

Alligator Snapping Turtle

Macrolemys (or Macrochelys) temmincki



Imagine a 250 pound prehistoric beast with fearsome hooked jaws, lurking in dark river waters. It lures prey to their doom through stealth and subterfuge, and engulfs them in its gaping maw....

Sounds terrifying, right? Actually it's just your friendly neighborhood alligator snapping turtle, the largest freshwater turtle in the United States. These rarely-seen animals are actually very slow-moving and inoffensive, and are only likely to bite a human in self defense.

Geographic distribution

Alligator snapping turtles are found in rivers that drain into the Gulf of Mexico. The most easterly of these rivers is the Suwannee River in Florida, while the most westerly is Texas' San Antonio River. Their center of distribution is the mighty Mississippi River, and alligator snappers were historically found up the Mississippi all the way to Illinois.

Alligator snappers eat just about anything they can fit in their mouths, including other turtles, acorns, crayfish, and even small alligators. However, much of their diet is fish, which are caught using a lure that would make bass fishermen jealous. The turtle sits very still on the river bottom with its mouth open, and slowly wriggles its specialized pink tongue. This tongue looks just like a worm, and hungry fish are in for a nasty surprise when they swim into the turtle's mouth for a closer look!



Male alligator snapping turtles can reach about 250 lbs and a yard long, and males are much larger than adult females. Mating usually occurs in spring, after which females lay up to about 50 eggs (the average is more like 20 eggs) in nests on land. The babies are only a couple of inches when they hatch, and if they survive to adulthood they may live for over 50 years!

Alligator snappers are in real trouble in many areas, and they deserve conservation attention. They are protected in most states where they occur, but this usually only happened after populations declined due to over hunting for meat markets (in the early 1970's, over three tons *per day* were taken out of the Flint River in Georgia). Many are still slaughtered for food in Louisiana, and remaining populations face problems from pollution and dams on their rivers. This fearsome-looking but gentle animal is a unique part of our biological heritage, and we should work to ensure its survival for the sake of future generations. -- **Bob Reed**