

Traveling Snapping Turtles Will Wander Far Afield

You never know what you might see while wandering the trails and roads of Mackinac. Not long ago, a friend of mine, Doc, asked me to look at a picture he had taken (he says it's great to have a digital camera). He had been walking along Leslie Avenue, when a large turtle crossed his path. He noted that it was more than a foot long, had a beaked nose, and a ridge along its back. I immediately thought of a Snapping Turtle, and a look at the picture confirmed it.

It was funny, because I had been talking with another friend about snapping turtles just a few days before. In the early 1960s, when I was a child, we used to find all sorts of tadpoles in the ponds, and frogs near them, salamanders under logs, and Painted and Blanding's turtles near the shore, but I never saw a Snapping Turtle here. My friend said that when he was growing up in the late 1970s and '80s, there was very little wildlife in or around the ponds. He and his uncle, among others, began to restock the ponds with tadpoles, fish, and turtles. Among the turtles that were planted on the Island were some Snapping Turtles. He speculated that the drop in the population of amphibians and reptiles may have been a delayed effect of the spraying of DDT that went on here from the 1940s into the 1960s as a way to control the fly populations. There doesn't seem to be a shortage of amphibians and reptiles today. The planting of the turtles may not have been the only source for the Snapping Turtle population. Snapping turtles are great swimmers and could easily have swum from one of the neighboring islands or the mainland. There could also have been a small population of them on the Island that we were unaware of.

Snapping Turtles, like all turtles, are reptiles. Reptiles are ectoderms (coldblooded), meaning that they take their body temperature from their surroundings. They have no internal way of controlling their body temperature and can only change it by moving to warmer or cooler



Nature Notes

By
Patricia Martin



Snapping Turtle

environments as necessary. Reptiles are clad in scales, shields, or plates and their toes have claws. Young reptiles are miniature replicas of their parents in general appearance, though they may change color or pattern. Other members of the Class Reptilia include crocodiles, lizards, and snakes.

Turtles occur on all the continents except Antarctica. They live in a variety of habitats, swimming in the open seas, surviving in arid deserts, and are particularly abundant in the eastern part of North America. Worldwide there are more than 200 species of turtles. Turtles often turn up in odd places outside their normal range. This may be owing in part to the former pet traffic in turtles; people bringing them from one place to another and then releasing their pets. Having turtles as pets is no longer considered a good idea, as they can be carriers of salmonella. Always wash your hands thoroughly after handling a turtle.

Snapping Turtles are members of the Chelydridae family of turtles, large freshwater turtles with short tempers and long tails, and the Snappers are certainly typical of this family. Adult Snapping Turtles (*Chelydra serpentina*) are usually eight to 12

inches in length, with the record being 18.5 inches, with the average weight being 10 to 35 pounds. Captive ones being fattened up have been known to grow to 86 pounds. When hatched, the carapace (top shell) is usually only one to 1.5 inches long.

As one book put it, Snappers are "ugly both in appearance and disposition." This freshwater Loggerhead is easily recognized by its large head, small plastron (lower shell), and long tail. The tail is saw-toothed along the upper surface. In the adult Snapper, the carapace (upper shell) is usually black to light brown, while in the young it's blackish or dark brown, with a light spot at the edge of each

marginal scute. The carapace is usually very rough with three fairly well-defined longitudinal keels. As these turtles age, their shells may become smoother, but traces of the keels can usually be found. The tail of the snapper is usually at least as long as the carapace, if not longer.

These turtles will live in any permanent body of fresh water, whether it be large or small, sweet or brackish. They can be found from southern Canada to the Gulf of Mexico and from the Atlantic Ocean to the Rockies naturally, and have even been introduced further west. As their name suggests, these turtles are quite aggressive, at least on land. They will often strike repeatedly. A favorite maneuver is to stand with their hind legs elevated and mouth agape and then suddenly lunge forward. In water, they're much less offensive. When stepped on in the water, Snappers will usually just retract their head. It's common for them to bury themselves in mud in a pond or shallow water with only their eyes showing. Because they're coldblooded, most turtles

bask in the sun to absorb the heat. This is rarely true of Snapping Turtles. You might have been surprised at the sighting of a Snapping Turtle on Leslie Avenue, as it's quite a distance from any pond. These turtles are great travelers and will wander far afield.

The Snapping Turtle is an omnivore, enjoying all sorts of food, including a variety of small aquatic invertebrates, fish, mammals, birds, carrion, and quite a lot of vegetation. They have often been caught in large numbers by people, to be made into soups and stews. I heard that a few years ago some of the workers on the Island caught a good-sized Snapper and were planning to make it into a stew when they were stopped by a local biologist.

Remember, on Mackinac we're supposed to observe the wildlife, not eat it.

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