**Mike Day*

Common Snapping Turtle (*Chelydra serpentina*) and Florida Snapping Turtle

Sizeable and Surly

These large, aquatic to semi-aquatic turtles can be identified by their blackish, grayish, grayish brown, to olive weakly keeled carapace with distinctive serrated rear marginal scutes, and long tails with jagged osteoderms or dorsal scales. Their carapaces are often obscured with mud and/or algae. As a largely sedentary ambush predator, these large turtles thus often develop algal growth on their shells, which is beneficial for the turtle in providing additional crypsis in their murky aquatic environments. The head, neck, and limbs are large and bulky, and plastron very reduced in size. Common snapping turtles have a widely negative reputation, and can be quite aggressive if cornered or handled, and are not suitable beginner's or intermediate turtle species. However, if they are respected and left alone in the wild, they do not pose any threat to humans, pets, or livestock (where they are subject to additional myths and misperceptions regarding their aggression and bite). Common snapping turtles are a hardy turtle species to maintain in captivity, however, and are quite tolerant of turbid or degraded water quality in the wild. Common snapping turtles are a controlled, regulated, or prohibited species in some states. Always check any applicable federal, state, and local laws and ordinances that may pertain to the specific possession of this species.

Taxonomy

Life: All living, physical, and animate entities
Domain: Eukaryota
Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum/Sub Phylum: Chordata/Vertebrata
Class: Reptilia
Order: Testudines
Suborder: Cryptodira
Family: Chelydridae
Genus: Chelydra
Species: *Chelydra serpentina**
**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

Lifespan and Longevity

Common Snapping turtles may attain longevity of 30 to 40 years or more under proper care and conditions.

Distribution and Habitat

Common snapping turtles are a very widely ranging species of turtle, occurring from southern to southeastern Canada, throughout much of the central, Midwestern, eastern, southeastern, and northeastern United States, and into northern Mexico. These turtles can occur in nearly any type of permanent to semi-permanent body of water or wetland, including lakes, impoundments, canals, ponds, ditches, slow rivers and streams, river backwaters, marshes and swamplands, and even heavily polluted, altered, or degraded urbanized or suburban environments.

Origin/History

Chelydra serpentina (Linnaeus, 1758). Subspecies would have other authors first attributed to them at other years.

It is difficult to pinpoint when exactly common snapping turtles specifically were first were kept as pets, although these turtles most likely became available during the same time period the aquatic turtle trade came into existence, in general, around the 1950's or 1960's along with other aquatic turtles. In the mid-1970's the USDA would prohibit the sale of hatchling turtles under 4 inches, citing salmonellosis public health concerns, although there would be a loophole allowing them to still be sold for bona-fide educational, scientific, or research purposes. Many states would also prohibit or regulate the commercial harvesting of wild common snapping turtles (and other native turtles) for their meat and shells to stem overexploitation.

Experience Level Required

Advanced.

Size

Adult common snapping turtles can reach carapace lengths of 8 to 16 inches, with some being reported at even larger sizes, and may weigh 25 to 40 lbs. or more.

Housing and Enclosure

Enclosure System: Primarily Aquatic to Somewhat Semi-Aquatic. Any enclosure that is provided must be secure and escape proof. One to several hatchling common snapping turtles under 4" can be adequately housed in a 10 gallon aquarium or similar sized tub or enclosure, but will quickly outgrow these accommodations, and larger accommodations should be provided accordingly. A general rule of thumb to follow for most aquatic to semi-aquatic turtles is to provide water that is at least 1 ½ to 2 times the turtle's height in depth to allow for complete submersion, and at least two to three times the carapace length for adequate swimming and movement. Once an individual reaches 8" in carapace length or more, housing and accommodations for this species can become more difficult. At minimum, a 55 gallon, or two foot by four foot enclosure or larger should be provided for a small adult common snapping turtle, although appropriately sized plastic or galvanized totes, troughs, or some forms of commercially available turtle tubs may be more suitable and easier to clean and maintain. A high power pump and water filtration canister system must also be set up and installed to maintain enclosure clarity and quality. Common snapping turtles seldom will bask out of the water, often opting to floating near the surface, although a small area of dry land in the enclosure can and may still be utilized. Substrates that can be utilized can include bare bottomed enclosures, or non-abrasive aquarium sand or gravel that cannot be easily ingested. Substrate should be agitated weekly to clear out lodged debris. Additional furnishings and accessories can also be provided in the enclosure for added safety and security including commercially available hides or slabs, live or artificial plants, which should be planted firmly to prevent uprooting, rocks, or other similar furnishings.

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

Providing the correct amounts of UVA/UVB overhead incandescent and florescent lighting, and calcium-to-phosphorus ratios is essential for ensuring the health and overall well-being of common snapping turtles in captivity. Without UVA/UVB, or adequate amounts of it, they can be susceptible to the abnormal bone and shell growth and development known as Metabolic Bone Disease (MBD), and other health and development maladies. Pyramiding of the scutes and shell can also occur due to poor or improper diet, lighting, or heating. Always be sure to spot clean the enclosure for urates, feces, or uneaten food at least twice per week. Be sure to periodically replace any substrate, clean, and disinfect the enclosure and its furnishings at minimum every 2 to 3 months. These turtles require a thermal gradient using a ceramic or radiant heat emitter, UTH (or under tank heating pad), submersible water heater, and/or UVA/UVB overhead lighting. A 12 to 14 hour day/night cycle can be provided using a quality UVB bulb for proper calcium, vitamin D, and D3 processing and basking opportunities. Water temperatures should be maintained at around 75 to 80 degrees F with an ambient air temperature of 80 to 85 degrees F and basking area temperature around 90 degrees F. More specific lighting, heating, and humidity product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's needs, as well as those of one's animals can be given as well. While humidity is somewhat less important for most aquatic to semi-aquatic turtles, a general humidity level should be at, or around about 60 to 75%.

Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition

Omnivorous to Carnivorous; In the wild, common snapping turtles are largely omnivorous. They will feed upon small amounts of algae and other aquatic plant matter as well as aquatic insects, crustaceans, mollusks, and carrion, or otherwise dead or decaying plant and animal matter. They will also commonly eat many smaller vertebrates including small fish, smaller reptiles and amphibians, and even sometimes small mammals or birds.

In captivity, variety is important, and these turtles can be given commercially available aquatic turtle or omnivore mix diets, as well as appropriately sized feeder fish of appropriate nutritional value. Avoid feeding them goldfish, which are not nutritionally staple. They can also be given crickets, roaches, waxworms, superworms, mealworms, nightcrawlers, red worms, earthworms, or crayfish. Frozen-thawed rodents of appropriate size, and other forms of fresh meats such as chicken, turkey, fish slabs, and/or beef can also be given, but any foods that are high in protein and fat should be given sparingly, if at all. Common snapping turtles will also accept some greens such as romaine lettuce, water hyacinth, various mustard greens, and even some other fruits and vegetables as well. Feeding frequency depends on the age, size, and overall health of your turtle, but in most cases, they can typically be fed two to three times weekly. They must feed and ingest food underwater, as with many other turtles, and any excess or uneaten food should be cleaned and removed to prevent fouling.

Commercially available canned or pelleted turtle diets are not good staples for feeding aquatic to semi-aquatic turtles, and should not exceed roughly 25% of their diets; Variety is always best. These turtles also require regular calcium and multi vitamin and vitamin D3 supplementation two to three times per week for optimal health and well-being. Without the proper diet and supplementation, they can be susceptible to Metabolic Bone Disease (or MBD), and other bone, shell, and growth maladies. More specific dietary and supplementary product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's needs, as well as those of one's animals can be given as well.

Handling

Common snapping turtles are by no means an appropriate beginner's turtle and are best maintained by the more advanced turtle or reptile enthusiast able to provide the proper amount of space and housing for this species. Despite their widespread negative reputation, however, common snappers can become very tame and handleable if acquired and handled or interacted

with on a regular and frequent basis from very early ages (such as from hatchlings). In general though, common snapping turtles are not suitable “pet” species for most individuals.
Due to their weight and bulk, any snapping turtle over 3 to 4” must be handled correctly to prevent injury to the animal and/or individual handling them. Snapping turtles should never be solely picked up or carried by their tails, as this is likely to cause spinal (or vertebral) injury. Many snapping turtles of intermediate size can be handled by firmly gripping their rear portion of their plastron and carapace between their tail and hind limbs.
Also be sure to practice basic cleanliness and hygiene associated with proper husbandry after touching or handling any animals or animal enclosures to prevent the possibility of contracting salmonellosis or any other zoonotic pathogens

Contact

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