

Tuesday, February 24, 2015

## Northern Snakehead

### *Channa argus*



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. These voracious predators feed on a variety of invertebrates, fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds and even small mammals! They can be identified by their long cylindrical shape, long dorsal and anal fins, and dark, irregular patches on their sides; but are probably best known for their large mouth with many sharp teeth. Because of the ability to breathe atmospheric oxygen they can survive in stagnant shallow waters which gives them an advantage over many native species. Despite inspiring the movies 'Frankenfish' and "Snakehead Terror" they are incapable of walking over land, but are very protective of their young and will bite if threatened while protecting their nest.

In Delaware, Northern Snakehead are known to occur in two river systems (Christina River and the Nanticoke River), four private ponds, and in Becks Pond which is one of the most popular public fishing ponds in Delaware. Unauthorized stocking of this fish in Becks as well as several other ponds has contributed to its spread within the Christina River watershed. A regulation passed in 2013 prohibits the transport, purchase, sale and possession of live snakeheads in Delaware, so hopefully this will curtail illegal stocking. Unfortunately once established this hardy fish has proven difficult to eradicate, making preventative measures even more crucial. The Division of Fish and Wildlife is closely documenting the occurrence of this species and collecting biological (length, weight, sex, stomach contents), genetic (small clip of fin tissue or blood sample), and age data (scales and otoliths or 'ear stones') in an effort to gain a better understanding of the potential impact this species could have on Delaware's freshwater ecosystems. Anglers have been very helpful with this effort by killing and providing their catches of Northern Snakehead to the Division. Anyone catching a Northern Snakehead in Delaware waters is encouraged to kill it and notify the Division of Fish & Wildlife at (302) 735-8654 or 739-9914.

