

Dive Team On A Mission To Search For Aquatic Invasive Species

When the members of the Lakes Area Dive Team (LADT), headquartered in Walker, Minnesota, aren't engaged in underwater evidence recovery or working the aftermath of a boating accident for the Cass, Beltrami or Hubbard County Sheriff Department, they're often doing another form of sleuthing—a service that helps protect Minnesota's lakes and the fish and wildlife that depend on them.

The team's 22 members, volunteers all, come from different walks of life, but they have in common a love for the underwater world, as well as a desire to be of service to their communities. All are certified SCUBA divers, and most have been part of the team for 12 or more years.



Lake Area Dive Team members pose with their new dive boat. Top row from left: Andy Erickson, Walker; Steve Blanchard, Park Rapids; Theo Ringle, Walker; Rachel Ahrens, Walker; Jackie Frana, Walker; Joe Freeman, Walker. Bottom row: Brandon Ritter, Buffalo; Todd Officer, Park Rapids; Dan Carlson, Bemidji; Brandon Schmickle, Bemidji; Corry Hill, Walker.

Among the group are 8 Dive Masters and 4 Dive Instructors, including team president Dan Carlson of Bemidji. It's a statistic that makes the LADT fairly unique.

"I've attended dive team conferences around the country and am proud to say that other groups are quite impressed with the number of diving professionals we have on our team, and the level of training we commit to," said Carlson, who in everyday life teaches the physical sciences at Blackduck High School and co-owns, with his wife Michelle, the Dive Depot dive shop in Bemidji.

The team was formed 18 years ago, Carlson explained, as a volunteer force that would assist law enforcement in criminal investigations in and around water bodies.



The LADT's primary mission, to assist law enforcement, requires continuous training so they are ready to perform in any situation.

"About 8 years ago," he said, "we were asked to help with other county projects." One of them being to conduct underwater surveys of specified lakes to determine the presence of aquatic invasive species. On different occasions team members have searched for rusty crayfish, faucet snails, Chinese and banded mystery snails, and Eurasian watermilfoil. Most

often, however, the target species is zebra mussels or starry stonewort, a non-native plant that can crowd out native species and overtake entire sections of a lake.

In Cass County, Resource Specialist Levy Bergstrom works closely with the team, advising them on the water bodies from which he needs survey results, based on reports of possible sightings of a particular invasive species.



Dive team members volunteer their time and skills to the community, and primarily operate on donations from the public.

“A call reporting a possible infestation might come in from the public, or we might get a request from the DNR to check a certain lake,” he said, “and it’s added to the dive team’s list.”

LADT members meet every Thursday, according to Carlson, with dives scheduled for the first and third monthly meeting. When the survey season begins in late May or early June, they often choose a lake from the list as the destination.

“While not as formal as a dive for a criminal investigation, it’s still highly organized,” he explained. Two to four members are in the water

while others serve as dive tenders, boat operators and sonar operators. Surveys are usually centered on the area around a public boat ramp since most non-native species enter a lake upon a fishing rig, pleasure boat, personal watercraft or the trailers carry them.

Divers take a bearing on an underwater compass and swim at a right angle from the ramp for a specified distance, all the while searching for plants and animals that don't belong in the lake. When they reach the endpoint, they move over a few feet and swim back.



LADT Member in Gear

“We call it ‘mowing the lawn,’” said Carlson. “The distance between each pass varies with the clarity of the water. Search passes can overlap a little, but we make sure they aren’t so far apart that we miss something.”

Nicole Kovar, MN DNR Aquatic Invasive Species Specialist in the Northwest Region, trains team members on what to look for.

“Everything appears different under water than it does when you’re holding it in your hand,” she said. “So, it’s important that the divers are able to recognize the target species when they see it. If an invasive species has become established in a body of water, we want to know about it as soon as possible.”



LADT Training

“It’s all about early detection,” added Bergstrom. “With some species like zebra mussels, it’s almost impossible to eliminate them once they’re established. But we can do a lot to keep them from spreading to other lakes in the area if we find out about them quickly enough. For that alone, the team is invaluable beyond words.”

This information is produced and distributed by the Mississippi Headwaters Board in an effort to motivate everyone to protect our natural resources. A recreation based lifestyle is part of our MN Traditions and is only preserved when we protect our aquatic resources from invaders such as zebra mussels and Eurasian milfoil. To support Minnesota Traditions join us on social media here

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