

Skipjack express

A fish-stocking border run keeps Wyoming's walleye well-fed

By Jeff Obrecht

In May, Andrew Nikirk and Gordon Edwards went fishing in Nebraska to improve angling in Wyoming. History shows their efforts are likely to pay off. Since 1978, preceding Wyoming fish biologists have made similar treks east for gizzard shad — whose offspring do a great job of feeding game fish. The results have been faster-growing walleye — and more of them — in some Cowboy State reservoirs.

The high-fat gizzard shad not only fuels faster walleye growth, the eastern forage fish staggers its spawning through the late spring and summer and will actually spawn more than once. That provides a steady supply of little fish for not only walleye, but smallmouth bass, crappie, catfish, northern pike and drum to eat. Surveys over the years have shown Wyoming walleyes grow fastest following gizzard shad stocking and years of good gizzard shad winter survival.

And that's why this May, Nikirk and Edwards needed more gizzard shad (simply called "herring" by some, and nicknamed "skipjacks" by others for cavorting near the surface). Nikirk oversees Keyhole Reservoir and Edwards, Glendo. Both those popular impoundments are known for walleye angling, but both lost their gizzard shad to the cold temperatures and extended ice cover of the 2013-14 winter. The body condition of walleye in both reservoirs was declining due to the loss.

Upstream rains overloaded Nebraska reservoirs with cold water and gizzard shad were nearly nonexistent May 11 — just seven shad in eight hours. With Husker biologist Caleb Huber at the helm of the electrofishing boat, they kept at it through the week in the inlet of Lake Maloney and the bubble of Sutherland Reservoir, where the power plant re-injects its cooling water. The crew rallied up with a quorum of 310 13- to 19-inch gizzard shad during the next three days. It wasn't the 1,500 Nikirk and Edwards had hoped for, but a victory compared to how the project started.

The shad were transferred daily to the North Platte Fish Hatchery until they could be loaded into a Wyoming hatchery truck at 6 a.m. May 15. With the threat of inadvertently transporting aquatic gremlins like zebra or quagga mussels, the tank was filled with well (not lake) water. To completely guard against exotic stow-away bad guys, such as Asian clams, biologists added a potassium-chloride solution, plus a little formalin, ensuring nothing but the gizzard shad were stocked in Wyoming.

All long-distance fish loads have expediency, but the fragile gizzard shad is an especially poor traveler. With Wyoming's long-distance fish trucker Adam Leiferman at the wheel, the big tanker didn't run any red lights, but the required slow-down for construction was particularly annoying with a hot load of precious fish.

Gizzard shad road trips have produced a challenge or two over the years. Bill Wichers

Eric Engbretson / Engbretson Underwater Photography

was Nikirk's predecessor at Keyhole in the 1980s and an ardent gizzard shad proponent. Wichers chuckles about expediting a full-capacity load of 440 fish to Keyhole in 1984. It was the era of the 55 mph speed limit and Wyoming's colorful governor, Ed Hershler, had all state vehicles sport a bumper sticker requesting citizens call "Gov. Ed" to report speeding.

Trucking around 65 mph and passing vehicles on U.S. Route 85 north of Lusk, a concerned citizen took Gov. Ed up on his request. So the Wyoming Game and Fish Department got a call from downtown and the fisheries chief explained the extenuating circumstances. Evidently the governor's office also became gizzard shad fans, because nothing more was said.

Wichers believes gizzard shad helped take predator pressure off little crappie and yellow perch in Keyhole. Shad are easier and quicker for walleye to eat, since they are not protected with spines like the little game fish. Like all predators, walleye prefer the prey of least effort.

This May, Leiferman was blessed with bigger tanks than the 1984 transport and 80 mph on most of the Wyoming leg to Glendo Reservoir. Only one of the 310 gizzard shad didn't live to become a Wyomingite.

When the gizzard shad hit Glendo around noon, 70 were quickly off-loaded to a smaller hatchery truck and Nikirk blasted north to Keyhole Reservoir. The remaining 240 joined Glendo Reservoir and its whitecaps at the Bennett Boat Ramp and generated some interaction with anglers.

"What ya' stocking?" asked several.

"Gizzard shad," we replied.

"Good deal," or a similar thumbs-up offered the anglers.

"Those drum?" asked another.

"No, gizzard shad. But you're right, they do look similar."

Glendo got its first gizzard shad in 1984 and before May 15, its most recent in 2007. At a Glendo check station June 28, an experienced angler reported he spotted a school of recently hatched 1- to 2-inch gizzard shad. Just what Nikirk and Edwards hoped to hear. They will both be checking walleye stomachs August through fall for little shad. The week of Aug. 10, Nikirk will set small-mesh nets at Keyhole to get a

read on spawning success for all species. The pair would appreciate any additional reports of young skipjacks from anglers, too.

Fisheries biologists collected gizzard shad from Glendo for Keyhole in 2012 and 2013, but struck out the last two springs when the old reliable spawning spot near the inlet failed to produce. That required them to tap the Nebraska gizzard shad well once again. Next to Grayrocks and Hawk Springs reservoirs, gizzard shad have had the best luck surviving winters in Glendo.

But over the years, gizzard shad stocking hasn't been without dissent. In the early 1990s, petitions were circulated in Glendo and Douglas to cease shad stockings. After coming off some tremendous walleye angling in the late 1980s, fishing slowed down due to some particularly productive gizzard shad hatches, combined with the introduction of emerald and spot-tail shiners. Food was plentiful in the short-term, and walleye just had less interest in whatever was on the hook. Game and Fish held a public meeting in Douglas where predator-prey dynamics were explained, which proceeded to play out in real life. Fishing improved as the predators caught up with forage fish supply and the reservoir continued to establish its regional angling reputation.

Gizzard shad overpopulating reservoirs is a concern, at least in more southern latitudes. It's happened in Oklahoma. But it's not a threat here, because the fish is also winter fragile — 60 to 70 days of ice cover and they're likely to go belly-up as happened at both Keyhole and Glendo in 2013-14.

Gizzard shad are plankton eaters and maybe the most non-piscivorous (non-fish-eating) fish on the continent. Even though they can grow as long as 20 inches, they rarely — if ever — eat little fish. The big adults are no threat to little walleye, smallmouths or other game fish. Forage fish such as smelt and alewives, on the other hand, are known to ravage game fish fry.

Although gizzard shad primarily eat plankton, they will eat organic debris off the bottom including snails and worms. Although gizzard shad tolerate muddy water well, their selective feeding contributes little to the turbidity. Wichers believes gizzard shad outcompeted Keyhole's carp for food so well and pushed the



Stacey Feeken, fisheries technician for the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, releases Nebraska gizzard shad into Glendo Reservoir.

Photo by Jeff Obrecht
Wyoming Wildlife

Adam Leiferman, statewide response specialist for the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, drove a load of transplanted gizzard shad 278 miles from Nebraska's North Platte Fish Hatchery to Glendo Reservoir. The offspring of the transplanted fish are prey for walleye in Glendo and Keyhole reservoirs.

Photo by Jeff Obrecht
Wyoming Wildlife



carp into such bad shape (some 12-inch carp were 10 years old) that carp suffered a massive die-off the winter of 1986-87. Fishing for all game species got a boost from that event.

A jig and nightcrawler caught the Wyoming state record gizzard (2.74 pounds, 19.25 inches long) this June 25 in the North Platte River near Torrington. The river's not typical shad habitat and they hadn't been reported there before. Which raises the question: Could one of those big Nebraska fish released in Glendo May 15 become famous by trying to find its way home? The world record gizzard shad weighed 4 pounds, 12 ounces and came from Lake Oahe, South Dakota on Jan. 14, 2006.

That's about the northwest extent of gizzard shad range. They're important forage in Lake Erie and stretch east to the Atlantic Ocean, but avoid the Appalachian Mountains. From central Minnesota they also extend all the way south through eastern Mexico, Texas and east through all Gulf States.

Gizzard shad are known more for catching fish than being caught. They're a popular catfish cut-bait in various stages of decomposition in the Midwest. Huber says some serious Husker catfish anglers tout the fish's trademark stomach — a sack packed with sand or rocks resembling a bird's gizzard — as a great bait. Someone lost

to history once touted it as a great name for the fish and it stuck — hence the gizzard shad. Perhaps it was the French naturalist/ichthyologist Citoyen Lacepede. He's the back end of the scientific name — *dorosoma* (lancelet-shaped juvenile body) *cepedianum*.

As Glendo has supplied gizzard shad for Keyhole, Grayrocks does the same for Wheatland Reservoir No. 1. Despite Wyoming winters, fluctuating water levels and many hungry predators, Grayrocks' gizzard shad have sustained themselves since initial stockings in 1981 and 1982. Not only have Grayrocks walleye, smallmouths and drum benefited the last 34 years, but this author has cleaned several December mallards there with crops crammed full of that summer's gizzard shad. Stunted or dead pre-ice-up shad provide migrating bald eagles sustenance as well as dead ones after ice-out in March.

Birds, smallmouths, whatever — the bottom line here is eastern Wyoming wouldn't have the top-notch walleye angling it's known for without Nebraska sharing its excellent walleye prey. That will continue to dispatch Nikirk, Edwards and others fishing far downstream to improve Cowboy State angling.

— Obrecht grew up trying to spear and bow-and-arrow skipjacks on an eastern Nebraska sandpit and in upper-middle age reaps their benefits at Grayrocks Reservoir.

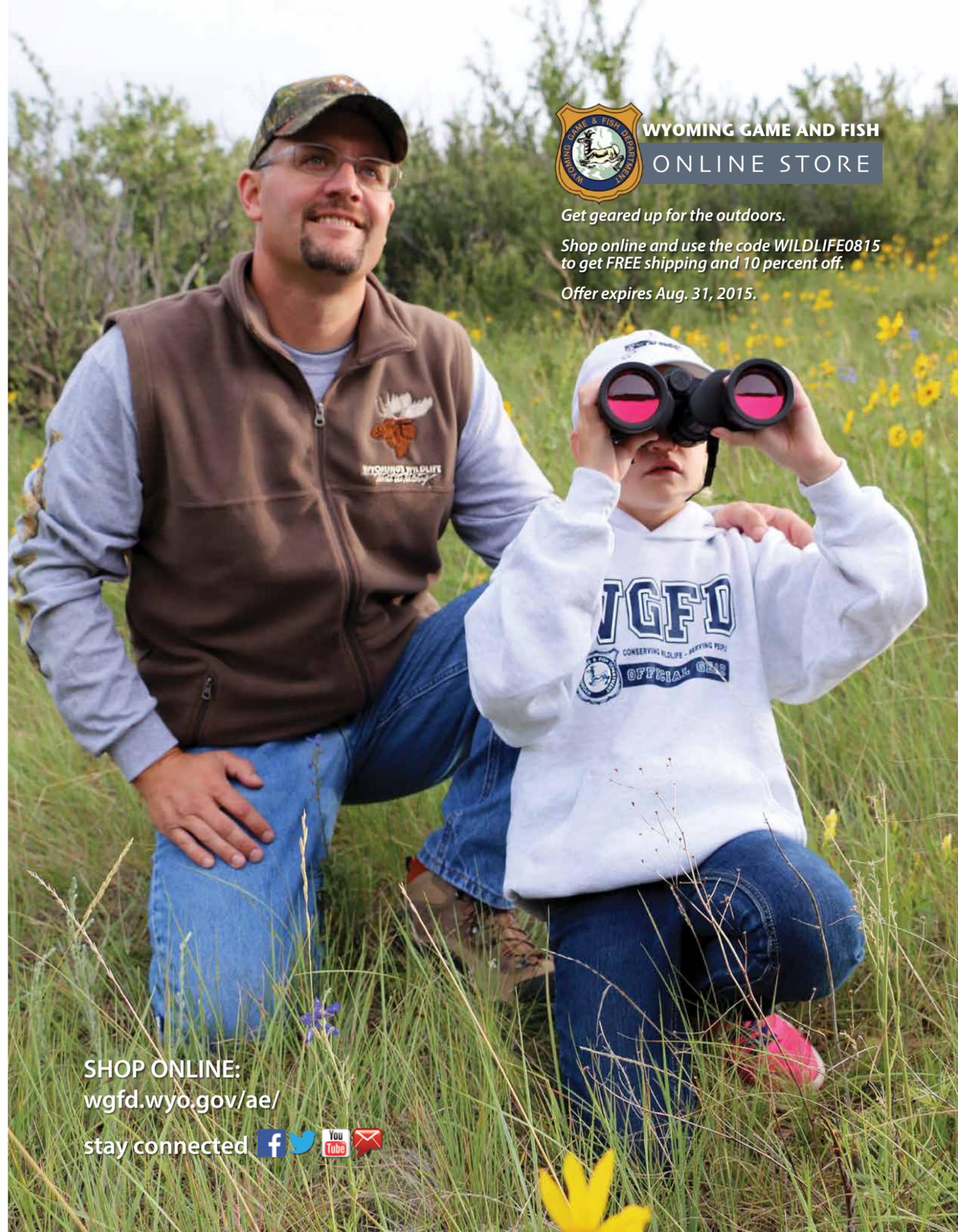


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