

They endure long days on icy water with no guarantees of profit. Yet commercial fishermen still manage to make the best of a rough trade.

Commercial anglers at Rend Lake target carp and buffalo during late winter, earning their living while fair-weather anglers remain indoors.



Roughing It

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When it comes to telling hard-to-believe stories about catching a boatload of fish,

Charlie Gilpin probably has everyone beat. Who else in Illinois could claim to catch 50,000 pounds of fish in one day—and actually be telling the truth?

“That was an exceptional day,” the 61-year-old west-central Illinois commercial fisherman recalled of last year’s record day on the Illinois portion of the Mississippi River. It was there Gilpin hauled in 25 tons of Asian carp during a day-long frenzy of net pulling and trips ashore. Although the market price for the hefty fish was just pennies per pound, Gilpin still called it a good day, and for more than one reason.

By removing 25 tons of Asian carp from the Mississippi, the commercial fisherman was providing a “service” which benefitted the public as well as the resource. Not only did 25 tons of fresh fish reach America’s seafood markets, those fish represented nonnative competitors in the river’s food chain. The exotic carp species, which filter-feed on various plankton, didn’t belong in the Mississippi. Removing the relative newcomers to the food chain therefore improved the resource.

“All native fish in the river rely on that food source (zooplankton and phytoplankton) at some stage of their lives,” noted DNR fisheries biologist Rob Maher. When tons of Asian carp vanish from the river, competition for that essential food naturally relaxes.

It’s not that the more than 1,300 licensed commercial fishermen in Illinois are in it purely for the benevolence of habitat improvement. The ancient busi-

ness of commercial fishing is occasionally lucrative, and serious fish mongers like Gilpin (who plies nets with son Charles Jr. and a seasonal crew) do their best to earn a real living on the water. It’s a rough way to haul in a few dollars. But the business of netting fish is an inescapable tradition for many.

“My father was a commercial fisherman,” Gilpin explained. “I’ve been a tool and die maker...but commercial fishing is what I do whenever there’s a market.”

During the late-winter commercial fishing seasons at two of Illinois’ largest impoundments—Rend and Carlyle lakes—that market demands mostly buffalo, a plump native fish related to the sucker. Gilpin is among the commercial fishermen bringing that fish to consumers, and since he’s been at it for years, his boats suggest a beacon of opportunity for other commercial anglers.

When other fishermen spot Gilpin’s



After pulling the fish-heavy nets, commercial anglers work swiftly to untangle the day's catch and release them into a livewell.

crew in the middle of a lake, they tend to do what all fishermen do when they see another boat.

They nudge closer.

"You get crowded a little bit some of the time," Gilpin smiled, adding that turf battles rarely escalate beyond envious glances.

Gilpin is too busy drumming up business—literally—to pay much attention to other boats. One of his techniques for coaxing buffalo and carp into his nets is to smack a piece of metal against the side of his aluminum boat. Although most recreational fishermen prefer the quiet approach on the water, Gilpin sets his nets, then trolls the area while he and his crew thump the boat to make noise.

Smaller fish, including game fish, dart through the wide mesh. The hefty buffalo and carp don't make it.

As it turns out, netting buffalo is practically the only way to harvest this popular commercial species. Rarely taken by hook and line ("it's not as if you can go out and fish for buffalo with a rod and reel," Maher said), buffalo dinners in America wouldn't exist if it weren't for commercial fishermen.

Buffalo is the most popular Illinois wild-caught species on the market. Of the more than 7 million pounds of commercial fish harvested annually in Illinois

(worth an estimated \$1.6 million), buffalo accounts for nearly half of the total catch, with common carp, Asian carp and drum filling out the remainder of Illinois' commercial fish harvest.

Since commercial fishermen operate at Rend and Carlyle lakes during late winter months, when recreational activity on the water is at an annual low, many visitors to the massive impoundments never realize commercial fishing occurs on Illinois lakes. Those who do sometimes get the wrong idea about what happens on the water.

"There's a misconception that commercial angling has a negative impact on sport fish," said Mike Hooe, District 19 fisheries manager for DNR. "People assume a giant net traps everything in the water."

But the reality is sport fish rarely appear in commercial nets, and when one does, the stray fish gets returned to the water immediately.

"Commercial fishermen don't want to risk losing their license by keeping the one or two sport fish that might turn up in their nets," Hooe said. "If they get one violation, they are not allowed to commercial fish at Rend or Carlyle for a period of 12 months after the final ruling on their ticket."

There is an impact on sport fish, but the net results are good. Food supplies for sport fish are increased.

"We're seeing a lot more shad at Rend Lake," Hooe said. "That's one benefit of taking nearly half a million pounds of filter-feeding fish out of the lake every year. But it also reduces the competition for food smaller game fish require."



Wide, mesh nets and understanding where carp and buffalo congregate helps commercial anglers target those species only. Sport fish very rarely become entangled in the nets—but always get released into the lake.

