

Spring surprises, including those welcome

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by Steve McComas



Native aquatic plants didn't completely disappear during the 2023-24 winter's short ice season like they usually do. Did native plants such as the ones shown here from Lake Sylvia in Wright County on April 15, 2024, shade out curlyleaf pondweed and inhibit its heavy growth in April? Lake Sylvia had sparse curlyleaf this month. Photo courtesy of Steve McComas

In the past month, I've been tracking the notorious curlyleaf pondweed. Under optimal conditions, it can produce more than 700 stems per square meter (spacing of one stem every 2 inches). This presents not only a recreational hindrance, but when the stem density is that high, fish can barely swim through that dense jungle. It's poor fish habitat.

I start investigating curlyleaf pondweed this month to determine potential May and June curlyleaf abundance based on stem counts from a rake sampler from April pulls. Curlyleaf needs to be treated early, before native plants are actively growing. That way, treatments are selective for curlyleaf with minimal damage to native plants.

When I'm working a case and encounter areas of potential heavy curlyleaf growth, I mark the sites with GPS and, back at the office, I circle the heavy growth points for treatment. Next, herbicide applicators come in and take care of the curlyleaf.

This season, I've run into some surprises. Weather conditions resulted in late ice-up in autumn and sparse snow cover this winter and pointed to a bumper crop of the invasive curlyleaf in early summer. I was bracing for widespread heavy growth of curlyleaf.

But the plants told a different story earlier this month:

Curlyleaf pondweed growth has been less than expected. Something was afoot. I needed to find the clues to explain this unexpected finding.

After surveying 15 lakes in April for curlyleaf, I started to notice a pattern. I thought the main factor that would stimulate curlyleaf growth was the short ice season and light snow cover. Turns out there was a wrinkle in this scenario.

I forgot about the impact of a mild winter on native plants. They were affected as well from the perspective that they didn't disappear during the short lake ice season. In a typical winter, native plants die off and decompose – right down to the sand or other substrate. That didn't happen this past winter. This spring, I found dormant native plant beds still in place. Native plants were either still standing or lying down. And when they were lying down, they acted like a blanket, covering the lake bottom.

The best I can figure is that native plants were shading out curlyleaf pondweed growth. I found that lakes with abundant native plant growth in 2023 had lighter curlyleaf growth than did lakes that had light native plant growth in 2023.

Aquatic plants have not been the only surprises so far. When spring conditions show up a few weeks early, aquatic species respond accordingly.

For example, turtles came out of hibernation a bit earlier than usual, but to no disadvantage. The spring peepers – the 1-inch-long frog with their booming, incessant chirping – were calling in mid-April, also a little ahead of schedule. Loons, swans, pelicans, and geese must have gotten their cues to head north. Hatchlings are expected shortly.



**THE LAKE
DETECTIVE**
By Steve McComas

This year's lake investigations have confirmed some of my rules of thumb. Lakes have many things in common, from the perspective of fish species, aquatic plants, turtles, algae, and other biota, yet every lake is different. Each lake has its own fingerprint. No two lakes are exactly alike.

What makes the difference is the physical lake setting and includes factors such as orientation of the long fetch, surrounding terrain, lake drop-offs, lake sediment types, and lake nutrients. These factors ultimately dictate fish community abundance.

I still have one more question about aquatic plants. The unknown factor moving toward summer is this: Will curlyleaf produce additional sprouting in May and put out a whole new crop and end up being a big pain in the neck in June? Or is it done sprouting in April? Guess I'll find out in June.

If you have any lake questions, drop me a line. Maybe I can crack the case. LakeDetective@gmail.com

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