

Kids' pages

Spring 2023 issue

Q What is an invasive species?

A An invasive species is a plant or animal that can exist in either water or land that is non-native and causes ecological and economic damage to an area. Non-native species are species that do not occur naturally in an area but are introduced as a deliberate or accidental human activity; whereas a native species is an organism that naturally occurs in an area without human intervention. A non-native species will become an invasive species when it proves to cause harm to the environment that it occupies. An example of an invasive species that persists in the Gulf of Mexico is the notorious Lionfish, *Pterois volitans*. Lionfish typically live in the Indo-Pacific range, but recently are thriving close to our coast. They were first introduced to the Gulf in the 1980s by the way of release or

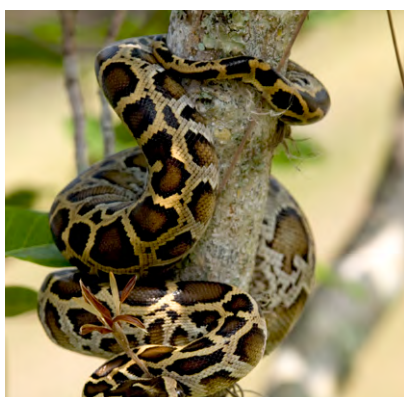
escape from marine aquariums. They are carnivorous fish with reddish brown bodies, white stripes, and venomous spines located on their dorsal and pectoral fins. Lionfish are a destructive invasive species because they have no natural predators in the Gulf and can reproduce extremely quickly. An adult female lionfish can lay approximately two million eggs per year! They also love to munch on many of our native fish species. This proves to be an issue because overhunting can lead to a reduction of native fish populations. Lower population levels can result in negative effects on the overall reef habitat and eliminate species that serve an important role in the ecosystem, such as parrotfish! Because of these problems, efforts are being made to sustainably reduce the population of lionfish that exist in the Gulf of Mexico, such as lionfish fishing derbies. If you're eager to see one of these



An adult Lionfish searching for its next snack along a beautiful reef system.

animals up close and personal, visit our Discovery Center located on the Pier in downtown St. Pete. Here, you can experience a once in a lifetime opportunity to partake in a lionfish dissection, where you can further your knowledge with this species. If getting your hands dirty isn't your thing, the Discovery Center has a display housing 4 live lionfish so you can learn more about this invasive species.

Sources: Scholastic Action; National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission



MEET THE

Burmese Python

Python bivittatus

SIZE: 16-23 feet

DIET: As a carnivore, it typically eats small mammals and birds, but some have been documented to eat larger prey items such as goats and alligators

DISTRIBUTION: Natively found throughout Southeast Asia, and non-natively found in South Florida

Meet one of the largest snakes in the world, the Burmese Python! This massive snake is typically tan in color with dark blotches along its back and sides, and can reach up to 23 feet long. You can find it normally living in grassy marshes and jungles in Southeast Asia, but due to the reptile trade it is now populating South Florida. As an ambush predator, it sneaks up on its prey and uses jaws with stretchy ligaments to swallow animals five times larger than its head! Loss of habitat, popular demand in the pet trade, and hunting for its skin has greatly affected this animal's population status. Luckily, groups such as the Wild Snake Rescue Project are promoting conservation efforts for these snakes.

Sources: National Geographic; National Park Services; National Geographic Kids

Top: A juvenile Burmese python in its natural habitat among trees. Bottom: A female Burmese python wrapping her body around her eggs to keep them warm.

Python Patrol

Burmese Pythons are an invasive species in Florida that are causing harm to the ecosystem. Read below to learn how you can help solve this problem!

Native wildlife, such as plants, birds, and mammals, in South Florida are experiencing a decline thanks to the widespread growing population of the Burmese Python. This invasive species is creating an imbalance in the ecosystem, but actions are being taken by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. This organization has created a program called Python Patrol. Python Patrol is a no-cost training program that aims to create a network of individuals throughout South Florida who know how to identify Burmese Pythons. This program will also teach

participants how to report sightings, search for, and safely capture these invasive constrictors. These training sessions are open to the public and no prior snake handling experience is required! Instructors typically run through a 90-minute course on the history of Burmese pythons and how to identify them, followed with a chance to practice capturing the snakes in real-life. If you can't make it to a training session, they also offer virtual lessons that will teach you how to identify Burmese pythons and gain confidence in understanding how to interact with them. Taking the






A Python Patrol trainee wrangles her first wiggly python.

initiative to learn about these invasive animals furthers FWC's goal of educating the public and eradicating this species in Florida.

Source: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Fun Facts

-  The Everglades is the only place in the world where alligators and crocodiles can coexist!
-  The spit of a Panther Chameleon is 400 times stickier than that of a human, this allows them to grasp their food more easily.
-  Capybaras are the largest rodent in the world, are closely related to guinea pigs, and could be Florida's next invasive species!
-  Cuban tree frogs have an unusual eating habit where they swallow food with the help of their eyeballs.

Sources: Everglades Holiday Park; Animalia; Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissions

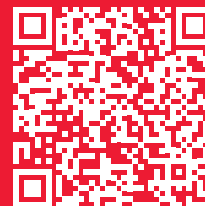
Sustainability Tip

Brazilian Peppertree Removal



If you have Brazilian Peppertree growing in your backyard, you can do your part to help eradicate this invasive species! You can either call your local tree removal company or apply a mild herbicide to the base of the plant.

Try something new!



Scan this code for a fun at-home activity!

Source:
The Purple Pumpkin Blog

Kids' Pages is a quarterly newsletter supplement to the *Bay Watch Log*. Please get your kids involved and sign them up to be a member today! Email membership@tampabaywatch.org or visit tampabaywatch.org.

TAMPA BAY
WATCH 

Restoring the Bay Every Day