The United States is home to about 90 species of frogs, most of which do not cause disruptions in their ecosystems. However, the American bullfrog is an anomaly; slowly becoming a big problem in its respective ecosystems. The bullfrog population is increasing at a rapid rate. This sudden increase is pushing the species out of its native range in search of new ecosystems containing the necessary prey and places to breed. Historically, bullfrogs were only found in the central and southern portions of the eastern United States, but due to increasing populations, they are now migrating into the northern and western states.

American bullfrogs are the largest frog species in the United States, growing up to eight inches in body length. Typically, females are slightly larger than males, but males have larger tympanic membranes than females. Analyzing the sex of a bullfrog is actually quite simple; if the tympanic membrane is larger than the frog’s eye, it is a male. If the tympanic membrane is smaller than the frog’s eye, the frog is a female.

One of the detrimental problems associated with the movement of the American bullfrog is its voracious appetite. Bullfrogs will eat anything they can fit in their mouths, including insects, spiders, small mammals, fish, small snakes, frogs, and even other bullfrogs. They have also been known to actively prey on birds sitting on the water. As a result, American bullfrogs decimate small animal species as they begin to move into new ecosystems. For example, native amphibian populations have plummeted in western states since the American bullfrog migrated into these areas.

Bullfrogs consume anything smaller than themselves and compete with native species for resources like food, water, and breeding space. A female bullfrog lays thousands of eggs, which hatch into voracious and cannibalistic tadpoles. Bullfrogs remain as tadpoles for up to two years, giving them twice the amount of time and chances to decimate the tadpoles of other amphibian species.

Eradicating the American bullfrog from these new areas is a difficult task. While American bullfrogs are big, they are also stealthy. Attempting to catch one during the day is nearly impossible if they are close to a water source. The best time to catch American bullfrogs is at night when they are most active and engaged in feeding. Shining a spotlight on the frogs causes them to have a delayed reaction to anyone in pursuit of them. The biggest challenge is finding people who are willing to spend their night trying to catch these frogs.

While the Bullfrog is considered a nuisance and an invasive species in some parts of the United States, they are unique frogs and very interesting to observe in their native range. Learning about the American bullfrog in a “hands-on manner” is the best way for people to truly understand the beauty, threats, and excitement of this frog species.

“Bullfrogs will eat anything they can fit in their mouths, including insects, spiders, small mammals, fish, small snakes, frogs, and even other bullfrogs.”

—Carter Wynn

Carter Wynn is a senior at the Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School in Richfield, PA. He is a 2018 graduate of the Brookies Field School of the Wildlife Leadership Academy and a regular contributor to the organization’s NextGen Blog.