

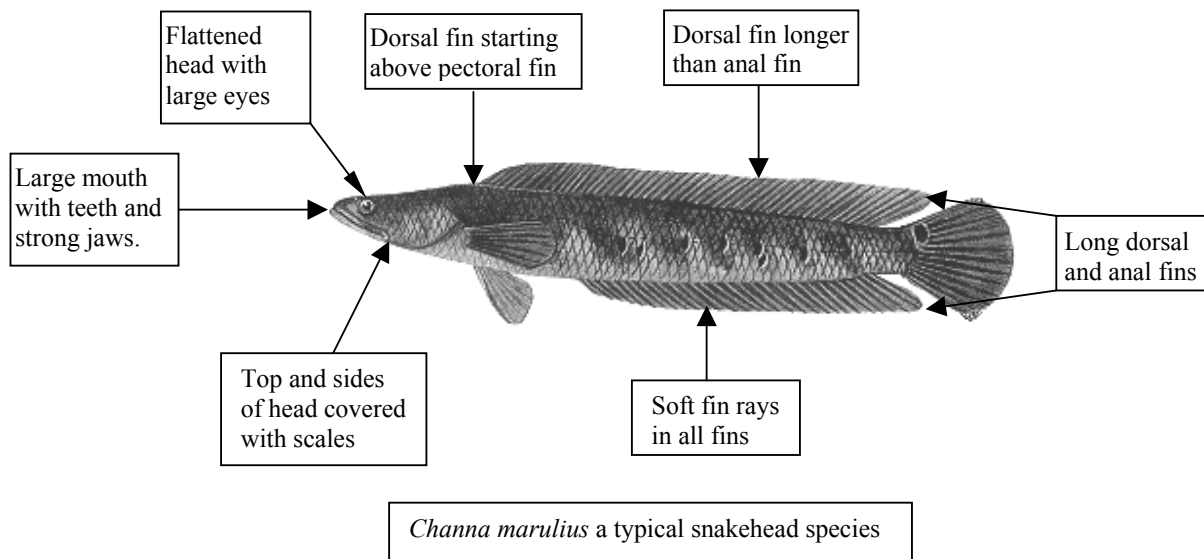
SNAKEHEADS

The snakehead family (Channidae) comprehends only two genera *Parachanna* and *Channa*. *Parachanna* is found only in Africa, while *Channa* is indigenous to Asia. However several species of *Channa* have been introduced outside their natural range of distribution, some as far away as the United States. Only eight species from the Mekong are known to science.

Snakeheads are very important in both fishery and aquaculture in the Mekong Basin, and everyone in the entire Mekong region is probably familiar with several of the species.

Snakeheads are medium to large sized fish. Adult walking snakeheads (*Channa orientalis*) measure about 20 cm, while big individuals of *C. marulius* and giant snakehead (*C. micropeltes*) can easily measure one meter or more in length, and weigh more than 20 kg.

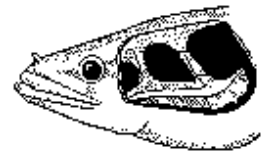
The broad flattened head, that gave these fish their English name, the large eyes in anterior part of the head, and the large mouth with strong jaws and well developed teeth, reveal that the snakeheads are voracious predators. Other characteristics include soft fin rays in all fins, long dorsal and anal fins (the dorsal fin is longest), and that the dorsal fin begins above the pectoral fin. Scales are covering the top and the sides of the head.



Despite the small number of species, it is not always easy to tell exactly which species of snakehead it is you have in front of you. The most important characters for proper identification include colouration, snout length, dentition, and above all the number of scales along the lateral line.

Snakeheads have very modest requirements for their habitats, but they seem to prefer sluggish or standing water; they are often found in muddy shallow water or in ricefields that are almost dry. Here they hide among vegetation, tree roots or old branches, while they are waiting for their prey, which consists of fish or crustaceans. If their habitat dries up, some species can move over land to another pond, or survive for many months buried deep down into the mud.

Snakeheads possess a cavity above the gill chamber, which functions as an accessory respiratory organ that allows the snakeheads to breathe atmospheric air. This ability, no doubt, accounts for the success of these species in harsh environments.

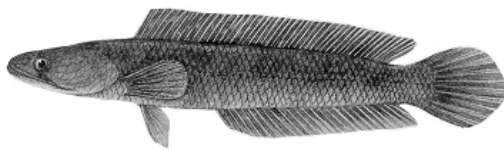


Snakeheads are not long distances migrators, but they do migrate laterally, in the beginning of the flood season, from their dry season refuges into the newly inundated areas.

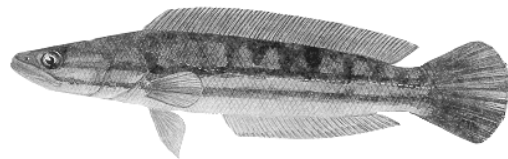
A cavity above the gills allows the snakeheads to breathe atmospheric air

Snakeheads, like most Mekong fishes, mainly spawn during the flood-season. They are, however, opportunistic breeders, and in environments with small fluctuations in water level, like for instance reservoirs, they are able to reproduce all the year.

As it is often the case with fish species living in very seasonal environments, some of the snakeheads have parental care: The female lays a small quantity of floating eggs in a small nest made of vegetation. The male guards the eggs and later the fry aggressively against potential predators, and some species will even attack humans if coming too close to the nest. It is very easy for experienced fishers to spot the male snakehead with the juveniles, and fish farmers often take the opportunity to collect the batch and stock them in cages. Until now cage culture have mainly concentrated on giant snakehead, but other Mekong species may prove to be suitable for culture in the future.



Chevron snakehead (*Channa striata*) is one of the commonest fish in fishmarkets



Giant snakehead (*Channa micropeltes*) a common aquaculture species and an excellent sportfish

Because of their tasty flesh, with only few bones, snakeheads are favourite food fish, and constitute an extremely important part of the staple food for rural people in the Mekong basin. One species, the chevron snakehead (*C. striata*), is possibly the most commonly seen of all fish species in fish markets along the Mekong. This species is very easy to catch in small traps or with hook and line in ricefields or in small canals or streams. The chevron snakehead is also popular because it can be kept for many hours in baskets or tubs with little or no water, as long as the skin and gills are prevented from drying out.

Because of its beauty, and it being a good fighter, jumping like a salmon when on the hook, the giant snakehead is among the most desirable game fish in the Mekong.

Not everybody shares the desire for snakeheads however, people belonging to the Karen tribe in Burma are thought to believe that individuals of *C. marulius* are reincarnations of people that were punished for their sins. They believe that if someone eats these fish they will be transformed into lions.