

This time of year, please help out the turtles that must cross highways

When spring arrives, everything that was dormant over the winter comes alive. Mother Nature has a pattern, and all of her little creatures, without the thought process that we humans possess, react to instinct. As custodians of the ecological world, we also have responsibilities to ensure that these animals are allotted the space they need to survive.



by Roland D. Hallee

SCORES & OUTDOORS

Snapping turtles, *Chelydra serpentina*, will eat nearly anything that they can get their jaws around. They feed on carrion, invertebrates, fish, birds, small mammals, amphibians, and a surprisingly large amount of aquatic vegetation. They will kill other turtles by decapitation. This behavior might be territorial towards other turtles or a very insufficient feeding behavior.

So every year, when the turtles begin their mating season, we have to be aware of what their routines are. When you see a turtle crossing the highway, that does not make it a target for "road kill." Remember, the turtle has its migration route; we're the ones that put a road through it.



A good Samaritan in Waterville, aided by Lori Hawk, of China, and granddaughter Aimee, helped this snapping turtle across the road, saving it from sure death.

Photo submitted by Deb Hamel

If you see a turtle crossing the roadway, please take the time to help it out without causing an accident. Make sure the way is clear, note the direction in which it is headed, pick it up and place it on the side of the road in that direction. If you put it on the other side, it will attempt to cross the road again. Merely put your thumbs on the back of its shell and other fingers on its belly. That's all there is. Don't put your hand around its mouth because you will find out why they are called "snapping" turtles. Turtles seek sandy areas to lay and incubate their eggs.

That was done recently by a good Samaritan in Waterville. At around 2 p.m. on May 5, Lori Hawk, of China, and her granddaughter Aimee, saw a huge turtle (turned out to be a snapping turtle) crossing the road from Pizza Hut to Central Maine Motors on Kennedy Memorial Drive. Lori stopped a man who came down that street so he wouldn't hit it, and he picked it up and helped it along.

The snapping turtle normally has a shell length ranging from 8 to 18-1/2 inches with a tail nearly as long as the shell. Several years back, while fishing on Webber Pond in a small 12-foot aluminum boat, I was startled when a "snapper" followed my bait up to the vessel. It surfaced like a submarine and was perhaps the largest turtle I had ever seen, measuring approximately 20 inches across.

The shell of the snapper ranges in color from dark brown to tan and can even be black in some individuals. They have characteristic tubercles on their necks and legs. Plastrons (breast plates) of the snapping turtle are very small and leave much of the extremities exposed. They cannot completely retract into their shell.

Snapping turtles mate from April to November. Once the eggs have developed sufficiently in the female, she excavates a hole, normally in sandy soil, and lays as many as 80 eggs. It is not unusual to see turtles dig their nest on the sandy shoulder on the side of secondary roads.

The eggs take 9-18 weeks to hatch, depending on the weather. Interestingly, female snapping turtles sometimes store sperm for several years. That allows individuals to mate at any time of the year independent of female ovulation, and it also allows females to lay eggs every season without needing a mate.

Snapping turtles are not social creatures. Social interactions are limited to aggressive interactions between individuals, usually males. They become very vicious when removed from

the water, but they become docile once replaced. They bury themselves in mud with only their nostrils and eyes exposed. This is used as a means of ambushing prey.

Snapping turtles have a small growth on the front of their tongues that resembles a wiggling worm. To capture fish, the turtle opens its mouth to make the "worm" visible. When a fish comes to investigate the lure, the turtle grabs it with its strong jaws.

Snapping turtles only live in fresh or brackish water. They prefer bodies of water with muddy bottoms and abundant vegetation because concealment is easier.

Snapping turtles are used by many people in turtle stews and soups. Their shells were used in many ceremonies among Native Americans. The shells were dried and mounted on handles with corn kernels inside for use as rattles.

On the negative side, snapping turtles consume the young of some game fish. The impact of snapping turtles on these populations, however, are minimal. They are also known to kill young and adult ducks and geese, but once again, the effects are slight.

In general, turtle populations are in danger and need our help. So please, the next time you see one in the road, help it out. You'll feel pretty good about yourself.

Roland's trivia question of the week:

Before Dallas Braden on May 9, when was the last perfect game pitched in the major leagues? Answer on page 15.

Play ball!



Baseball season is underway in both Little League and Junior High Leagues. Top left, Winslow seventh grade baseball player David Grant hustles up the first base line during a game against Lawrence on May 7. Top, Ben Frazee, of Lawrence Junior High, gets set for a pitch during the same game against Winslow. Left, Ryan Gagnon focuses on a pitch during a Winslow Little League game on May 8. Gagnon plays for Gagnon Chiropractic.

Photos by Mark Huard/Central Maine Photography

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