It's a small mollusk, but far from a tiny threat...

The New Zealand Mudsnail

Story By Kristin TePas and Patrice M Charlebois
Photos By D. L. Gustafson, Montana State University

What's small, brown, a little bit slimy and causing a stir among Lake Michigan resource managers and scientists? It's the newest invader in Lake Michigan—the New Zealand mudsnail (*Potamopyrgus antipodarum*).

This past summer, researchers at the Lake Michigan Biological Station, a field station of the Illinois Natural History Survey, discovered the New Zealand mudsnail while processing a sample from Lake Michigan—one of the first reported sighting of this species in the lake. It had already invaded lakes Ontario, Erie and Superior, and most likely came to Lake Michigan from one of these lakes via ballast water.

Reported from Lake Michigan this summer, an infestation of the minute New Zealand mudsnail could damage the lake's ecology.

The "stir" over the NZMS focuses on its potential impacts in the already-beleaguered Lake Michigan. In many western rivers where the snail has been present since the 1980s, the NZMS is better at obtaining food and colonizing habitat than many native invertebrates.

"The Lake Michigan ecosystem already is under stress from previous invaders such as the zebra and quagga mussels," said Sara Creque, an LMBS aquatic ecologist. "If the New Zealand mudsnail out-competes and reduces food for native fish, it could be detrimental to the upper levels of the food chain."

While researchers and resource managers sort out the potential impacts of the NZMS on Lake Michigan, Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant wants to reduce the risk of Illinois' inland lakes and rivers becoming infested. This task is especially difficult because the NZMS clones itself, which means that a new lake or stream could become infested from the introduction of just one NZMS. Added to this are other troublesome characteristics including: the snail's tiny size (less than 1/4" long), which makes it especially hard to see; its ability to close off its shell, which allows it to survive for days out of water; and its ability to attach to aquatic plants and recreational equipment, which means that it could easily be transported overland.

Individuals whose activities could potentially spread the NZMS (e.g., researchers, anglers, commercial shippers, recreational boaters, etc.) can help reduce the risk of spread by being vigilant in removing mud and plants from all equipment; draining all water from livewells, bait buckets, bilge, etc.; and cleaning gear, boats and trailers. Taken together, these actions will help protect our inland waters from new invaders such as the NZMS.

For more information about the NZMS and ways to prevent its spread, visit www.protectyourwaters.net.

Patrice M. Charlebois and Kristin TePas are with the University of Illinois' Illinois Natural History Survey and the Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant College Program and based in Zion.