

Pennsylvania Amphibians & Reptiles

THE SNAPPING

by Andrew L. Shiels

Turtles are members of the Class Reptilia, Order Testudinata. They are the oldest living reptiles, having evolved more than 200 million years ago.

Turtles have adapted to a variety of environments including marine, estuarine, freshwater and terrestrial habitats. They are found on every continent except Antarctica. Although their habitats may differ, all turtles share these same characteristics: 1) a shell, 2) they lay eggs, and 3) they build nests on land to incubate their eggs.

The most unique feature of a turtle is its shell. The shell's shape, color and pattern make it a readily used feature for species identification. The shell is divided into an upper part, the carapace, and a lower part, the plastron. Both carapace and plastron are covered with scales called scutes. In addition to using the shell as an identifier, the plastron's shape can be used in sex determination. In many species male turtles have a concave plastron; female turtles have a flat plastron.

Most Pennsylvania turtles are active from April to October, spending the remaining portion of the year hibernating in burrows, in the mud, on the bottom of streams or ponds, or under piles of vegetation. Normal daily activities include basking in the sun, foraging for food and resting. The majority of turtles are diurnal (active during daylight hours). However, mud turtles, musk turtles and

snapping turtles are primarily nocturnal (active at night). Most turtles are omnivorous—they feed on a wide variety of foods including insects, fish, small mammals, carrion, berries, aquatic vegetation and plants.

Turtles vary in size from species that are several inches in length to those that are over 6 feet (sea turtles and giant tortoises). The common snapping turtle is the largest Pennsylvania turtle. Adult snappers can reach a shell length of 12 inches and typically weigh between 15 and 45 pounds.

Not only can they reach outstanding weights, but turtles also live longer than most other vertebrates. Some box turtles have had recorded life spans of longer than a century. Generally, however, most Pennsylvania turtles live 20 to 40 years.

In Pennsylvania, there are four turtle families comprising 12 genera and 15 species and subspecies. The families are grouped into snapping turtles; musk and mud turtles; pond, marsh and box turtles; and softshell turtles

Snapping turtles, or “snappers,” are large freshwater turtles with a posterior serrated carapace reaching lengths of 12 inches. The carapace varies from tan, brown or olive to black. The plastron is yellowish to tan and greatly reduced in size. The head is large with massive jaws. The common snapper has a long tail with three triangular plates. Males usually have longer tails than females with the male cloacal opening (anus) located beyond the margin of the top shell. In females, the cloaca does not extend beyond the shell

edge. Weights average in the 15- to 45-pound range. An exceptional snapper found in Wayne County was weighed by Commission staff in 2006 at over 60 pounds.

Snapping turtles have been found in almost every kind of freshwater habitat in their range. They prefer still or slow-moving water with soft mud or sand bottoms and abundant vegetation. Snapping turtles can also be found in brackish coastal waters. Snapping turtles range statewide.

Mating occurs from March to November. The nesting period for snapping turtles is usually three weeks (mid-May to mid-June). Snapping turtles

For more information

Pennsylvania Amphibians & Reptiles, by Larry L. Shaffer, is the Commission's full-color, illustrated book that provides details on Pennsylvania's salamanders, frogs, toads, turtles, lizards and snakes. The 6-inch by 9-inch, 166-page book includes each animal's characteristics, identification, range, habitat description, reproduction habits, and food requirements. To order this book, see the form on page 62, or order online on the Commission's web site, www.fish.state.pa.us. On the main page's left side, hold your cursor over “Pubs. & Products” and click on “The Outdoor Shop.”



TURTLE

dig nests in loose sand, loam, railroad beds, plant debris or sawdust piles. Clutch sizes may vary from six to 100 eggs in each nest, but individual snappers usually lay 25 to 50 eggs. The incubation period depends on temperature, usually requiring 60 to 90 days.

As the name “snapping” turtle suggests, this species uses its powerful jaws to capture prey and defend itself if provoked. However, they will usually attempt to flee if disturbed. Snapping turtles are one of the most aquatic turtle species, spending a majority of their time resting on the bottom of deep pools or buried in the mud in shallow water with their eyes and nostrils exposed. During the day

they can be seen floating just beneath the water’s surface with only eyes and nostrils protruding.

Throughout their range, snapping turtles are hunted for food for personal consumption or the restaurant trade. They are often killed because they are mistakenly believed to be major predators of young waterfowl. Indeed, snapping turtles are opportunists and will consume many types of food, both plant and animal. However, snapping turtles are important scavengers of dead and decomposing aquatic animals. Research has shown that 80 percent or more of their diet typically consists of aquatic vegetation such as duckweed. ☐

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