



Mr. Misunderstood

Snapping turtles are not so scary and definitely important

By Meredith Karcz, Conservation Technician

For many people, encountering a snapping turtle while swimming, on the road, or on the land can be a scary experience. Many people fear that the turtle will snap at them, and that their bite will take off a finger or toe! Fear of this species is common because of the misconception that the Common Snapping Turtle (the only Snapping turtle found in Canada), is aggressive. But, in reality, the Common Snapping Turtle is not aggressive at all. In water, they will completely avoid confrontation by burying



themselves in sediment or swimming away when they feel the least bit intimidated. And on land, they only act in defense- and even then, they are not as harmful as you may think.

When on land, Snapping Turtles are not able to escape quickly or hide when they encounter a threat because unlike other turtles, Snapping Turtles cannot retreat into their shells for protection. Their large head, tail, and limbs do not fit inside their shell- their bottom shell (plastron) is relatively too small as compared to other turtles. So when they feel threatened by a potential predator on land, they will snap out of self-defense – but not because of aggression or for any hunting instincts. Also, even if they snap at you, they cannot take off a finger or a toe because Common Snapping turtle beak's do not have the required jaw strength: their average strength is 208-226 Newton. Meanwhile adult humans with molars are between 280 and 300 Newton. This means that a Common Snapping Turtle, may be able to break skin, but cannot bite through ligaments. In fact, they cannot even break an average carrot in half.

As long as you respect a Common Snapping Turtle's space when on land, or if you encounter them when they are in water, a Snapping Turtle will have no reason to be defensive. So now, that you are not as nervous, you may wish to approach a turtle on land to help it across roads for instance. An important thing to know is that you should never lift a turtle by its tail! A turtle's tail is part of their spine, and lifting them this way can dislocate their spine and cause permanent damage. Other useful facts are that Snapping Turtles cannot reach their heads



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behind their back legs or under their shells. This means there are ways to lift them or handle them without fear of their snap! Check out the Turtle Guardians website, or partner websites for instructional videos.

Now that we have dispelled the myth that Common Snapping Turtles are scary, let's talk about why they are so important. Snapping turtles are the best cleaning crews for our lakes and ponds. When snapping turtles are in lakes, we have more assurance that the water is safe for swimming. This is because, while Snapping Turtles are omnivores, eating both plants and animals and including fish, frogs, insects, crayfish, and even small birds, they are also amazing scavengers. Snappers eat any dead and decaying animals they find along the bottom of lake and ponds. By removing decaying and potentially diseased animals, they play a vital and irreplaceable role in keeping the water healthy and free of harmful bacteria.



Turtles are also essential to the future health of our aquatic ecosystems in other ways: They spread seeds! This critical and essential ecological service provided by Snapping Turtles (and other turtles) means that there are more aquatic plants to filter nutrients, clean water, and provide fish habitat in our lakes and wetlands for future generations. How do they do this?

Aquatic plants and seeds make up a

large portion of the Common Snapping Turtle's diet. Researchers have found that seeds which have passed through a turtle's gut will germinate successfully (Kimmons and Moll 2010).

Considering that Snapping Turtles will migrate up to 3.9 km to return to hibernation sites, and that females will travel up to 2 km to nesting sites, this species' capability of dispersing aquatic plant species is significant (Brown and Brooks 1994, Petit et al. 1995). The seeds that they spread result in a proliferation of aquatic vegetation, which in turn, provides habitat and food for many species, prevents shoreline erosion, adds oxygen to the water, removes excess nutrients from the water column helping to keep algal blooms in check, and more. Snapping Turtles' integral role of spreading seeds helps to keep aquatic communities healthy and diverse.

So the next time you encounter a Snapping Turtle, remind yourself that there is no reason to be afraid of this awesome animal. Instead, from a respectful distance, muse at its fine details, such as the three rows of triangular bony plates on its dinosaur-like tail, its smiling beak, bright eyes,



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or angular shell (carapace). This species of turtle descends from ancestors who roamed the earth during the Late Cretaceous Period alongside the dinosaurs. Your next chance to spot Snapping Turtles in The Land Between will be in the spring- in early May as they emerge from their overwintering sites. Watch for them along roads and if it is safe to do so, help them across, because they are important and irreplaceable helpers. Weed them to stick around!

If you see a Snapping Turtle, note the location, take a picture and report the observation through our Turtle Guardian App or at <https://www.turtleguardians.com/sighting-report-form/> so that we can understand where to install crossing signs, turtle tunnel fencing, and which habitats need to be conserved.

References

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