

Upper Potomac River Snakehead

Since initially being observed in the lower tidal Potomac River in 2004, the distribution of northern snakehead in Maryland has rapidly expanded to now includes watersheds on the Eastern Shore (Choptank, Nanticoke, Wicomico), Middle Bay (Patuxent, South River, Patapsco), and Upper Bay (Susquehanna). For the upper Potomac River it was hoped that Great Falls would serve as a natural barrier blocking their upstream movement. Unfortunately in 2014 northern snakehead were observed in the C&O Canal above Great Falls. Multiple reports were submitted by anglers in 2014-2016 of northern snakehead being caught in the C&O Canal between Violettes Lock and Great Falls. In spring 2016 the first confirmed report came in of a northern snakehead in the mainstem upper Potomac River. A bowfisherman shot a northern snakehead upstream from Seneca Creek (Figure 1). With this new record come concerns about the potential impact that northern snakeheads could have on the upper Potomac River aquatic community. Maryland Department of Natural Resources (MD DNR) Freshwater Fisheries Program plans to conduct additional boat electrofishing surveys in 2017 to help determine northern snakehead abundances in this section of the river.

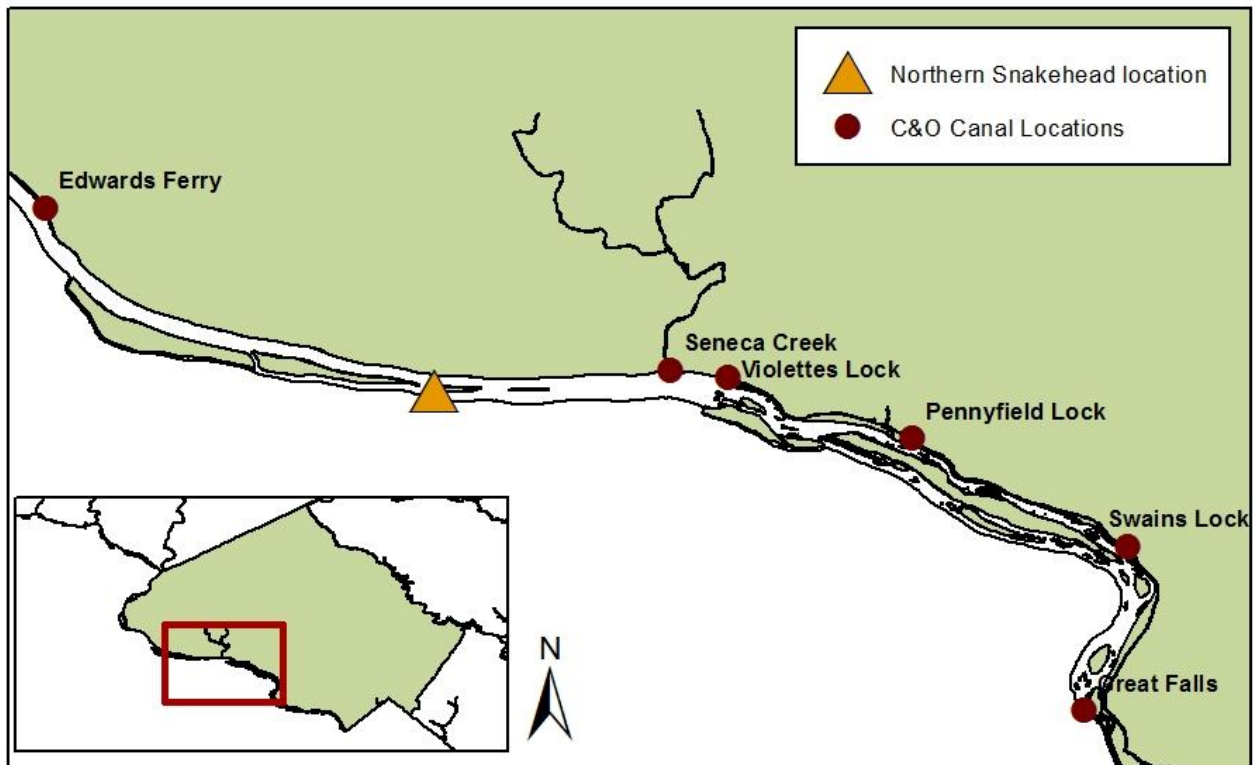


Figure 1. Location of northern snakehead collected from the upper Potomac River in Montgomery County, MD in spring 2016.



(L to R) Northern snakehead caught in the C&O Canal near Violettes Lock; northern snakehead shot bowfishing in mainstem upper Potomac River in spring 2016

MD DNR strongly encourages anglers to harvest and kill any northern snakehead that they catch. It is against Maryland, Virginia, and federal laws to possess, import, or transport live northern snakehead. Maximum penalties are 5 years in prison and fines up to \$250,000. If you do want to keep a northern snakehead, you must kill the fish by removing its head, gutting it, or removing its gill arches. There is no minimum size or creel limit. If you do catch a northern snakehead in the upper Potomac River, please report your catch to MD DNR by email (fishingreport.dnr@maryland.gov) or phone (410-260-8300).

For additional questions about northern snakeheads in the upper Potomac River please contact Michael Kashiwagi (Michael.kashiwagi@maryland.gov).