



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

*Chel-lie-dra ser-pent-tina*



**Description:** The Common snapping turtle is a large, aquatic to semi aquatic turtle with a blackish brown, to gray carapace ranging from 8 to 19 inches with raised keels that often smoothen in older specimens and often is coated with mud and/or algae. The rear marginal scutes are distinctly serrated, and the head, neck, and limbs are fairly large, sometimes with a pale orange ocular stripe. The pale yellowish plastron is small and much reduced, and the tail is long and muscular with raised osteoderms.

### **Taxonomy and Classification:**

**Life:** All living, physical, and animate entities

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**Domain:** Eukaryota  
**Kingdom:** Animalia  
**Phylum:** Chordata/Vertebrata  
**Class:** Reptilia  
**Order:** Testudines  
**Suborder:** Cryptodira  
**Family:** Chelydridae  
**Genus:** Chelydra  
**Species:** *Chelydra serpentina*\*

\*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

**Similar/Confusing Species:** Eastern musk turtles (*Sternotherus odoratus*) are much smaller as adults, lack serrated rear marginal scutes, lack a long tail with jagged scutes and scales, and tend to have higher, more domed, or oblong carapaces.

**Etymology:** Chelydra- Chelyros (tortoise, turtle, or water serpent). serpentina-serpentinus (snake).

**Subspecies:** None currently.

**Range & Habitat:** Common snapping turtles are a common and widespread turtle in Wisconsin, being found statewide. They prefer permanent to semi-permanent bodies of water with ample aquatic vegetation and mucky bottoms including lakes, ponds, marshes, rivers, streams, and backwater sloughs.

**Habits & Natural History:** Common snapping turtles are known for their surly dispositions when cornered on land or when moving across roads in May to Early July as females search for sandy areas to nest. Handling or moving these turtles should be avoided or done so carefully when necessary. Despite their reputation, snapping turtles do not go out of their way to attack people, and are not a major threat. These sluggish turtles spend a great deal of time in the water, and are largely carnivorous, feeding on fish, frogs, small snakes, aquatic insects and other invertebrates, and carrion. They bask less out of water less frequently than other turtles, and often float on the surface.

**Phenology:** Common snapping turtles will begin emerging from overwintering and mating as early as early April through May, and remain active throughout the year through September or October (or sometimes even later in the year if warmer temperatures persist or otherwise permit). Many Wisconsin turtles begin moving over land and are often encountered during May through early July as they search for sandy nesting sites.

**Conservation Status:** WI Common, but regulated by WI DNR with some bag limit restrictions, and may be declining in some areas. IUCN Red List Least Concern (LC).

### **Contact**

Authored by Eric Roscoe. For any additional questions, comments, and/or concerns regarding this

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species, group of species, or this informational sheet, please email and contact the Madison Area Herpetological Society at [info@madisonherps.org](mailto:info@madisonherps.org)

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