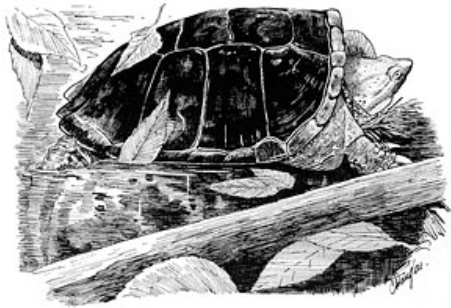


Creature Feature: Fall 2009

By W. Scott Douglas

Snapping Turtle (*Chelydra serpentina*)



Probably everyone who has spent time in the country has a story about a snapping turtle. The best one I heard was from my father who had his stringer of fish stolen by a hungry snapper. The stringer was hanging by a hook off the back of the boat. When he went to add a fish, the stringer had only fish heads and the turtle, which departed quickly when he lifted the stringer out of the water. I once saw a pair mating in the canal. Both were quite large, perhaps 25 lbs each or more, and they

were not quiet about it. It took me a while to figure out what was going on; I'm glad I didn't try to break up what I thought was a fight!

The snapping turtle is the largest, and perhaps the most common turtle in the watershed. You can find snapping turtles throughout the watershed, from the Delaware canal up to the headwater swamps and bogs. They tend to be abundant in stocked fish ponds, where there is ample food. Believe it or not their diet is as much as 1/3 plants. As for animal flesh, they will eat almost anything they can catch from leeches to ducklings. They also serve as aquatic clean up crew by consuming dead fish and mammals that fall in. The turtle is an ambush predator; it buries itself in the muddy bottom of slow streams and ponds, often with only eyes and nostrils exposed. Snapping turtles strike at their prey with lightening speed, closing their mouth with a characteristic SNAP! In the winter, turtles become dormant; burrowing into soft mud of a river bank or in an abandoned muskrat lodge until spring.

The snapping turtles mate throughout the spring and summer and into the fall. The females can actually store sperm for years, so they do not have to find a mate in order to lay eggs every year. Females will often be seen migrating to nesting areas in the spring and early summer. They are looking for soft sandy soil in which to lay their eggs. Their clutch size varies widely, but 25 1-inch diameter white eggs is typical. Once laid, the eggs are left on their own; hatching in 9-18 weeks. The hatchlings make their way to the nearest water unprotected. If not eaten when young, or captured by humans for food, snapping turtles will live up to 40 years in the wild, achieving a shell diameter of 18 inches or more and weigh as much as 45 lbs.

Some people mistakenly believe that it is not safe to swim where there are snapping turtles. This is not true. While they can be aggressive when on land, they are docile in the water and will try to escape when disturbed. Snapping turtles are often kept as pets. They are relatively easy to care for, and can live for more than 45 years in captivity, reaching a much larger size than they would in the wild. It is not, however, illegal to take them in the wild without a collector's permit. If you see one on the road, or if your dog is harassing one in migration across your lawn, simply pick it up carefully by the sides of the shell and holding it away from you, remove it to the far side of whatever obstacle it was trying to cross. Do not pick it up by the tail. Remember that they can reach to the middle of their shell with their head, and almost that far around the sides.