black-n-blue “Hippy Hackle” on a #6 long shank streamer hook

Bait Fishing for Carp

Of course, carp exist in many of Utah’s other lowland waters, and as a non-game species are available for sport fishing year-round, although they tend to feed less aggressively in colder water than many other North American fishes and, may even hibernate during the winter in some shallower, colder waters like Utah Lake. Unfortunately, carp found in many lowland waters like the Jordan and Bear rivers may not be as edible as those from Utah Lake, or the other waters mentioned above due to the presence of pollution and/or off-flavors. That certainly does not prevent the great sportfishing opportunities carp afford.

NOTE: One may decide to not catch-and-release carp landed, however, it is unethical and illegal to leave them to die and rot on the bank (as many Utahans have traditionally done.) If I do not plan to eat or release a carp, I often bury them where I plan to grow that year’s tomato plants for some Native American “magic”.



Dan (wearing bell-bottom pants and a tank top) bait fishing for carp on the Bear River, ca 1975

My historic go-to still-fishing bait for them is fresh frozen sweet corn or a piece of nightcrawler threaded on size 10 to 6 bait hook. Because carp can be very sensitive and line-shy, I use lighter 6 to 8-pound test line, light or sliding sinkers, and a long, fast spinning or leger rod, and a reel with a smooth drag and lots of line capacity. Using a spinning rod, I usually bottom fish for them using sweet corn or piece of nightcrawler as bait, but always leave the reel open, as carp often move off after picking up the bait. I try to set the hook as they start to move away with the bait, and hope that I have adjusted the reel drag properly. If they spook, they can launch one’s rod into the water, never to be seen again as they streak upwards of 100 yards on their first run!

More recently I have switched to using light wire “circle” hooks in slightly larger sizes, which has revolutionized almost all my bait fishing. Circles usually eliminate the hassle and timing of setting the hook. In fact, attempting to do so usually fails to hook the fish. Instead, the rod should be secured on the shore or boat with the reel closed, but the drag set light enough to provide enough tension to allow the hook to work properly while still preventing the fish to pull the rod in. As any fish moves away with the bait, the hook usually rotates to the corner (click) of its mouth and hooks the fish there. One simply picks up the rod and starts to fight the fish, hopefully readjusting the reel drag to help land the fish. How easy is that?

Cooking and Eating Carp, and Some Preparation Tips

My wife and I have eaten various species of carp since I entered the Peace Corps in the 1970s. Common carp are by far our favorite. Carp meat is oiler, similar to that of trout/salmon and catfishes, and not as lean as sunfishes like bluegill and crappie, and America’s favorite freshwater food fish, yellow perch. Where those fishes can be cooked in a wider variety of ways, and even frozen for extended periods, it is best to eat carp fresh within a day or two. As with any fish, the flavor and texture of fish is dependent upon where and when they are caught. For example, carp and all other fishes from Utah Lake almost always taste good, because that lake only rarely produces any off-flavor compounds from the late summer algae blooms that occur on many of Utah’s more fertile waters. However, the Utah Health Department recommends that pregnant women and children should not eat much carp (nor channel catfish) from Utah Lake due to elevated levels of PCBs (a well-known environmental toxin).

NOTE: Cooking techniques that help melt fat from the fish flesh of carp and catfish should allow even those recommended to avoid those two species to consume smaller quantities or a lower frequency. Toxic mercury is not a concern in Utah Lake, but could be an issue in the other upstream waters previously mentioned and, is usually well distributed throughout the flesh and bones of any fish, unlike PCBs that are fat soluble and mostly found in the fatty tissues.



18-pound carp recently caught on sweet corn from a GSL duck club that was excellent to eat with little risk for either mercury nor PCBs
Yummm!

We have learned to only cook carp smaller than 10 inches and greater than 10 pounds. I carefully remove all the usually large scales with a scaling tool or large spoon, BEFORE removing their guts, often doing that job underwater in a tub, cooler or bucket to reduce scales ending up everywhere. We simply pan fry smaller carp like with a smaller trout and BBQ whole, larger fish. Most Americans complain about the “Y-shaped” floating bones found in both carp and pikes, as it makes eating them more challenging. Those bones are very thin in the smaller carp and can be consumed with the flesh, as with smaller trout. Those bones are much thicker in larger carp making it easier to simply remove them as eaten. Larger, pre-scaled and headed 10+ pound fish are patted dry with paper towels and then oiled inside and out with any cooking oil and placed directly on the BBQ on relatively high heat. The fish is routinely and carefully rolled

over and over as it cooks just until the skin starts falling off and the meat can be pulled from the spine. As with cooking any fish – do not over-cook!

TIP: We like to continually baste oily fishes like carp and salmon with orange juice as they cook, instead of more acidic lemon or lime, because those citrus tend to dry the meat out more as it cooks. The orange juice along with lemon or lime juice along with classic salt and pepper does work well at the table.

Before consuming any large fish we think it is always a good idea to scrape of the “mud streak” flesh that runs down both sides of any bony fish. Most of the off-flavors and/or fat-soluble toxins previously absorbed by the fish are likely to be stored in this less appealing brown flesh. We either carefully place the entire fish on a large platter in the center of the table for people to remove the meat they prefer, or meat can be removed to a serving plate. Most people (especially children) prefer eating the lighter-colored, bone-free rib meat. We often avoid the tail end because it has more and smaller bones that are more difficult to remove at the table.

TIP: We have found that placing a moist washcloth adjacent to our less dominant hand to wipe it off as we pull out the “Y-shaped” bones as we fork through the very moist meat with our dominant hand makes for more efficient and enjoyable eating.

Obviously, there many other ways to preparing carp in the world. For example, Israelis do a much more complicated, traditional holidays carp or pike Gefilte Fish dish. I found six carp recipes in my book of International Fish Dishes, Froud and Lo, 1987, but today's Internet would provide many others. The longtime Utah State University ichthyologist, Dr. William Sigler, and author of the renowned books The Fishes of Utah and its revision co-authored with his son Fishes of Utah, a Natural History. He promoted brining and smoking carp due to their oilier flesh to me and his other ichthyology students. He was also the primary reason I continued to learn more about carp and the study of all earth's fishes, and the reason I ultimately attended graduate school to further study them.

In conclusion

I recommend that all so-called American sport and food fishing anglers at least try out a few of the ideas provided in this article. There is no reason why Utah's anglers should miss out on the great fishing and eating opportunities that common carp have provided me over the decades, and to understand why that species is such a worldwide favorite!