

Turtles

Prepared by the National Wildlife Control Training Program. <http://WildlifeControlTraining.com>

Researched-based, certified wildlife control training programs to solve human – wildlife conflicts.

Your source for animal handling, control methods, and wildlife species information.



Figure 1a. The common snapping turtle (*Chelydra serpentina*). Photo by Chelsi Hornbaker, US-Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).



Figure 1b. Alligator snapping turtle (*Macrochelys temminckii*). Photo by Gary M. Stoltz, USFWS. (South Carolina is not in the range for Alligator snapping turtles – remove?)

Species Overview

Conflicts

When conflicts arise, they usually are related to a perceived concern of excessive numbers rather

than any concrete damage to property or livestock. Common snapping turtles (*Chelydra serpentina*), however, are one exception. They can prey on waterfowl and fish. In addition, some landowners do not like the excavations made by females for laying eggs.

Legal Status

Currently in South Carolina there is no permit needed to harvest turtles.

Identification

Fifty-one species of land turtles separated into 6 families reside in the US. Only turtles from the Emydidae (pond turtles), Trionychidae (softshell turtles), Kinosternidae (mud turtles), and Chelydridae (snapping turtles) families have significance for nuisance complaints. Within these families, most species cause no conflicts with humans.

Physical Description

The common snapping turtle (hereafter referred to as snapping turtle), like most turtles, has four legs that can be drawn into a protective shell. Snapping turtles have a rough upper shell with a saw-toothed edge along the rear end of the shell. The bottom shell is cross-shaped. Its shell is easily distinguished from the spiked shell characteristic of the alligator snapping turtle.

Snapping turtles can range in weight from 10 to 35 pounds. Their shells range in length from 8 to 18½ inches. The necks, legs, and tails of snapping

turtles have a yellowish color but their head is dark.

Species Range

Snapping turtles occur from the Gulf of Mexico to southern Alberta to Nova Scotia.

Health and Safety Concerns

Snapping turtles are not considered to pose disease threats to humans or other animals. Snapping turtles, however, have a powerful bite that can inflict serious injury. Snapping turtles kept in captivity may carry salmonella.

General Biology, Reproduction, and Behavior

Reproduction

Snapping turtles are solitary animals. Mating occurs in shallow water about 6 weeks prior to females laying eggs. Males do not remain with females.

Nesting occurs from late May to mid-June in southern states, to as late as mid-June to early July in northern sites. Gravid females engage in a pre-nesting migration, traveling up to 9 miles to wetlands adjacent to nesting sites. Females lay one clutch of 26 to 55 eggs per year.

Nesting/Denning Cover

Female snapping turtles travel away from water to areas with minimal vegetation, sandy soil, and sun exposure. The female scrapes out a shallow hole to lay eggs.

Behavior

Snapping turtles generally are active during the warmer months and stop feeding when water temperatures reach 63°F. They settle into the shallow portion of bottom of lakes, ponds, or rivers to a depth of 12 to 39 inches. Shallow streams are preferred.

Snapping turtles do bask but not to the extent of other species of turtles. Basking occurs more frequently in areas with colder water.

Snapping turtles can travel overland and have been found to travel 165 yards in a single day.

Habitat

Snapping turtles live in lakes, ponds, streams, rivers, and other fresh water environments with muddy bottoms and vegetation. They also may be found in brackish and polluted waters. In contrast, alligator snapping turtles prefer streams or rivers with greater depth, physical structure, warmer water, and detritus.

Food Habits

Snapping turtles are ambush predators, taking annelids, crustaceans, insects, amphibians, reptiles, ducks, and muskrats that move into striking range. Snapping turtles do consume some plant material such as duckweed.

Voice, Sounds, Tracks, and Signs

Snapping turtles typically are silent but can hiss when threatened. In soft soils, half-moon shaped claws print patterns accompanied by a tail drag line will be signify a snapping turtle trail.

Damage Identification

Damage to Landscapes

Turtle damage to landscapes is limited to the digging of nests.

Damage to Crops and Livestock

Many people think turtles eliminate fish from farm ponds, but research suggests that predation by turtles is not significant enough to affect fish populations. Avoid eliminating turtles across large bodies of water as their scavenging plays an important role in keeping the water clean.

Successive disappearance of individual ducklings and fish may signify the presence of snapping turtles.

Damage to Structures

Turtles do not damage structures.

Damage Prevention and Control Methods

Habitat Modification

Most types of habitat modification are too expensive and too damaging to the environment to implement on a broad scale. In small locales, eliminate plant growth that would provide cover as well as debris used for basking. Dredge ponds and rivers to remove the muddy bottoms preferred by snapping turtles.

Snapping turtles movement can be curtailed by cutting banks to 90°. Banks embedded with large rocks can inhibit access to nesting areas also.

Exclusion

Exclusion of turtles from ponds and other bodies of water is not practical. Drift fences 1 ft high and buried 6 to 8 inches into grade, however, will prevent turtles from accessing protected areas.

Frightening Devices

None have been found to be effective.

Repellents

None have been found to be effective.

Toxicants

None are available.

Shooting

Shooting can reduce populations of turtles in small ponds. The technique is most appropriate with turtles that bask or stay near the water surface, such as mud turtles (*Kinosternidae*). Air rifles (.177-caliber or above) have sufficient power to take turtles when targeting their heads. Shooting requires special attention to safety due to the risk of ricochet. Consult state and local laws before shooting to ensure legality.

Trapping

The use of traps is very effective for reducing local populations of turtles when turtles are not hibernating. Consult your state agency for restrictions. Place traps in quiet water areas of streams and ponds, or in the shallow water of lakes. Traps set in streams must be anchored. If the water is too deep for the top of the trap to be out of the water, lash short logs to each side to float the trap. Snappers and soft-shelled turtles also may be taken readily in baited fyke or hoop nets (Figure 2).

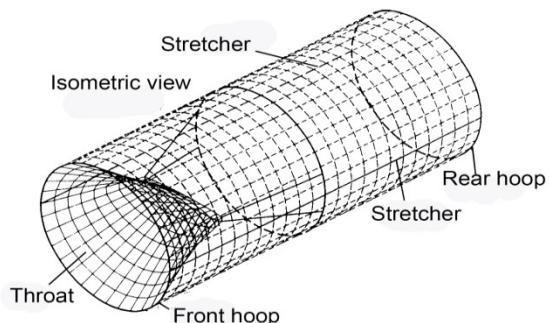


Figure 2. Hoop trap for turtles. Image by Prevention and Control of Wildlife Damage (PCWD).

The trap should be 4 to 6 feet long from front to back of the hoop and made with No. 24 nylon seine twine. Bait traps by suspending a line attached to an oily fish, such as Asian carp, at the end farthest from the opening of the trap. Turtles enter more readily when the mouth of the trap is set downstream.

For box, pond, and marsh turtles, use a box sunk where the turtles are located. The turtles will crawl onto the top of the box to bask in the sun and fall into the trap. Another version uses a box with an inclined board leading up to it. Turtles climb on the board to bask and drop into the box.

Snappers and soft-shelled turtles may be taken on set lines baited with cut fish or other fresh meat.

Other Methods

Turtles can be removed directly. For most turtles, simply grab them by the shell. Snapping turtles (including the Alligator turtle) require care to avoid being bitten. Snappers may be grasped safely by the tail, but this technique can be difficult to sustain and may injure the turtles. A preferable method is to approach the turtle from the rear, and place one hand on the back portion of the shell. Reach over with your other hand, knuckles facing the top of the snapping turtle's head with fingers cupped, to grasp the top end of the shell (Figure 3). Use your knuckles to keep its head down. Release by quickly moving your hands to the rear of the turtle to avoid being bitten.



Figure 3. Proper hand position for grasping the shell of a snapping turtle (alligator snapping turtle pictured). Photo by Stephen M. Vantassel.

Disposition

Relocation

Limit moving turtles to situations involving rescue, such as when they are crossing a street. Move a turtle in the direction it was walking, provided you can do so safely.

Translocation

Translocation is not permitted in South Carolina.

Euthanasia

Euthanasia by carbon dioxide is suitable for snapping turtle but can take hours for them to die due to their ability to tolerate CO₂. Shooting is effective if conditions permit. Place a bullet (.22-caliber) at the middle of the widest part of the head.

Resources

Government or private agencies, universities, extension service.

Web Resources

<http://intranet.dnr.sc.gov>
<http://wildlifecontroltraining.com>
<http://icwdm.org/>
<http://wildlifecontrol.info>

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