

6/30/79

Natural History Notes

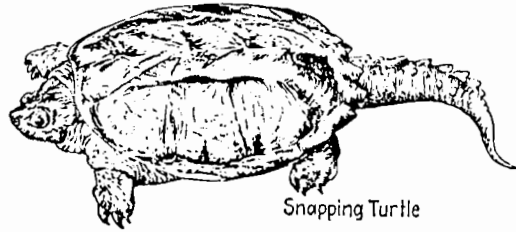


MIKE DOMBECK grew up in the Moose Lake area and graduated from Hayward High School and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. He has a B.S. degree in Biology and an M.S. degree in Aquatic Biology. He has taught Zoology at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and is now a fisheries biologist with the U.S. Forest Service, living in Munising, Michigan. Mike has also been an area fishing guide since his high school days.

THE SNAPPING TURTLE

The snapping turtle is a common inhabitant of Wisconsin's lakes, rivers and marshes. The snapper is the largest freshwater turtle in North America. It is characterized by a large head, long tail, strong jaws and powerful legs. It also possesses a rough upper shell called a carapace with jagged projections running along the top and edge of it. The carapace is connected to the plastron or lower shell by two narrow pieces of shell. This leaves quite a bit of soft flesh exposed, but that doesn't seem to be as dangerous to the snapper as it would be for another less aggressive species of turtle. The average length of the adult runs from 10 to 15 inches. The snapper may weigh up to 80 pounds, with most adult individuals averaging 25 pounds. The snapper is basically drab in color in shades of dark brown, gray and olive. Another characteristic (if you care to look that close) is two conspicuous barbels under the chin. Snapping turtles have been known to live for 25 years.

Snapping turtles hibernate during the winter under the mud, often utilizing old muskrat burrows. They don't emerge until the temperature remains above 60° in the spring. The mating season extends from the time they leave hibernation until November. The eggs are fertilized internally and gestated approximately two to six weeks before the female digs out a nest on dry land. She then lays from 12 to 75 pinkish-white eggs, the average being 25. During laying the female may catch the eggs with her back feet to break the fall into the nest. Soon after laying, the eggshells turn tough and leathery. The female may store the sperm from one mating for several years to fertilize other eggs, but the percentage of fertilization does decrease. The peak of the nesting season is June, with the young hatching 50 to 125 days later, depending on several environmental factors. If the clutch of eggs is laid relatively late and the onset of cold weather



Snapping Turtle

is quick, the eggs may not hatch until the next spring. There is a danger of freezing if the nest is dug above the frost line. During incubation the nest is preyed on by birds, reptiles, and mammals such as raccoons, skunks and foxes. The young are about one inch long when hatched. They immediately head for water where they hide in the muck or aquatic vegetation. They are eaten at this stage by bullfrogs, bitterns, herons and hawks.

The snapping turtle feeds on aquatic vegetation and animals. Large snappers have been known to prey on muskrats and ducks by grabbing the animal and holding it underwater until it drowns. Snappers over 12 inches in length don't have too many predators. The alligator and man are the two threats to its safety.

The snapping turtle plays an important role in its aquatic habitat as a predator, scavenger and as prey. With its armor-like shell and beady little eyes the snapper is hardly a thing of beauty. Coupled with its ferocious appearance is a vicious aggressive temper. The snapper is nothing to be trifled with. On the other hand, the meat of this turtle is a prized delicacy for soup. You have to decide if it is worth the trouble.

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