

# Is That a Snapping Turtle?

By Frederick Boyce

The largest and most notorious freshwater turtle in our part of the world is the common snapping turtle. I say “notorious” rather than “best known” because, by virtue of their fearsome reputation, more people have seemingly *heard* of them than have actually *seen* one.

Snapping turtles have a reputation, not entirely unfounded, for biting hard and not letting go. This trait has been mythologized to the point where snapping turtles are said to not let go “until the sun goes down” or “until it thunders.” While that might seem to be the case to anyone unfortunate enough to have been latched onto by one, the tenacious grip that most interests me is the one that these big turtles have on the human imagination. Children, in particular, seem to have all heard of snapping turtles but are very seldom able to recognize one.

“Is that a snapping turtle?” is one of the questions I hear most often at the aquarium, and it is usually asked about anything *but* a snapping turtle. This question even gets asked about our colorful little box turtles in their outdoor habitat along the boardwalk. Ironically, the one turtle at the aquarium about which this question is rarely asked is . . . the snapping turtle. Once seen, there is really no mistaking this awesome-looking beast for anything else. There is something very prehistoric and dinosaur-like about them, and they do, in fact, bear a close resemblance to one of the earliest-known turtles, *Proganochelys*, which lived during the early Triassic Period, at the very dawn of the age of dinosaurs over 200 million years ago. Many extremely well-preserved and complete fossils of this creature exist in museums, and if one of these turtles were to be seen crossing a highway today, it would likely be taken for a large snapping turtle.

Snapping turtles have massive heads and long tails that have triangulate “sawtooth” scales along the top edge, like the tail of a dragon. The upper shell (carapace) is large and fairly smooth in adult turtles, while the lower shell (plastron) is greatly reduced, having a vaguely cruciform shape. Hatchlings, however, which are solid black or dark brown with small whitish spots running around the edge of the shell, have very bumpy, rough shells with three pronounced ridges—but their most prominent identifying feature is a very long tail, as long as the baby turtle itself.

Young snappers up to a few inches in length do not “snap” or try to bite defensively, but instead freeze when picked up and emit a rather fetid musk. Adults, however, which can weigh 23-35 pounds, with a record of well over 80 pounds, are not called “snapping” turtles for nothing.

While they are normally very aquatic and rarely emerge to bask, they are sometimes encountered traveling overland from one waterhole to another, especially after rains. They stomp along with stoic determination, raised up off the ground on their powerful, clawed legs, looking very much like old movie dinosaurs. If approached, they quickly drop to the ground and rotate to face the intruder, jaws agape. Further provoked, they will raise their hindquarters into the air and lunge forward. While no turtle has teeth, they do have sharp-edged jaws, and just about any species of turtle can and will inflict a painful nip if molested. A large snapping turtle can potentially do some real damage, but tales of them shearing fingers off or snapping broomsticks in two are greatly exaggerated.

Their necks, like their tails, are very long, and they can strike rapidly, much like a snake, hence their scientific name, *Chelydra serpentina*, which means “snake turtle.” Their refusal to simply turn tail and run, like most other animals, makes them very challenging to chase off of roadways. Small to medium-sized ones can be picked up by the tail, but larger snappers can be seriously injured in this way. If you are so inclined, you can grasp the turtle near the base of the tail with one hand, raising the hind end up while sliding the other hand underneath, then lifting the turtle off the ground, supporting its weight with one hand while still holding onto the tail to keep it steady, as shown in the photo. Their long necks can reach almost halfway down the shell, and their sharp, flailing claws are no trifling matter either—and in case that isn’t enough, there is also a row of jagged, sharp and pointy scutes along the

rear edge of the shell that they seem to greatly enjoy driving into any hand trying to hold the tail, so it can be a tricky thing indeed to pick up one of these large, heavily armed turtles.

Despite their fearsome appearance and reputation, they are actually very shy and fearful animals that much prefer to be left alone. They only behave defensively when out of the water, their normal safe zone, and refrain from snapping at humans in the water, preferring to hide in the mud or move quietly away, so swimmers or waders have nothing to fear from them.

Common snapping turtles are widespread over the entire eastern half of the U.S., and even range into southern Canada. Very tough and cold-tolerant, they have been seen actively moving about under the ice of lakes and streams in frozen northern climes. Snapping turtles are highly aquatic and will inhabit virtually any sized body of water within their range. They love to bury themselves in mud, where they will sit quietly for long periods with only their eyes and perhaps a faint outline of the shell visible. While not considered threatened anywhere in their range, there is mounting evidence that they are being taken in unsustainable numbers, especially for the Asian food markets, so we need to be keeping a closer eye on them if we wish to have such interesting animals around. As the passenger pigeon so sadly illustrates, even being common is no insurance against extinction.

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The author prepares to release a wayward snapping turtle in the Roosevelt Natural Area near the NC Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores.—Photo by Aquarium Associate Director Stuart E. May

