

WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

WILDLIFE FACT SHEET

Common Snapping Turtle

Chelydra s. serpentina

Background

Snapping turtles are widespread in Connecticut. Their ability to adapt to people and the state's changing landscape has made them evolutionarily successful. Snapping turtles can even be found in polluted waters and urban wetlands, although populations in these habitats may not be robust.

Range

Snapping turtles range across the eastern United States to the Rocky Mountains, from southern Canada to the Gulf of Mexico, and into Central America. They have been introduced in some western states.

Description

Connecticut's largest freshwater turtle is easily recognized by its dark carapace (upper shell) with a deeply serrated back margin, and a small plastron (bottom shell) that does not completely cover all of the animal's flesh. Three low keels (or ridges) on the carapace of younger turtles often become obscure as the turtle matures. The carapace measures 8-12 inches on an average adult, and the turtles can weigh between 10-35 pounds. The carapace can vary in color, from green to brown to black; sometimes it is covered with moss. Snapping turtles have a long tail, often measuring as long or longer than the carapace, that is covered with bony plates. They also have a large head, long neck, and a sharp, hooked upper jaw. This hard beak has a rough cutting edge that is used for tearing food.

Habitat and Diet

Snapping turtles are almost entirely aquatic and can be found in a wide variety of aquatic habitats, preferably with slow-moving water and a soft muddy or sandy bottom. They inhabit almost any permanent or semi-permanent body of water, including marshes, creeks, swamps, bogs, pools, lakes, streams, rivers, and impoundments. Snapping turtles can tolerate brackish water (mixture of seawater and fresh water).

As omnivores, snapping turtles feed on plants, insects,



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spiders, worms, fish, frogs, small turtles, snakes, birds, crayfish, small mammals, and carrion. Plant matter accounts for about a third of the diet. Young turtles will forage for food, but older turtles often hang motionless in the water and ambush their prey by lunging forward with the head at high speed and powerful jaws to seize prey.

Life History

Sexual maturity has more to do with size than age. Turtles are ready to mate when their carapace measures about 8 inches. The nesting season is from April through November, with most of the nesting in southern New England occurring in late May through June. Snapping turtles rarely leave their aquatic habitat except during the breeding season, at which time females travel great distances in search of a place to dig a nest and lay eggs. Some turtles have been found as far as a mile from the nearest water source. Selected nest sites include banks, lawns, gardens, road embankments, and sometimes muskrat burrows.

One clutch of eggs is laid in May or June. With powerful hind legs, the female digs a shallow bowl-shaped nest in a well-drained, sunny location. Over a period of several hours, she lays approximately 20 to 40 creamy white, ping-pong ball-sized eggs. After covering the eggs, the female returns to the water, leaving the eggs and



hatchlings to fend for themselves. Turtle nests are often preyed upon by raccoons, skunks, and crows. As much as 90% of nests are annually destroyed by predators.

Snapping turtles have temperature-dependent sex determination. Eggs maintained at 68°F produce only females; eggs maintained at 70-72°F produce both male and female turtles; and those incubated at 73-75°F produce only males.

Hatching takes approximately 80 to 90 days, but the hatch date can vary depending on temperature and other environmental conditions. Generally, hatchlings emerge from their leathery egg in August through October by using a small egg tooth to break open the shell. (Northern snapping turtles sometimes overwinter in this egg stage). When the young hatch, they dig out of the nest and instinctively head to water. Young at hatching are about an inch long with soft shells and they must make it to water without being preyed upon by raccoons, skunks, foxes, dogs, birds, and snakes. When they reach water, the young turtles may be taken by fish and other snapping turtles. Once the turtles have grown some and their shells harden, they are virtually predator-free.

Interesting Facts

Snapping turtles are nocturnal and spend most of the time underwater, lying on the bottom of the waterbody. Their dark-colored skin and moss-covered shell enables the turtles to lie in wait and ambush their prey. Usually docile in water, snapping turtles can be aggressive during the breeding season when they are found traveling across land. This is usually when most people encounter snapping turtles. If you find a snapping turtle in your yard, treat it with the respect it deserves. Snapping turtles have powerful, sharp jaws. Keep children and pets away from the turtle until it has finished laying its eggs and has left the area.

Countless turtles are killed or injured on roads during their terrestrial treks. The presence of a large turtle on a busy road can be a safety hazard for motorists. By driving defensively and keeping alert to conditions on the road, motorists should be able to avoid hitting a turtle.

Snapping turtles should never be picked up by their tails

as this can damage the animal's vertebral column and tail, not to mention the human who is in danger of being bitten. Because snapping turtles can be slimy and heavy, the Wildlife Division does not recommend that anyone manually pick them up.

Unlike most other turtles, snapping turtles rarely bask on land, but instead bask on the water's surface. They survive winters in Connecticut by hibernating when temperatures dip below 41°F. They burrow into mud and leaf debris in shallow water or under logs and overhanging banks. After emerging from hibernation, turtles begin feeding and searching for mates.

Snapping turtles generally reach maturity at 8 to 10 years and can live up to 40 years or more. They typically occupy home ranges of 4 to 22 acres, depending on the size of the wetland. Snapping turtles rarely leave their aquatic habitat except during the breeding season or to reach new habitat to avoid overcrowding, pollution, and habitat destruction/desiccation.

The DEEP Wildlife Division does not keep records of the largest or heaviest snapping turtles in the state as the agency recommends that these turtles **not** be handled.

In many areas of the United States and other parts of the world, people relish snapping turtle meat in soups and stews. However, these turtles can potentially concentrate environmental contaminants and toxic chemicals such as PCBs in their flesh and could pose a health concern if consumed in large quantities.

Snapping turtles can be harvested in Connecticut. Regulations passed in 2013 established specific protections for snapping turtles by designating seasons, size/bag limits, gear restrictions, and other measures designed to ensure the long-term viability of Connecticut turtle populations. Specific details on the snapping turtle regulations can be found on the DEEP website at www.ct.gov/deep/hunting. Turtle eggs cannot be taken and turtle nests cannot be disturbed without DEEP authorization.

Management of Problems

In Connecticut and elsewhere, snapping turtles have a reputation for decimating game fish and waterfowl populations. Scientific research, however, indicates that this is rarely the case. A 1940s study in Connecticut found that not only fish, but aquatic plants and crayfish are dominant food items. Other studies also have shown that snapping turtles eat insignificant amounts of game fish, and that mammalian nest predators and large fish kill far more waterfowl than do snapping turtles. In natural situations, snapping turtles have no significant impact on fish or waterfowl populations.

Snapping turtles may cause depredation at privately-owned ponds, fish farms, or waterfowl sanctuaries and control methods may be warranted. Private pond owners may trap and relocate turtles to nearby bodies of water with the owner's permission. Turtles may not be removed from public waters without authorization from DEEP and the appropriate governmental agency in control. Contact the Wildlife Division at 860-424-3011 for assistance.

