

# Till it Thunders

I was checking out the new residents on Mill Pond in Sloan Community recently while doing my evening chores. There was a great egret and some gadwalls that hadn't been there the day before. There was something else in the water that I couldn't quite make out. Was it a beaver? Could it be turtles? Were they fighting or were they mating? Was one mortally wounded? They sure were acting strange. Every once in awhile I would glimpse something black. As I got closer I realized it was the wing of a bird and the turtles were feasting on what was probably a duck. I had never witnessed this, but later was assured by my neighbor that yes, turtles do catch unsuspecting waterfowl. One day you swimming along minding your own "bidness" and the next thing you know you are turtle soup! All joking aside, I decided to learn more.

The **common snapping turtle** (*Chelydra serpentina*) is a large freshwater [turtle](#) of the [family Chelydridae](#). Common snappers are noted for their belligerent disposition when out of the water, their powerful beak-like jaws, and their highly mobile head and neck (hence the [specific](#) name "*serpentina*", meaning "[snake](#)-like"). In some areas they are hunted very heavily for their meat, a popular ingredient in [turtle soup](#). These turtles have lived for up to 47 years in captivity, while the lifespan of wild individuals is estimated to be around 30 years.

## Anatomy and morphology

*Chelydra serpentina* have rugged, muscular builds with ridged carapaces (though ridges tend to be more pronounced in younger individuals). The [carapace](#) (upper shell) length in adulthood may be nearly 20 inches, though 10–19 inches, is more common. They can weigh in excess of 35 pounds.

Exceptionally large (often captive and overfed) individuals may reach 75 lb.

## Ecology and life history

Although primarily aquatic, snapping turtles occasionally leave the water to bask or venture about on land. This activity most commonly occurs after heavy rains, during drought when individuals are searching for water, or when females are looking for nesting sites. Ponds, slow-moving creeks and rivers, lakes, and brackish marshes are suitable habitats for snapping turtles. A body of water with a soft, muddy bottom is preferred. In such environs, one can sometimes encounter snapping turtles covered in mud with only the eyes and nostrils exposed. In this position, the snapping turtle is well poised to ambush unsuspecting prey. The snapper is an aquatic ambush hunter, capturing its prey with its beak-like jaws. Not only does its long neck allow the turtle to ambush prey, it also allows a concealed snapper to raise its nostrils to the surface without disturbing its hiding place. Snapping turtles are opportunistic predators and scavengers that consume a wide range of food items including: algae, duck weed, water hyacinth, water lettuce, crayfish, insects, fish amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals.

This species mates from April through November, with their peak laying season in June and July. The female can hold [sperm](#) for several seasons, using it as necessary. Females travel over land to find sandy soil in which to lay their eggs, often some distance from the water. After digging a hole, the female typically deposits 25 to 80 eggs each year, guiding them into the nest with her hind feet and covering them with sand for incubation and protection. Incubation time is temperature-dependent, ranging from 9 to 18 weeks.

## **Behavior**

Snapping turtles have "fierce" dispositions however, when encountered in the water, they usually slip quietly away from any disturbance. Snapping turtles have evolved the ability to snap because unlike other turtles, they are too large to hide in their own shells when confronted. Snapping is their defense mechanism. These turtles rarely bite humans; they usually flee when threatened.

But I wouldn't want to put the old adage that "they don't turn loose until it thunders" to the test—especially in times when it might be a spell till it thunders!