

# BIGHEAD CARP

## Invasive Species

### Quick Stats:

**Average Length** - 2 to 3 feet  
**Average Weight** - 4 to 15 pounds, but Missouri record is 106 pounds

**Identification:** Bighead Carp have silvery to dark grey bodies with dark blotches on their sides and a white underbelly. Their lower lip is white. Blotching is usually muted or absent in fish adapted to turbid locations such as the Missouri River.

While similar to Silver Carp with the eyes oriented downwards and mouth facing up, the keel of a bighead carp extends only from the anal fin to the pelvic fins. The filtering structure on the front of the gill arch are filamentous in Bighead Carp but appear spongelike in Silver Carp. Bighead Carp and Silver Carp often hybridize and the hybrids are fertile and can backcross. Intergrades between the two species are thus common.

**Habitat:** After their accidental introduction into the wild, these fish are found primarily in large rivers, and are prevalent throughout the Missouri River Basin. They prefer non-flowing or slow moving water when not spawning.

**Reproduction:** Bighead Carp reach sexual maturity between two to three years of age. Like the Silver Carp, they require large rivers with turbulence to spawn their eggs, and these eggs float in the water for up to two days before hatching. Once mature, a female will lay between 500,000 to 1.5 million eggs a year.

**Diet:** Bighead Carp are planktivores, or eaters of plankton.



*A Bighead Carp swimming in an aquarium. Bighead Carp prefer slow-moving water for their habitat.*

# CONT. BIGHEAD CARP



**Reasons for Invasive Status:** The Bighead Carp is native to China and was imported to the United States in 1973, primarily as a biological water quality control mechanism in fish hatcheries to clean up excess plankton in the water. The fish were also stocked in various other locations, such as sewage treatment facilities, for the same reasons. Bighead Carp escaped into the free-flowing rivers, where they flourished and spread.

These fish have been able to spread quickly and vastly because they eat a lot of plankton, competing directly with native planktivores, such as Paddlefish and Gizzard Shad. Since plankton form the base of most aquatic food chains, they can also affect an entire ecosystem, therefore food can run out or be reduced for all animals and the whole ecosystem suffers as a result. Bighead Carp predation on plankton alters the plankton community to smaller plankton that are less useful to native species and they sometimes promote the proliferation of toxic algal blooms that are noxious to native fish as well as humans. When disturbed by boat motors, Silver Carp may jump as high as ten feet into the air, however Bighead Carp do not jump at all.

## Sources:

“Bighead Carp.” Missouri Department of Conservation. Retrieved from <https://nature.mdc.mo.gov/discover-nature/field-guide/bighead-carp>

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“New law bans Importation of bighead carp into U.S.” Michigan Radio. Retrieved from <http://michiganradio.org/post/new-law-bans-importation-bighead-carp-us>

**For More Information:** This is issue number 5 in volume I of issues all related to the Missouri River. To access the rest of the collection, visit the Missouri River Relief Education page at [riverrelief.org](http://riverrelief.org). This issue was published in June 2018.