

Snapping Turtle

Chelydra serpentina



Status: **Special Concern**

Threats:

- ◆ Chemical contamination
- ◆ Low reproductive output; nest predation
- ◆ Road mortality (adults) and road maintenance (nests and hatchlings)
- ◆ Habitat loss due to diminishing wetlands
- ◆ Harvesting
- ◆ Persecution



Photo: Joe Crowley



Photo: Scott Gillingwater

Description:

- ◆ Largest turtle in Canada; length up to 40 cm; weighs 4.5-16 kg
- ◆ Carapace is light brown to black and often covered with algae
- ◆ Plastron is yellowish, small and cross-shaped; legs and skin not well protected
- ◆ Young turtles have three longitudinal keels; older turtles are almost smooth
- ◆ Long tail and large head, two barbells on neck
- ◆ Head, limbs and tail are brown
- ◆ Tail is same length or longer than carapace with "dinosaur-like" triangular scales projecting from the upper side
- ◆ Poor swimmers; prefer to walk along the bottom

Biology:

- ◆ Only aggressive when threatened on land; will swim away from danger and people when in the water
- ◆ Lays 20-40 round, ping-pong ball-like eggs in sandy areas
- ◆ Leaves the water infrequently
- ◆ Are scavengers; eat primarily carrion
- ◆ Takes 15-20 years to reach maturity

Habitat:

- ◆ Live in any freshwater source, but prefer slow moving waterways such as ponds, sloughs, shallow bays, river edges, shallow streams
- ◆ Hibernates underwater, buried by logs, sticks, debris in small streams that flow continuously through the winter or buried deep in mud covered with vegetation
- ◆ Often takes advantage of man-made sites, such as gravel road shoulders, for nesting

Species at Risk
STEWARDS' GUIDE SERIES

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Turtle on the road?
**Here's How
You Can Help:**

Snapping Turtle on Your Property? **Here's What You Can Do:**

- ◆ Protect nest sites by observing from a distance. Nesting season in Ontario is from late May to late June. Female turtles dig their nests and lay their eggs in sandy, well drained soil. Eggs usually hatch in September.
- ◆ Keep nesting sites intact for next year as Snapping turtles often return to the same nesting site.
- ◆ Don't cover Snapping turtle nests: they need specific temperatures if hatching is to be successful. Covering the nest could result in cooler temperatures and the eggs might not have time to hatch before the fall freeze.
- ◆ Keep your wetlands intact! Snapping turtles and other animals depend on this valuable habitat.
- ◆ Sit back, relax, and enjoy knowing you have provided suitable habitat for one of Ontario's precious turtles!
- ◆ **See a turtle?** Tell Turtle Tally! If you see an at risk turtle (live or dead) submit your sighting to Ontario Turtle Tally: www.torontozoo.com/adoptapond/TurtleTally.asp. You can also submit your sighting to the Natural Heritage Information Centre at nhic.mnr.gov.on.ca/MNR/nhic/species/species_report.cfm. Every turtle sighting you report helps protect Ontario's turtles and the places they live.



Juvenile
Photo: Joe Crowley

◆ **Learn more.** Check out the Species at Risk section on the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources website at www.mnr.gov.on.ca.



Photo: Joe Crowley



Photo: Scott Gillingwater

- ◆ Watch for traffic! Make sure it is safe to pull over and help the turtle without putting yourself at risk.
- ◆ Move the turtle in the direction it's going. If you don't, it will probably turn around and try again.
- ◆ Don't lift a turtle by its tail. Turtles are heavy; you could dislocate vertebrae. Don't drag turtles - they get road rash!
- ◆ A turtle smaller than a dinner plate can be picked up by the shell. Grasp the shell on either side of the tail at 5 and 7 o'clock. If you have gloves, wear them.
- ◆ Larger turtles are more challenging. If possible, toss a towel or blanket over its head. Turtles that can't see you, can't bite you. The turtle can then be picked up in the same way as above.
- ◆ If you can't lift it and have a shovel handy, try gently sliding the shovel under the back end of the turtle. You can then either shovel the turtle onto a second blanket and drag it across the road or slowly push the turtle across the road on the shovel. If using a shovel to move a turtle, keep it very low to the ground in case the turtle moves.
- ◆ Snapping turtles secrete a smelly musk when handled. Hold them away from your body.
- ◆ It is best not to move a turtle from the general area where it is attempting to cross the road. Turtles do make overland movements away from wetlands; however, if the area is highly developed or the risk of the turtle moving onto another road is high, then moving the turtle to the nearest wetland is probably the best option.
- ◆ Wash your hands after handling a turtle.