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Snapping Turtles, Ten Million More Years

Our familiar snapping turtles have been up out of the lakes laying their eggs, often in the soft ground of domestic vegetable gardens, but also on many a sunny gravel bank. How does she decide how far to walk, whether to go back to the same place she went last year, or to the place she herself hatched out months or years ago? We have been asking these questions of the mighty snapper for centuries, following, observing, making notes. There is still plenty to learn about this ancient creature. She has been around for so long, some say our planet rests on her back.

The way the story goes, a learned scientist or maybe a philosopher once lectured on the earth's place in the solar system, giving his audience many of the best and latest ideas to do with galaxies, and cosmology. And some ideas were ancient ones.

Folks were enlightened, maybe puzzled, but at least thoughtful. Except one person immediately stood up to challenge the speaker. The way I first heard it, William James was the lecturer. The challenger said, "Everything you've said is wrong, Mr. James. The world is supported by four giant elephants who stand on the back of a huge turtle."

Some say the learned scientist was Bertrand Russell, or Henry Thoreau, or John Locke. I am sticking with William James, who with a smile asked his challenger, "Ah, but what is the turtle standing on?"

"Another, even larger turtle!"

"But what is that turtle standing on?" They go on for a few rounds until William James puts it to him.

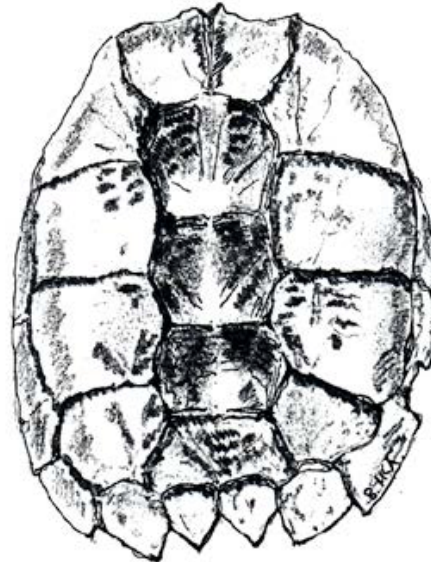
"What about the very last turtle. On what is that turtle standing?"

(Here it comes.)

"It's no use, Mr. James. It's turtles all the way down." Growing up, we loved that line in my family, and used it whenever we needed to settle an argument about anything.

I used to wonder about those turtles. How did they get the gig, the place in such powerful logic?

Anyone who has hosted a snapping turtle, also called a snake tortoise, or a torup, will



*Snapping turtle carapace,
found during winter draw-down
of Lake Garfield.*

recognize at once that this is not a creature for mere science. She goes way, way back and she carries on unchanged for ten million years, so far.

She is a member of the family Chelydridae, and in this country there is only one other species in that family, the alligator snapping turtle. This species might be one of the turtles farther down the tower of turtles in that story. It is even bigger than our snapper, the record being 219 pounds. This is a southern species, down in Georgia, Florida, and Texas. Like ours, she lies on the muddy bottom waiting for something delicious to come along. She has a huge head with hooked beaks on upper and lower mandibles. She lies with her mouth open and has a sort of "lure" on the floor of her mouth. This looks like a pink worm and can be wriggled. In comes the unsuspecting fish.

Our northern snapper is usually ten to thirty-five pounds, much more mobile than the alligator snapper. Ours, too, lies on the muddy bottom like an innocent rock. Often, she has algae growing on her shell, so she blends right in. Along comes a fish or salamander or some juicy aquatic invertebrate, and out

shoots our turtle's head. She has a long strong neck and the same kind of hooked, beaked, mandibles as her southern cousin. This turtle is built for action, even when she is out of the water.

This only happens in the early summer, at egg-laying time. The snapper's legs are long and strong, good for swimming or for walking. Sometimes she goes a quarter of a mile from the lake or pond to find just the right place to dig a nest for eggs. This she does by scooping with her hind feet and backing into the earth cave. Once satisfied with the nest, she raises up a bit and lets out her perfectly spherical eggs, which are an inch across. (See photo on page 28.) There are usually about twenty to thirty eggs in a nest, and when she finishes laying, she moves forward, letting the earth roof settle on top of the nest. Sometimes she will then tamp it down with her plastron, which is the "shell" on her belly. This is small, giving little protection to her soft underparts. Generally, she only needs armor on top, her carapace.

The snapper heads back for the water. In about twelve weeks, those eggs will hatch, but only if some skunk or raccoon or even a hungry person does not find them first. They are edible, and so is the turtle herself. Back in the day, you could buy a snapping turtle in the market and take it home to make soup.

Often, according to our observers who write these things down, all the eggs are dug up and eaten within the first day after they've been laid. Even so, the snapping turtles have a healthy and stable population, a system that works. In their relationship with humans, they have been through periods in history when folks robbed the nests to sell or eat eggs. Or when folks considered snappers to be a strain on populations of ducks and geese. The turtles can pull down a chick or gosling, or even a full-grown Canada goose. Some "sportsmen" may kill off all the snappers in a pond so the ducks and geese will grow up and can be shot and eaten by folks instead of by turtles.

Even so, the turtles look like they are good for another ten million years. They have to be, because it is a very long way down, and they must hold up the world.

— Bonner McAllester