

Northern Snakehead – *Channa argus*



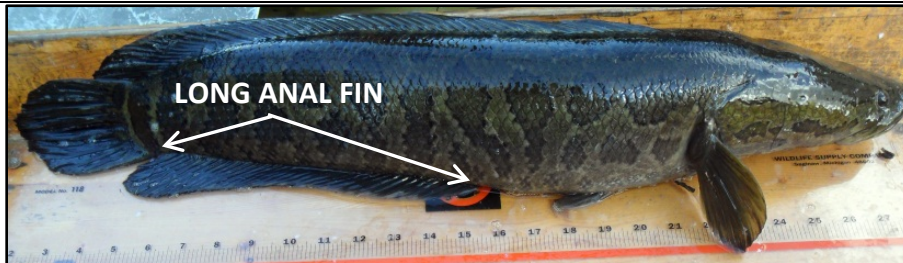
S. Trammell-USGS

Introduction and Status

Northern Snakehead, a native fish of China and Russia, were brought to the U.S. for the live food fish market. Unfortunately these exotic invaders escaped or were illegally stocked and now occur in at least eleven states where they potentially threaten native fish and wildlife resources. The Northern Snakehead has since been designated as ‘injurious wildlife’ which makes importation and interstate transport illegal under the Federal Lacey Act. In Delaware, it is illegal to transport, purchase, sale, stock and possess live snakeheads. There are no season, creel, or size limits for Northern Snakehead and it is permissible to catch them in state waters by hook and line, spear or bowfishing (where it is not prohibited).

Identification

Northern Snakehead (top photo) are identified by a long dorsal fin (along its back) and a long anal fin, a rounded tail, and a large mouth reaching beyond the eye with many, sharp teeth. They have dark, irregular ‘patches on their sides. The young are generally lighter tan or yellowish in color but otherwise look like the adults.



Bowfin, a native species, are sometimes confused with Northern snakeheads. Bowfin have a short anal fin. *Please return Bowfin back into the water if you catch one.*



Life History

Snakehead are opportunistic and feed on a variety of aquatic organisms including crustaceans, beetles, insect larvae, fish, amphibians and reptiles. In addition to obtaining oxygen from the water, they have the ability to utilize atmospheric oxygen which allows them to survive in stagnant shallow waters or out of the water for a variable period of time. Despite inspiring the movies “*Frankenfish*” and “*Snakehead Terror*” they are incapable of walking over land, but have a thick mucus layer that allows them to slither back into the water if they are removed and placed nearby. They build nests in shallow, slow moving waters and guard their nests and young for up to a month. During that time they are very protective of their young and will bite if threatened.

Occurrence in Delaware

Snakeheads prefer shallow, stagnant, slow moving streams or ponds with heavy vegetation. In Delaware they have been documented in two major river systems and their tributaries (Delaware River and the Nanticoke River), numerous stormwater ponds, at least 8 private ponds, Banning Park Pond, and in Becks Pond which is one of the most popular public fishing ponds in Delaware. Natural expansion as well as illegal stocking contributed to the spread of this species within the state. Unfortunately once established this hardy fish has proven difficult to eradicate, making preventative measures crucial.

Report Snakehead Catches and Sightings

The Division of Fish and Wildlife is documenting the occurrence of this species and anglers have been very helpful with this effort by reporting their catches. The information provided by anglers contributes to a larger database that is used to track the spread of this species and to assess potential impacts to other aquatic species. Anyone catching a Northern Snakehead in Delaware waters is encouraged to kill it rather than return it to the water. Contact the Division of Fish & Wildlife at (302) 735-8654 or 739-9914 or Edna.Stetzar@state.de.us to report catches of Northern Snakehead and provide the following information: date of catch, name of water body, specific location of the catch, the size of the fish, the final disposition of the snakehead, and contact information so that the Division can contact you for any follow up questions. Submission of a photo allows the Division to confirm the report.



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