

Giant African Land Snails

Fact Sheet

Background

The giant African land snail, believed to be originally from East Africa, has been established throughout the Indo-Pacific Basin, including the Hawaiian Islands. This mollusk has also been introduced to the Caribbean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe. Recently, the snails were detected on Saint Lucia and Barbados.

Several species of this snail family are capable of becoming agricultural pests in the U.S., and can pose a serious health risk to humans. The federal Plant Protection Act prohibits the unauthorized importation, entry, exportation or movement in interstate commerce of the giant African land snail without a permit from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has recently discovered and confiscated illegal giant African land snails from commercial pet stores, schools and one private breeder in Wisconsin, Illinois, and Ohio. Some of these snails have also been discovered in Michigan. These snails are being used increasingly for science lessons in schools by teachers who are unaware of the risks associated with the snails and the illegality of possessing them.

As part of a national effort to find and remove these pests from the U.S., pet stores, schools and private residents are urged to voluntarily turn in any giant African land snails they may have, without fear of penalty. The main concern is to remove the snails from Michigan in a safe, humane way, to keep them from becoming established in the continental U.S. and to eliminate the human and agricultural risks associated with them.

In 1966, a Miami boy smuggled three giant African land snails into the country. His grandmother eventually released them into a garden, and in seven years, there were more than 18,000 of them. The Florida state eradication effort took 10 years at a cost of \$1 million.

What are Giant African Land Snails?

“Giant African land snail” is the common name used to describe any of the three snail species native to Africa. The giant African snail (*Achatina fulica*), the giant Ghana tiger snail (*Achatina achatina*), and margies (*Archachatina marginata*) are large, terrestrial snails that can reach up to 20 cm (8 inches) in length and 10 cm (4 inches) in maximum diameter. These snails are about the size of an average-sized adult fist. The brownish shell with darker brown vertical stripes covers at least half of the length of the snail.

If you have snails and are unsure if they are giant African land snails, size is the most obvious identifying factor. If the shell is more than two inches long, the snail is more than likely a giant African land snail. If the snail is smaller, but still growing at a rapid

pace, it could also be a giant African land snail. If you are unsure, it is best to err on the side of caution and call to have the snail collected.

Why are giant African land snails a concern in Michigan?

Giant African land snails are illegal in Michigan and the continental U.S. because they are highly invasive, and can cause extensive damage to important food crops and other agricultural and natural resources. These snails can also pose a risk to human health.

Why is it so important to have the snails collected?

Can't they just be disposed of?

It is very important that the snails, eggs and bedding are collected by state or federal inspectors, instead of being released in the wild or disposed of in a landfill. In addition to the health risk they may pose, giant African land snails have a huge appetite. They are known to eat at least 500 different types of plants. If fruits or vegetables are not available, the snails will eat a variety of ornamental plants, tree bark and even paint and stucco on houses. Giant African land snails also reproduce rapidly, laying as many as 100 to 400 eggs in a single session. Snails contain both male and female reproductive organs and can lay up to 1,200 eggs per year. Although these snails thrive in tropical and subtropical areas, they can survive cold conditions and snow. In northern areas, the snails would become slow and sluggish, almost in a hibernating state, until warm weather returns. There is also a chance that the snails could be transported to a warmer climate, where they would thrive and place the agricultural and natural resources of southern states at risk.

The final reason for turning the snails in to state or federal officials instead of releasing them or disposing of them is so that the origin of the snails can be traced, which will help reduce the risk of more snails finding their way into classrooms, pet stores or private homes.

If children or adults have already come in contact with these snails, should they be concerned?

The human health risk associated with handling the giant African land snails is low in the U.S. This type of snail is one of many types that can be infected with a parasite that can cause meningitis, but it is unknown if any of these snails in the continental U.S. are infected. The only way snails can become infected is by eating infected rat stool. The likelihood a snail is infected is considered lower if the snail was bred indoors and kept in a tank than if it was collected from the outdoors or ever been outdoors.

Even if the snail is infected, the infection can spread to humans only under unusual circumstances. People may become infected by eating raw or undercooked snails or slugs that contain a parasite. Whether the slime shed by infected snails can contain parasite larvae and infect people is unknown. All snails, even those that are legal to possess, can carry salmonella and other bacteria. People who handle snails of

uncertain origin should always wear gloves and thoroughly wash their hands after handling.

What should people who have these snails do?

If you have or think you may have a giant African land snail, PLEASE DO NOT RELEASE IT INTO THE ENVIRONMENT, SELL IT, OR GIVE IT AWAY. Instead, contact the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service office located in southeast Michigan at 734/942-9005 or by leaving appropriate contact back information at the USDA's giant African snail toll-free hotline at 888/703-4457. USDA or Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA) personnel will arrange to collect the snails as soon as possible free of charge and without penalty for safe and humane disposal.

As a precaution, isolate and secure the tank until the snail, eggs and bedding can be collected. Do not handle the snails with bare hands, and move the snail container to a place where children and adults do not have access.

After the snails are removed, the tank, and water and feed bowls should be sanitized with a strong bleach solution.

Are any snails safe to keep for classroom use or as pets?

There are alternative snail species that may be used with science curricula in classrooms, or to keep in home tanks. Ideally, snails that are collected locally can be used to teach about native fauna, and these can be used without a permit. Currently, the U.S. Department of Agriculture is reviewing permit procedures for exotic mollusks for educational purposes on a state-by-state basis. For more information, visit www.aphis.usda.gov/ppq/permits/plantpest/snails_slugs.

For more information on giant African land snails in Michigan:

Contact the following offices or visit any of the websites listed below.

Offices:

USDA APHIS Michigan Office at 734/942-9005

USDA APHIS toll-free giant African land snail hotline at 888/703-4457

MDA Pesticide and Plant Pest Management Division at 517/373-1087

MDA Animal Industry Division at 517/373-1077

Web sites:

www.michigan.gov

www.aphis.usda.gov

www.cdc.gov