

Eastern Snapping Turtle  
For 5/31/19  
By Ashley Adair

Turtles are on the move. Sightings of a few different kinds of turtles are increasing as we head deeper into spring and eventually into the beginnings of summer. Just in the last few days, we have been seeing an abundance of snapping turtles, one of the largest turtles found in the Midwest.



*Eastern snapping turtle seen resting near a busy street in West Lafayette, IN. Notice the long tail characteristic of this species.*

The Eastern snapping turtle, *Chelydra serpentina serpentine*, is second only to the alligator snapping turtle in size. Snappers average about 20-25 pounds and can reach anywhere from 8-20 inches in size as adults. Alligator snappers, which are much larger and scarier looking, can reach 200 pounds! Alligator snappers are not typically found in Indiana except in the extreme southern tip of the state.

Snapping turtles typically inhabit a wide variety of aquatic areas. They are commonly found in streams, lakes, ponds, and bays, especially in and around heavy vegetation. This species is not a basker, unlike many of our other common turtles (like softshells, map turtles, and red-eared sliders). You may occasionally see one float to the surface of a pond to catch some rays, but they are not the type to climb atop a log and bask for hours in the warm summer sun. Snapping turtles often have moss and other plant material on their backs because of their habit of staying submerged much of the time.

Snappers are getting out and about as egg laying season kicks into full gear. We will be seeing more traveling long distances as females seek out sandy places to build nests and lay eggs. This will inevitably cause conflict on the roadway as turtles attempt to cross streets and roads to potential nesting sites. Conflict could potentially result in injury or death of the turtle, primarily by cars on the roadway. Some conflict also results in bites to humans who get too close.

The snapping turtle is known for its powerful bite, which is made possible by its sharp “beak.” A bite from a snapping turtle can be very painful, and it can be difficult to remove appendages from its powerful jaws. Snapping turtles typically use these jaws to eat anything that can fit in their mouth, including plants, snails, spiders, small fish, snakes, other turtles, and even the occasional unsuspecting bird.

Generally, handling a snapping turtle should be avoided, because their long necks can bend around and snag fingers and hands that are simply attempting to help. However, if you must handle any turtle, never grab them by their tails, which are not designed to support the weight of the turtle. Always grasp them by the rear part of their carapace, on either side of the tail, and move them in the direction they were originally traveling in.

If you are curious about other turtles found in Indiana and want to learn more, check out Purdue Extension's publication *Turtles of Indiana*, FNR -243.