

# 2011 “YEAR OF THE TURTLE”

## Snapping Turtles



*Alligator Snapping Turtle (Macrochelys temminckii)*  
E O Wilson Biophilia Center  
Photo: Molly O'Connor



*Common Snapping Turtle (Chelydra serpentina serpentina)*  
Roy Hyatt Environmental Center  
Photo: Molly O'Connor

Snapping turtles may be one of the most misidentified turtle in Florida. It is similar to shark identification; you see a shark and you have to limit your identification to only those sharks that you know. In many cases sharks are misidentified as “white sharks” or “bull sharks” because of the familiarity of the names. I think this may be the case with snapping turtles. When I was a young boy I had a pet “snapping turtle” that I named “Snappy”... I know now that it was a box turtle. Molly and I host a “Turtle Table” at a lot of local events such as Seagrass Awareness Day and the Choctawhatchee Bay Family Fun Day where we hear of all sorts of accounts of snapping turtles in their yards. It may very well be a snapping turtle that they see, I do not know – I was not there, but with the frequency we hear this, I think some of these are misidentifications.

That said, once you see a snapping turtle you will probably never misidentify it again; they are quite distinctive. The first thing you will notice is their rather large tail, much larger and longer than most other turtles. The second thing you will notice are the scales that extend vertically either from the carapace or their tail; giving them an almost dinosaur appearance. A third character that is easy to recognize is the hawk-like hooked beak... and their reputation for knowing how to use it is their claim to fame. If you happen to come across a dead one you will notice their plastron is greatly reduced; it covers very little of the ventral side of their body. This brings up the question whether this turtle design is old and primitive or whether they are the “new kids on the block” as far as turtle evolution is concerned. Recent books I have read suggest they are the “new kids”.

There are actually two species of snapping turtles in Florida, with one species have two subspecies. Two of these three are found in the Florida panhandle and, with a little practice, are pretty easy to tell apart. By far the most common snapper in the state is the Common Snapping Turtle (*Chelydra serpentina serpentina*). This snapper is found all over the eastern United States and most of the state of Florida. This snapper can be distinguished from the more famous Alligator Snapper by their smooth carapace and vertical, “dinosaur-like” scales on the dorsal side of their tail. They are also found in a variety of habitats, where the Alligator Snapper is more selective. They can be found in rivers, streams, lakes, ponds, ditches, almost any deep bodied water is possible. They are known for their long over land trips looking for suitable

habitat and are commonly found dead on the roadsides from collisions with vehicles because of this. I have found several along a particular stretch of Scenic Highway and found one that was living in a small pond at Site 2 of Project Greenshores on Pensacola Bay. City workers were mowing in the area and, unfortunately, ran over the turtle that was hidden in the grass. There is a subspecies of this variety found south of the Apalachicola River called the Florida Snapper (*Chelydra serpentina osceola*). It is endemic to Florida.

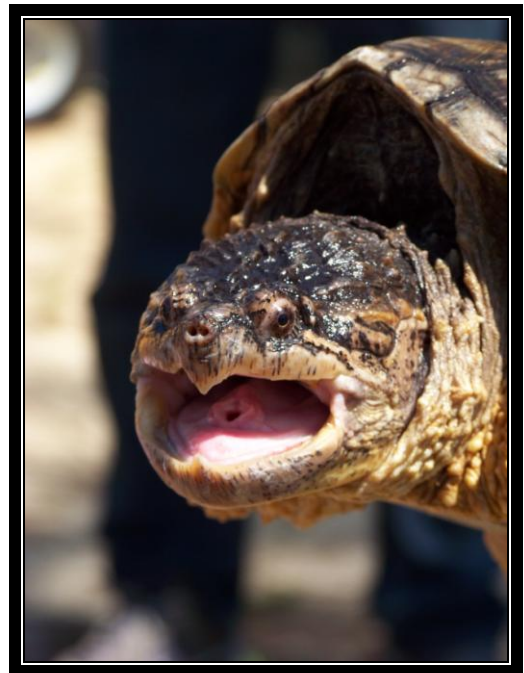
Like the misidentification of the snapping turtle in general, most snappers are incorrectly identified as “alligator snappers”. The Alligator Snapper (*Macrochelys temminckii*) can be identified from the Common snapper by the presence of three rows of raised, vertical scales along the upper surface of its carapace; there are no vertical scales on the tail. This turtle is found throughout the Mississippi Valley area but only found in the panhandle of our state. It is mostly nocturnal and spends most of its time on the bottom of rivers and floodplains of major rivers such as the Escambia, Alabama, and Apalachicola; there are reports of this animal in brackish water conditions. This species is famous for its “fishing lure” tongue which, along with its well camouflage mouth, is used while sitting very still for long periods of time either in the mud or under a log at the bottom of a river or associated floodplain habitat waiting for a fish to “take the bait.” The males of this species are known for their bad temperament and there are stories of them ripping body parts or holding on and never letting go. Actually the common snapper has the bad temperament and seems to be more eager to “snap” at you than the alligator snapper.



*Alligator Snapping Turtle  
(Macrochelys temminckii)*

*E O Wilson Biophilia Center, Freeport, FL*

*Photo: Molly O'Connor*



*Common Snapping Turtle  
(Chelydra serpentina serpentine)*

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Although snapping turtles eat a variety of larger prey, such as bass, bream, baby birds and turtles, they are actually omnivorous. They can reach an immense size, 42-cm carapace length and over 100 pounds, and live very long lives. Unlike other riverine turtles, the male snappers are generally larger than the females. Some snappers have been reported to be over 100 years old and there was a story of one that was killed where a civil war era musket ball was found lodged in its carapace! They tend to spend most of their time in the water and are rarely seen basking. They nest on sandy beaches but tend to move inland and actually dig the nest in a shady area of the nearby forest. It is pretty easy to identify the nest because it looks like someone drove a tank through there. ☺ These animals should be handled with care. The Common Snapper we have a Roy Hyatt has only “snapped” a few times, twice while I was holding it and it was arm-shaking with strength and lightning quick! It begins with a gap; the turtle will open its mouth, I assume as a warning, and then – just as you begin to relax – it snaps with incredible strength... literally jerking your body. They do have long

extendable necks so that they can stick their snouts out of the water for breathing and these long necks can certainly extend their bite range to at least the mid point of their carapace. However, the snapper we have has never tried that move.

Snappers have been harvested for decades as a food source. The exact number of them left in the state is not known but all indications is that the Alligator Snappers have declined enough that it has been listed by the FWC as a Species of Special Concern; no one may possess an Alligator Snapper, its eggs, or any body parts in Florida.



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