

Florida is home to thousands of non-native species of plants and animals. When these species reproduce to the point of causing economic, social, or ecological disturbance to the area, they reach “invasive” status. Perhaps one of the least visible, yet arguably the most concerning invasive species here in Florida, is the Burmese python (*Python bivittatus*.) A non-venomous constrictor, it is one of the largest species of snake in the world—known to grow up to 19 feet in length. Native to Southeast Asia, hundreds of thousands of pythons were brought to Florida since the 1970s, primarily through the exotic pet industry. The first “wild” observation occurred in Everglades National Park in 1979. Since then, the Burmese python has become an apex predator across the Greater Everglades ecosystem, thought to be responsible for a whopping 90% decline in native mammals.

Capturing the Burmese python

Like all nonnative reptile species, Burmese pythons are not protected in Florida except by the anti-cruelty law and can be humanely killed on private property with landowner permission—much like last month’s wildlife spotlight, the green iguana. Additionally, they can be captured and humanely killed year-round and without a permit or hunting license on [32 Commission-managed lands](#) in south Florida. Slowing the invasion is exactly what the [Conservancy of Southwest Florida](#) is trying to do. The Burmese Python Research and Removal Project is headed by research manager Ian Bartoszek and biologist Ian Easterling. Impressively, according to Easterling, since **2013** the Conservancy has removed more than 30,000 lbs of snake across a 160-square mile area in western Collier County! During the latest removal campaign, the Conservancy team removed over 5,000 lbs in a five month period. That’s a lot of python!



Burmese pythons are semi-aquatic and are often found near or in water. Adult pythons caught in Florida average between 6 ft and 9 ft but can get much bigger. In fact, the largest Burmese python *by length* was captured during July here in Florida, and measured 19 feet in length! However, according to Easterling, the largest *by mass* was 215 lbs. “We captured what was the largest python at the time in December of 2021, and she still holds the record as the *heaviest* python captured in Florida. She was 17’ 10” and was carrying 122 egg follicles.”

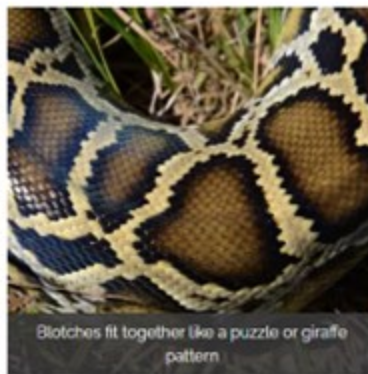
So, what is the state doing about it? The Conservancy’s *Burmese Python Research and Removal Project* is doing some fascinating—and relatively effective—work toward decreasing the population. “To be most effective, we need to capture the females—with or without eggs—to keep them from breeding,” advises Easterling. Sounds easy enough, right? Well, it involves some technology, some luck, and a lot of perseverance. “Breeding season is over the winter months, with the peak activity typically from November through February,” explains Easterling. “We implant transmitters into male pythons. They’re the best female

python detector around. He's spending the entire breeding season seeking a mate. When we think he's found one, we head out into the wild and follow the signal." He goes a step further, noting that if we in Winding Cypress see a python during those months, there is a good chance there is a second one nearby. The process is painstaking and dangerous for the uninitiated and untrained, but Easterling takes it in stride. "These snakes are not aggressive in general, are usually docile, and are basically afraid of us... but they ARE extremely powerful," he laughs. "When we're out in search of pythons, we see snakes you would never see. They're pretty elusive. And yes, I've had them wrap themselves around my arm until the circulation is cut off. And yes, I've been bitten a few times. It comes with the territory."

Identifying a Burmese Python

It's important to be able to correctly identify Burmese pythons and differentiate hatchling pythons from snakes of similar markings, like the much smaller cottonmouth and rattlesnake. Properly identifying Burmese pythons can help target this species for removal from the Everglades ecosystem while protecting our native animal population.

Three Characteristics Help Distinguish Burmese Pythons



"Silver" appearance in the dark; "notice the triangular head with the arrowhead-shaped marking extending toward the nose"

Burmese pythons are light tan in color with dark, irregular patches along the back and sides. The patches look like puzzle pieces, or the markings on a giraffe. Despite the fact they are nonvenomous, these critters have a triangle-shaped head with a dark, arrowhead-shaped wedge extending toward the nose. Interestingly, if you see one in the dark their skin is very reflective and they almost "shine" almost gray and black.

Diet, Range, and Distribution

In Florida, Burmese pythons prey upon native species including a variety of mammals, birds, reptiles, and even deer and alligators. "as well as endangered species such as the Key Largo rat Easterling, who has been doing this work since 2015 with the Conservancy, notes that, "while the Burmese python may not be the biggest invasive species in Florida, their impact on the amount of native wildlife they consume is the bigger issue."

At this point, they are most heavily concentrated in the Florida Everglades, but have been seen as far east as Key Largo; as far west as Collier County; and as far north as just south of Lake Okeechobee. Python observations outside of south and southwest Florida are likely escaped or released animals.

Because of their large size, adult Burmese pythons have few predators. Interestingly, however, pythons *are* vulnerable to other predators when they are hatchlings. "In order to grow from a hatchling that fits in the palm of your hand to an adult, pythons have to avoid multiple predators such as opossums, raccoons, bobcats, and alligators," explains Easterling. "In fact, the dead hatchling that was found at the corner of Mockingbird Court in Winding Cypress recently was, we believe, killed by a cottonmouth snake. We know that it was consumed by one."

What should I do if I see a Burmese python?

If at all possible, report Burmese pythons to the Conservancy of Southwest Florida immediately. Waiting may cause the snake to slither off and become more difficult, if not impossible, for the trackers to find. If you think you see a Burmese python, take a photo, note your location, and call the Exotic Species Hotline at 888-Ive-Got1 (888-483-4681). You can also use the free **IveGot1** mobile app or online at IveGot1.org.

[Watch](#) amazing captures of the Burmese python thanks to the Conservancy of Southwest Florida.

Want to join the Python Patrol training program? Check this out! <https://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/nonnatives/python/patrol/>

Did you know?



Members of the public may not transport pythons alive and must humanely kill pythons at the capture location. However, python skins or meat may be kept and/or sold. Some Burmese pythons removed from the Everglades that have been tested for mercury levels had high amounts of mercury for human consumption. Though it is not illegal to eat python meat, the FWC cautions that neither the Florida Department of Health nor the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services have stated that python meat is safe to consume.