



Common Snapping Turtle

North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



(Jeff Hall)

Common Snapping Turtle

(*Chelydra serpentina*)

This common and familiar animal is North Carolina's largest freshwater turtle. Its large head and long tail make identification easy. Snappers are so named because they defend themselves by snapping and biting aggressively when handled or otherwise molested. They are top-level predators in many food chains and are important components in aquatic ecosystems.

Description

Snapping turtles have large heads with powerful jaws and necks. The carapace has a jagged posterior edge and three longitudinal keels, which are most prominent in young specimens. The plastron is small and cross-shaped. The tail, adorned above with large, saw-toothed scales, is much longer than that of any other North Carolina turtle. The shell offers only limited protection to the head and limbs, causing these turtles to rely largely on their strong jaws for defense. The skin and shell are usually brownish above and whitish or yellowish below. The skin is thick, with numerous tubercles, and the powerful limbs have large claws. The carapace is often encrusted with algae. Male snappers are, on the average, larger than females.

History and Status

Snapping turtles are fairly common throughout North Carolina, and they occur in most aquatic habitats. They are not currently listed under any category of special protection, but a [wildlife collection license](#) is required to collect more than four reptiles in a year. Commercial collecting of snappers for their meat has probably reduced populations in some areas, and in some states such activities have resulted in the need for protective legislation. In North Carolina, once a wildlife collection license is acquired, up to 10 turtles per day and 100 per year may be harvested.

Habitats and Habits

Snappers occur in most freshwater habitats and sometimes enter brackish water. They are most common in large, permanent, relatively quiet bodies of water, such as ponds, lakes, swamps, canals and rivers. More aquatic than most of our turtles, they seldom bask but often swim near the surface. They may wander considerable distances over land between bodies of water, especially during rainy periods in spring and early summer. They frequently cross roads, particularly females during nesting season, and many are killed by motor vehicles.

When closely approached on land, a snapping turtle often elevates its hindquarters, gapes its jaws and then suddenly lunges with a snakelike strike at the offending object. They may also secrete a strong-smelling musk from glands along the sides of the body when irritated. In water they are more at home, usually retreating or withdrawing when confronted by a larger animal.

The common snapping turtle gets its name for its penchant to snap and bite aggressively when handled.



(Jeff Hall)

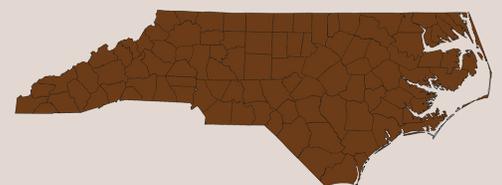


(Jeff Hall)

Range and Distribution

This wide-ranging turtle occurs throughout most of the United States east of the Rocky Mountains, from southern Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. Scattered populations have been introduced west of the Rockies, and other subspecies range from Mexico to Ecuador. The species occurs throughout North Carolina.

Range Map



■ Common snapping turtle range

Common Snapping Turtle

Wildlife Profiles - North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission

Snappers are omnivorous, opportunistic feeders, feeding upon nearly any small animal slow enough to be captured. Much of their food is scavenged, and vegetation comprises a high percentage of their diet. They often lie buried in the mud with only their eyes exposed, but they may also forage actively along the bottom, using both sight and smell to detect food. Like other turtles, they cannot chew their food—small prey is swallowed whole, and larger items are bitten into chunks of manageable size, the strong front claws often being used to help maneuver the item. A healthy snapper can, if necessary, survive for several months without food.

Large adult snappers have few predators other than humans, but the young face a gauntlet of predators, including various mammals, birds, alligators and large fish. The eggs are relished by many animals, especially raccoons, foxes, skunks and eastern kingsnakes, which locate nests by their scent and dig them out. Eggs are most likely to be predated during the first day or two after being laid; after those first few days, the scent of the mother and the eggs dissipates and the nest stands a better chance of survival.

Snappers spend the colder months buried beneath the mud at the bottom of their aquatic habitat obtaining oxygen through cloacal respiration, but they may emerge and become active on mild days during the winter.

People Interactions

The flesh of snapping turtles has long been a favorite food, especially as an ingredient in soups and stews. The species is taken commercially and is of some economic importance. It is easily captured in baited hoop traps or on set hooks. Large snappers can be very dangerous if handled carelessly; their powerful, sharp-edged jaws can inflict considerable injury upon a carelessly placed hand or foot. However, they are normally inoffensive underwater and pose little if any danger to swimmers or waders. Sportsmen have long resented this turtle's presence in many areas, regarding it as a threat to game fish and waterfowl. There is no doubt that these opportunistic feeders occasionally take ducklings and fish, but such items represent a very small percentage of their diet. Snappers have interacted with their prey for many thousands of years, and they pose no threat to populations of other species sharing their environment. Indeed, humans have recently begun to realize that all predators affect their prey's populations in positive rather than negative ways. An abundance of snapping turtles is often indicative of a healthy ecosystem, and the hundreds of eggs a female produces in her lifetime are an important food source for many species of wildlife.

References

Martof, Bernard S., William M. Palmer, Joseph R. Bailey and Julian R. Harrison III. *Amphibians and Reptiles of the Carolinas and Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).
Palmer, William M., and Alvin Braswell. *Reptiles of North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1995)

Credits

Written by Jeff Beane; updated Jeff Hall, NCWRC. 2020.

Wild Facts

Classification

Class: Reptilia

Order: Testudines

Family: Chelydridae

Average Size

Length: 8 to 14 inches; record 19 3/8 inches (straight-line carapace length)

Weight: 10 to 35 lbs.

Fattened captive specimens have exceeded 80 lbs. The largest North Carolina specimen on record weighed 61 lbs.

Food

Invertebrates, fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds, mammals, carrion, and a wide variety of plant material

Breeding/Young

Mating usually takes place in spring and normally occurs in water, with the pair often snapping savagely at one another. In late spring, the female deposits about 25 spherical, white, leathery-shelled eggs in a hole excavated with her hind feet, sometimes far from water. The nest is then covered and abandoned, and the eggs hatch in 2 to 3 months. More than one clutch may be laid during a season.

Hatchlings are 3/4 - 1 1/4 inches in carapace length, and dark brown with prominent keels and ridges on carapace (top of shell). They also have a blackish plastron (bottom of shell).

Life Expectancy

May exceed 40 years and possibly much longer.



Snapping turtle eggs (Photo: Moondigger/Wikimedia)