

The Turtle's Pace

For a few years, my youngest daughter had a fascination with turtles. This very same child now lives in the Cities, and is studying to become a veterinarian. But at the time, her world was smaller and something sort of inexplicable drew her to these shelled creatures. So for a while we had an old, metal dishpan on my kitchen table. In it was a snapping turtle. He lived on meat scraps and spent his time going round and round in circles. Every now and then the dishpan would be empty, which meant that he had managed to escape again, and we should look around for him on the floor.

My father-in-law, who is a man with his own, unique pace, got in on the girl's turtle interest. One day after we had released the one that lived on our table, Grandpa Ralph showed up with another turtle for Libby. Fortunately, he also provided a wire mesh basket, which we used to house the turtle in the garden for a while. I'm not quite clear on where Ralph found this turtle, but I can picture him driving slowly along keeping one eye out for a turtle opportunity. It would be the sort of thing that would interest him.

As you drive the roads of the Chippewa National Forest these days, try keeping a look out for turtles. This is the time of year when we see them along our forest roads and highways. Judging by the numbers of turtles we see that have been smashed by traffic, one has to think roads aren't a great place for them to hang out. So, what in the world are these turtles up to?

I see primarily two species of turtles along the roads of the Chippewa: painted turtles and snapping turtles. Snapping turtles are aptly named, due to their cranky nature and strong bite. A very aquatic species, snappers spend a lot of time just floating around in the water with their long necks extended, nostrils barely above water. Male snapping turtles maintain territories they defend against each other, and have been known to remain on territory for over 10 years. Because they are intolerant of high temperatures, snappers do not spend as much time basking in the sun as do some other turtle species. Unless you spend a lot of time around water, you will mostly notice snapping turtles in June and July, when they come on land to lay their eggs. Female snapping turtles sometimes make lengthy trips to suitable open areas, such as sandy banks, fields, road banks, and lawns, in which they put their nests. They dig a nest with their hind legs, perhaps 4 to 7 inches deep, and lay 20 – 30 leathery-shelled eggs. No nest tending is done by Mama Snapper, and she moves back to the water once her eggs are laid.



Baby snapping turtle headed to the lake

The eggs hatch in 50 to 125 days, depending on the weather. It is an interesting fact that low temperatures result in primarily male baby turtles upon hatching; high temperatures produce

more females. In Minnesota, the quarter-sized hatchling snapping turtles must exit their nests by fall, because they cannot survive our winter temperatures.

Snappers often congregate in large numbers to overwinter below the ice in places like muskrat tunnels, steams, and holes in river beds. They bury themselves in decaying vegetation and mud, and wait out freezing weather. They are sometimes seen moving around slowly under the ice. One of our favorite things to do when the children were small was to look for the first sound, clear ice, and skate around with a lantern at night. Much fun can be had in this manner, watching turtles and fish moving under the ice.

Painted turtles are the turtles you see resting on logs in the water, basking in the sun. These turtles will bask for a couple of hours at a time, and you may even see them stacked on top of one another 2 or 3 turtles high. They are called “painted” because their undersides are orange or red.

Like the snapping turtle, painted turtles eat a wide variety of foods, including insects, crayfish, snails, frogs, fish eggs, fish, carrion, aquatic plants, and the like. Painted turtles also emerge from water to lay their eggs, generally May through July. Their nests are also constructed in open areas with loose soil, and contain perhaps 8 or 9 eggs. Double clutching, or the laying of two nests in a season, has been found for painted turtles, even in northern Minnesota.

It takes about 72 -80 days for painted turtles to hatch, and the turtles sometimes do not emerge from the nest that summer, but hatch and remain in the nest over the winter. I observed this at my home one year, when snow plowing unearthed a nest of baby turtles during the middle of winter. Those tiny turtles would have come out on their own in the spring.

Snappers and painted turtles can live 30 or 40 years in the wild, and somewhat longer in captivity. You can age a turtle by the rings on its shell. The oldest known snapping turtle is 79 years old. Both turtle species experience very high predation rates on their nests, as a variety of mammals will dig up and eat their eggs. Many kinds of animals, birds and even fish enjoy young, small turtles. These turtles do not begin to reproduce until they are 5 or more years old. Adult snapping turtles have few predators other than humans and their automobiles. Automobiles kill many thousands of turtles each year.

Although the vehicles we drive are built for speed, not everything moves at 60 miles an hour. Not all people; certainly not turtles. If you want to experience life more fully, sometimes you need to slow down a little. At whatever speed you move, maybe you want to consider giving those that move at a different pace a break.

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