



Photo: Phil Westra, Colorado State University, Bugwood.org



Northern Snakehead



The sharp teeth of the northern snakehead. Photo: U.S. Geological Survey

What Is It?

The northern snakehead (*Channa argus*) is an aggressive freshwater fish that can grow up to four feet long. It has been found in a variety of freshwater lakes, swamps, ponds, and streams of various temperatures, but cannot tolerate saltwater. The northern snakehead is native to parts of Asia and Africa.

Is It Here Yet?

No, although the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife recently confiscated a northern snakehead at the Canadian border. It has been seen in the wild in several locations on the East Coast.



Photo: Howard Schwartz, Colorado State University, Bugwood.org

Why Should I Care?

The northern snakehead fish is a voracious eater that preys on fish, crustaceans, frogs, insects, small reptiles, birds, and mammals, with significant impacts to food chains and ecological systems. The adults may attack humans who approach young. This fish also can introduce diseases and parasites.

What Are Its Characteristics?

- The northern snakehead fish has a large mouth with a strong jaw and sharp, canine-like teeth.
- Its head resembles that of a snake; it has an elongated cylindrical shape with enlarged scales and eyes on each side near the top front of the head.

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- The fish has elongated dorsal and bottom fins, with pelvic fins close to its pectoral fins and gills.
- It is generally tan with dark brown mottling.

How Do I Distinguish It From Native Species?

The northern snakehead is relatively easy to identify by a few distinguishing characteristics. Native fish have a short fin, instead of an elongated fin, at the bottom of their body. One native look-alike, the bowfin, also has a black spot at the base of the tail.

Finally, the lower jaw of the northern snakehead extends past the upper jaw. To learn more, see the graphic here: <https://www.mass.gov/doc/snakehead-identification/download>



The northern snakehead's lower jaw extends past the upper jaw. Photo: Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, Bugwood.org

How Can We Stop It?

Do not purchase, sell, or trade this species, and do not release aquarium fish into the wild. The northern snakehead is classified as a Prohibited Aquatic Animal Species in Washington, meaning it may not be possessed, purchased, sold, propagated, transported, or released into state waters. The importation of the northern snakehead fish is regulated further by the federal Lacey Act, under which it is listed as an Injurious Wildlife Species.



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What Should I Do If I Find One?

Report immediately via the WA Invasives mobile app or reporting web form at <https://invasivespecies.wa.gov/report-a-sighting/>.