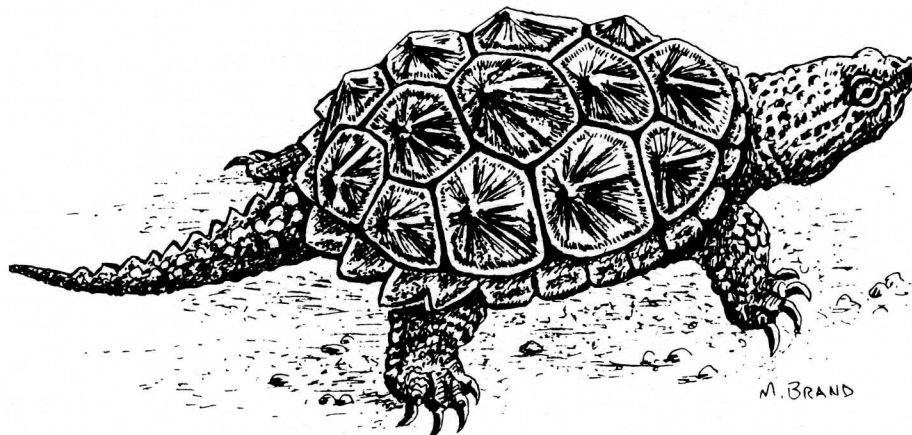


# Naturalist Notebook

## RIVER BEND NATURE CENTER

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## Snapping Turtle

*Chelydra serpentina*

Often the subject of tall tales and known for its aggressive attitude, the snapping turtle is a complex animal and skilled survivor. The common snapping turtle is best identified by a very small bottom shell (plastron), a long, spikey tail, and jagged-edged upper shell (carapace). Of the freshwater turtles they are also some of the largest; an average adult weighs 10 to 35 pounds. While the common snapping turtle is often the most abundant species in eastern ponds and marshes, it is not abundantly visible. This is because it is especially fond of shallow, marshy swamps with plenty of vegetation, it does not frequently bask in the sun, and it is most active at night, dawn, and dusk.

In the springtime, snapping turtles emerge early from their winter mudbank retreats to find food and warmth in sunny ponds. They will eat anything from insects and fish to small birds and mammals.

In mid to late June females will travel over land to find a nesting site in a dry, open area. There she will lay 20 to 30

eggs and cover them with sand or soil. If these eggs survive the predation by skunks, foxes, raccoons, and mink, one-inch hatchlings will emerge 9 to 18 weeks later in search of food and water.

Snapping turtles are highly aquatic. While they can be seen basking on logs, they are intolerant of high temperatures and often prefer to stay submerged to their nostrils in tepid pond water. This also causes their shells to be covered in mud or algae. They are most likely to "snap" at predators when they are traveling over dry land to new ponds or nesting sites. Furthermore, they also must feed while submerged, as water pressure is essential for swallowing.

Snapping turtles are harvested year round for human consumption. Although licensing is required, turtle hunting is unregulated and widespread. While the snapping turtle is not endangered and has few predators, it receives serious pressure from habitat destruction and fragmentation, water pollution, hunting, and automobiles.