

There's a reason why responsible fishermen don't leave bait at the lake.

# Take the Bait

Story and Photo  
By Joe McFarland

**F**ishermen have a job to do. They need to bring home fish. But not just a nice stringer of panfish. After a long day at the lake or river, every responsible angler should bring home the bucket of minnows they brought along, and here's why.

Unintentional introductions of invasive species are responsible for catastrophic damage to our waterways in Illinois and elsewhere. Financial losses from the introduction of invasives into our landscape and waterways exceed \$100 billion nationwide, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

From zebra mussels to Asian carp, exotic species introduced to our waters now out-compete native species, devour forage and jam water structures with foreign organic material.

Fishermen, it turns out, might be partly to blame.

The simple act of pouring extra minnows into a waterway—well-intended or not—can release a plague of ecological



woes if those “minnows” include young invaders ready to multiply. The most common baitfish sold in Illinois include golden shiners (*Notemigonus crysoleucas*) and fathead minnows (*Pimephales promelas*). And while those native species cause no harm, most anglers have trouble identifying the various tiny fish they receive in their minnow bucket.

Often, the origin of bait might be murky. If bait fish were netted in a waterway already tainted with invasive species, chances are, some of the bait will include those invaders.

Young Asian carp can easily be mistaken for gizzard shad, the latter representing a popular bait fish in Illinois. When anglers net what they believe to be gizzard shad, then transport them to another body of water for fishing, they

**Responsible anglers are careful about how they handle extra bait. Never dump unused minnows into a lake or stream.**

run the risk of introducing the devastating carp to yet another fishery.

It's perfectly legal to net baitfish in Illinois. But it's against the law to transport those fish to dump in another lake or river. Two species are illegal to possess alive—the rusty crayfish and round goby.

Anglers can easily prevent further aquatic introductions by doing something quite simple: disposing of unwanted bait on dry land or in the trash.

For more information about what fishermen and boaters can do to curb the incoming tide of exotic aquatics, click on [www.protectyourwaters.net](http://www.protectyourwaters.net).

