



FELT SOLES AND AQUATIC

HITCHHIKERS

I admit it, I wear no felt. For more than 5 years I've been using studded Aquastealth™ boots or sandals while fishing. My wife and friends know that I'm not graceful, especially when it comes to wading or standing in a boat so any help to keeping me vertical is worth the money. Until a few years ago, my biggest problem with felt was how much snow it attracted during winter fishing on tailwaters. That was the primary reason I switched to studded rubber boots. I never looked back having just as good a purchase on slippery streams as I did when using felt. Friends with drift boats and rafts, however, were not nearly as enthused by my conversion to the studded boot. That was then, this is now.

Zebra mussels, didymo (rock snot), whirling disease and a host of other invasive Aquatic Nuisance Species are here in Montana and impacting our rivers, streams and lakes in varying degrees. The results can be devastating, the impacts from whirling disease in Madison River rainbows is one example, or they can be much smaller in scale thanks to the amazing adaptive evolutions in the form of whirling disease resistant fish in some watersheds. One thing remains clear though – introduced Aquatic Nuisance Species are not on the top of the list of things you want to find in your favorite fishery.

How anglers can prevent the spread of these invasive species is becoming a hot button issue. Some groups have advocated banning felt soled wading boots much like New Zealand has done while others claim that the science is still out on their impacts and what else can be done to stem the growing threats. Trout Unlimited has issued a press statement asking for manufacturers to stop producing felt soled boots and waders by 2010 citing a number of studies and some anecdotal evidence.

According to the press release issued in June of 2008 by Trout Unlimited, "While the elimination of felt soles on waders and boots will not entirely prevent the spread of ANS, this action will help reduce the risk and help protect our precious aquatic resources," said David Kumlien, executive director of the Whirling Disease Foundation. "This action will also help make the public more aware of the threat of ANS and hopefully will motivate them to change their behavior and practices related to other aquatic recreational activities that may also contribute to the spread of ANS."

When an angler looks at the available body of science regarding felt soles, sediment movement, whirling disease pathogens and where the spread of zebra mussels, didymo and other Aquatic Nuisance Species have popped up, it's clear that anglers play a huge role in moving these invasive species around. However, the science is also not clear as to the effect of eliminating felt soles or other factors such as anchor ropes, bilges, and other nooks and crannies in wading gear where the spores and diatoms can hide.

While some organizations are now calling for the ban of felt soles through either state fish and game regulations, or through legislative means, the science is still unclear as to the ultimate effect of banning felt soles to ANS dispersal. In other words, while it will clearly help mitigate the spread of whirling disease, didymo, zebra mussels, etc, it will not eliminate the threat.

Other methods of trying to achieve zero spread such as cleaning your equipment thoroughly and letting it dry, and washing your boat and making sure you get the crud off before moving to another watershed appear to be the best methods to minimizing aquatic hitchhikers. Perhaps the most effective is to have a couple of pairs of waders or wading boots so that you can achieve the clean and dry technique.

While the fishing products industry is making huge strides in providing felt alternatives, there is still quite a ways to go in finding an alternative that provides comparable traction in slippery streams. From my own perspective, studded Aquastealth™ is the closest rival and surpasses felt when walking on dry surfaces. I believe Aquastealth™ is also heads and tails above felt when it comes to wading during the winter, when ice and snow can make walking dangerous. However, one of the major drawbacks of studded rubber soles is having your friends, guide and boat mates not let you on a boat or raft with your studs, since they have a tendency to damage the inside of a drift boat or tear up a raft.

The fishing industry has responded admirably to the call to arms that our friends at Trout Unlimited have voiced, and we look forward to seeing the new products and innovations in wading technology. We also ask that boat manufacturers also step up to the plate and devise methods that mitigate the use of cleated boots so they don't damage the inside of what are frequently, very expensive boats.

Montana's cold and warm water fisheries are renowned, and attract anglers from around the world. Beyond the economic impacts associated with invasive species, an estimated \$300 million a year in Montana is generated from both direct and indirect angler expenditures, the bigger picture relates to how valuable healthy watersheds and fisheries are to our landscapes and lives. Healthy watersheds are the lifeblood of our landscapes, vital to ecosystems and important to us socially and culturally. Nonindigenous species can choke the life out of a river or stream, cause toxic algae blooms that kill naturally occurring aquatic life, and dramatically change the structure of a waterway.

As caretakers and stewards of our natural wealth, anglers must do everything we can to reduce and mitigate the impacts from the foreign, nuisance species invaders.

Please, take a few minutes before and after you go fishing, and inspect, clean and dry your equipment before moving to new waters. Help keep Montana invasive free, and help maintain our bountiful fisheries for future generations.

For more information on the science behind ANS, and what you can do to help stop the spread of Aquatic Nuisance Species visit these websites:

Center for Aquatic Nuisance Species:

<http://www.stopans.org/aboutANS.php>

Clean Angler:

<http://cleanangling.org/>

MSU Aquatic Nuisance Species webpage:

<http://www.esg.montana.edu/aim/mollusca/nzms/>