



MONTEREY NEWS



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Snapping Turtle Egg Nests

When the months of spring slide along the coastline into summer, the snapping turtle has risen from the muddy bottom of brackish river tributaries to journey overland to lay her eggs. First the female has to meet and “make love” with the male to fertilize her eggs. However, mother nature has already bestowed upon her a female’s prerogative to change her mind about reproduction. If she feels that conditions are not exactly right for her eggs she is blessed with the ability to store the male’s sperm in her reproductive organs until she feels the time is right.

Temperature is critical. In this time of global warming scientific research has determined that her eggs incubated from about mid-60’s to mid-70° produce only males, mid-70’s to low 80° produce both male and females, and temperatures in the mid-80’s produce only females. Once she felt that the time and temperature were correct, she got the inner green light to head overland as far as a mile or more, often crossing country roads with traffic, in plain view of onlookers. She may return to the same sandy hill she used to reproduce last year.

As in my illustration, in less than a single day she may lay as many as thirty to forty eggs, using her tail to bury them in the sand out of sight of predators. All too often they are found by hungry skunks, raccoons, and crows. If she finds that her treasure trove has been disturbed upon her return the following year, she knows not to use it again. Once she has laid and hidden her eggs she immediately takes off on the very



same path back to the water that she used to get there. All the hard work and important timing is forever finished and left behind her with her future hatchlings to fend for themselves.

The eggs hatch in New England in August through October. Research has found that warmer temperatures after hatching enhance their growth.

The future hatchling snapping turtles (*Chelydra serpentina*) are among the oldest creatures on the face of the earth, having evolved ninety million years ago, during the Age of Dinosaurs, but not related to them. If you should see a snapping turtle crossing a road, please do not waylay or disturb its reproductive intentions.

As an adult slowly crosses the road, or your yard, you might be a witness to mother nature’s ancient renewal, in an unbroken chain of evolutionary history. I hope your observations, and my article

and illustration, will live in your mind as long as I have hoped.

— George B. Emmons