

# **North American Snapping Turtle (*Chelydra serpentina*)**

***Family Chelydridae***

**Subspecies: None currently recognized**

***Updated 2025***



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**Description/Identification:** The North American Snapping Turtle is the largest, and heaviest species of turtle in Wisconsin. As adults, their carapace, or upper shell length ranges from about 7.8 to 16.5 inches, and is wide posteriorly with strongly toothed or serrated rear marginal scutes. Three, low longitudinal keels or ridges are present in juvenile and to subadult turtles, but become much more smoothed out or inconspicuous in older turtles. Their plastrons are very small and reduced in size, and are usually a pale yellowish cruciform shape with much of the soft undersides of the body and limbs exposed. The scales on the fore and hind limbs are large and plate-like. As with most turtles, North American Snapping Turtles are toothless, and instead have hardened, bony, keratinized beaks and horny plates along the maxilla and premaxillae on the inside of the mouth. Also as with most aquatic turtles, the reddish to pinkish tongue is fixed to the inside of the mouth, and does not move freely or protrude outside of the mouth.

The head is very large and broad, and the beaks or jaws are massive, with a pointed snout. The long, snake-like neck and thick, fleshy limbs are stout, with fleshy, warty tubercles throughout. The toes are fully webbed, and large fore and hind claws are also almost always evident. The tail is very long, the longest of any species of turtle as adults in Wisconsin, plated with large ventral scales on the bottom, and one to three rows of large, plate like keels or osteoderms on the dorsum of the tail. Two fleshy barbels are also usually present on the chin.

Male and female North American Snapping Turtles are similar in their size and appearance; however, males have longer, thicker tails than do the females, and the cloacal opening in males is located further posterior to the rear marginal edge of the carapace whereas the cloacal opening in females is directly beneath the carapace. Hatchling North American Snapping Turtles are similar in appearance to the

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adults, but have much more strongly keeled carapaces, gray ventral surfaces, and the tail is about as long as the carapace or longer, causing them to be confused with Alligator Snapping Turtles (*Macrochelys temminckii*). Alligator Snapping Turtles, however, DO NOT occur in, or anywhere near Wisconsin.



*Plastron, © Turtlewife Blog*

When opened, the mouths are large, and are notched at the tips of the upper and/or lower jaws. The carapace color of North American Snapping Turtles usually ranges from a light brown, dark brown, olive-green, or blackish or dark grayish, and may often be covered with mud or algae. The skin on the head, neck, and limbs, and tails, range from brown to dark greenish on the dorsal areas, and more lighter yellowish, pinkish, reddish, or grayish on the ventral areas. The areas around the mouth and jaws may also be light colored. No subspecies of the North American Snapping Turtle are currently recognized.



*© WDNR.*

**Range and Distribution:** North American Snapping Turtles have a very large and broad distribution over the United States and Canada, from southern Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Quebec, and Nova Scotia, throughout the eastern and central United States, as far west as to Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico. Introduced, scattered populations also occur in the western U.S. In Wisconsin, North American Snapping Turtles are widespread, and can be found statewide. They are one of the most common, familiar, and widespread turtle species in Wisconsin.

**Habitat:** North American Snapping Turtles are aquatic habitat generalists, and can be found in nearly any type of permanent to semi-permanent wetland or body of water. These may include small springs, or spring fed creeks, ponds, roadside ditches, bogs and marshes, swamps, large lakes and flowages, rivers, floodplain wetlands and river backwaters or backwater sloughs, and impoundments. They may also be found in more temporary or artificial ponds or wetlands as well, but generally seem to prefer areas with

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muddy bottoms and dense aquatic vegetation. North American Snapping Turtles are also not affected significantly by severely polluted or degraded waters and habitats, and can be found in these types of environments as well. There are very few, if any, types of aquatic habitats in which North American Snapping Turtles do not, or cannot live in.

**Feeding and Diet:** North American Snapping Turtles are omnivorous; being opportunistic and feeding on a wide variety of algae and other aquatic plants, small fish, amphibians and their eggs and larvae, other smaller reptiles such as smaller snakes and hatchling turtles, aquatic insects and insect larvae, crustaceans such as crayfish, snails and other mollusks, leeches and other worms, or carrion (dead and decaying plant and animal matter). They may also even take small mammals or small birds such as young waterfowl, on occasion. North American Snapping Turtles may be sedentary, acting as ambush predators, or they may more actively hunt for and stalk for their food. As with most turtles, feeding takes place underwater. Much more details into the diets and feeding and dietary behaviors of North American Snapping Turtles are also highlighted in Vogt's 1981 publication.

North American Snapping Turtles are still occasionally negatively blamed to have negative impacts on local game and sport fish and/or local waterfowl populations through their predation of fish, and small birds. However, studies have shown that the compositions of these prey in a North American Snapping Turtle's diets is only a small portion of their diets. This makes their reputations for having significant impacts on waterfowl or fish population declines mostly untrue. North American Snapping Turtles are important and beneficial components of their aquatic ecosystems, which help ensure fish and waterfowl populations are kept in check, while also consuming many other plant and animal food, leading to these large turtles acting as much greater benefits to the environment than the occasional game fish or duckling that they may consume.

**Natural History:** North American Snapping Turtles are generalists in their natural history, and can be active both during the day and at night. They emerge from their overwintering sites buried underneath the mud or bottom sediments of their wetlands, in beaver or muskrat lodges or dams, or from within the banks from about mid-April, and are active throughout the year until October or November. They can sometimes, however, be seen swimming underneath the ice on warmer days during the winter. Generally, during the day during their active seasons, North American Snapping Turtles remain relatively inactive, laying or burying themselves in the bottom mud or vegetation in shallow water waiting to ambush smaller prey.

North American Snapping Turtles may also forage for food by floating slowly just beneath the surface of the water, or they may crawl along the bottoms in search of prey more actively. North American Snapping Turtles are slow and inefficient swimmers, spending more of their time and locomotion crawling along the bottom. They also are less active baskers than most other turtles, usually only floating on the surface or low submerged vegetation as a means of basking, although they can sometimes be seen basking on low emerging logs, rocks, or on shorebanks basking, often with other turtles.

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During most of the year, North American Snapping Turtles are highly aquatic, seldom leaving the water except to travel or disperse over land to new habitats during the spring (in the case of males and juvenile turtles), adult females moving over land in search of sandy or gravelly nesting sites in open, sunny exposed locations. North American Snapping Turtles have been recorded to stray as much as about 1.9 miles or greater away from water, usually from mid-to-late May, through July. North American Snapping Turtles usually reach sexual maturity at around 5 to 7 years, and copulation and mating can take place throughout the year, although usually most often during the spring or fall just after, or just before overwintering. The females will usually deposit or lay anywhere from about 10 to 96 round, spherical “ping pong” ball-like eggs constructed in nests using their hind feet and claws.

These nests may be dug on hillsides, along road-beds or road-shoulders, riverbanks, sand banks of lakes or flowages, or along sandbars, usually in the late morning or early to late evening. Only one clutch of eggs is usually laid annually, and the hatchlings usually begin to hatch by late August or September. Hatchling North American Snapping Turtles may also overwinter in their nests and emerge to disperse the following spring, depending on the area. Nests may also be made in beaver or muskrat lodges or dams as well.

North American Snapping Turtles are well-known for their reputations for being foul-tempered and irascible when encountered on land, or when removed from the water. They will readily turn to face their threat, hissing with their mouths wide open, and will use their long necks and strong, powerful jaws to readily bite should the threat come too close. They are able to rapidly expel air as they force their heads and necks back into their shells, and they are also able to lunge forward. North American Snapping Turtles have very strong and sharply edged jaws and hooked beaks which can cause a painful bite or lacerations should their jaws be able to make contact, although reports of them being able to sever limbs and appendages is probably doubtful, or questionable, at best. When in the water, North American Snapping Turtles are usually much more reluctant to bite, opting more often to swim away or retreat into the mud or vegetation, and reports of them being a threat to swimmers, boaters, and other water users are also not substantiated. There are no known reports of them biting defensively when in the water. They may also emit a foul-smelling musky substance from glands along their bridges as well.

Although they are a common species in Wisconsin, and over much of their range, North American Snapping Turtles are still threatened by overexploitation and overharvesting in some areas, for their meats and and/or shells via the turtle trapping industry, particularly when they may congregate in large numbers in their overwintering places. Nest over-predation, and roadway and highway mortality also can significantly impact North American Snapping Turtle, and other species of turtle populations.

North American Snapping Turtle eggs and hatchlings are most susceptible to a large number of different predators. Many different species of birds, including large wading birds, large fish, snakes, sometimes other turtles, large amphibians such as North American Bullfrogs, large predatory or carnivorous aquatic invertebrates such as waterbugs, and a wide array of carnivorous mammals such as raccoons, opossums, skunks weasels, skunks, foxes, and coyotes and otters will all readily eat hatchling turtles or turtle eggs.

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Adult North American Snapping Turtles have very few natural predators, but can still be eaten by some carnivorous mammals on occasion, such as otters, as well as humans.

**Conservation Status:** In Wisconsin, North American Snapping Turtles are listed as “Common”. They are still regulated and protected along with all other of Wisconsin’s herptiles, however under N.R. 16 and 19.275 as well as N.R. 21 and 22. North American Snapping Turtles are currently not protected or regulated federally. North American Snapping Turtles are currently IUCN Red-List Least Concern (LC).