

Hissing Geese, Hungry Snappers

Signboards posted along the Potomac warn unwary bathers and waders of the dangerous undercurrents. The force of the wild, free-flowing river poses no such threat among the Canada geese and mergansers bobbing or diving into the current. They need to take great care instead, ironically, when they lead their recently hatched offspring into the calm, nearly stagnant water of the adjacent C&O Canal. Lurking below the surface, ready to grab a gosling, is perhaps the largest predator of the Potomac region—the common snapping turtle.

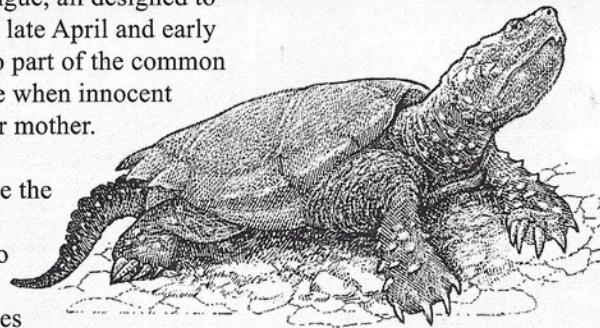
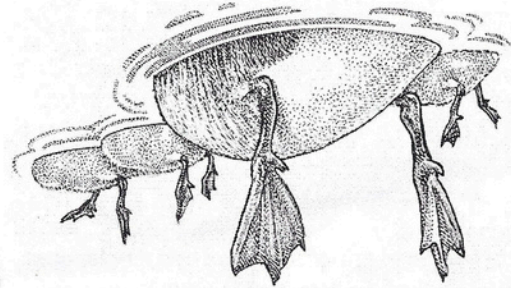
Weighing up to 60 pounds, the snapper is normally what biologists call an ambush predator, lying in wait, biding its time until a fish or frog ventures too close. Snapping turtles have evolved several adaptations to improve their chances of grabbing a meal. The common snapper sports an algal garden on its outer shell to conceal its carapace until it lunges for food. The even larger alligator snapping turtle, found in the southern U.S., has perfected a form of fatal attraction; it dangles a worm-like fleshy growth on its tongue, all designed to lure in a hungry fish. But in late April and early May, a reptilian stalk is also part of the common snapper's hunting repertoire when innocent goslings paddle behind their mother.

Snapping turtles rarely leave the water, except when females wander far from the canal to excavate a nest in sandy soil for their eggs. The turtles one encounters or hears about crossing highways and roads are females looking for a safe deposit box for their own reproductive output.

If a lumbering turtle on the towpath did encounter a pair of Canada Geese accompanied by their goslings, it would be met with a chorus of hissing, as is any cyclist or walker who ventures too near the flock. More surprising still, the snapping turtle might hiss right back. Hissing is a remarkable though not well studied vocalization. A hiss is usually uttered when an animal feels threatened by a predator or moves to protect its young. It has evolved independently in a menagerie of unrelated organisms besides geese and snapping turtles. A short list includes: peacock butterflies, Madagascar

hissing cockroaches, raccoons, opossums, cats, tortoises, and of course, some species of snakes. Even among humans, when someone hisses at you, the sound gets your attention.

Snapping turtles, as a species, have had eons to perfect their hunting and hissing skills. The ancestor to the snapper appeared on Earth in the Paleocene about 65 million years ago, just after the decline



A Common Snapping Turtle contemplates the feet of a Canada Goose and her three goslings.

of the dinosaurs at the end of the Cretaceous. The common snapping turtle seems to have deviated little in body plan or behavior since. In the spring, the males form territories along the canal, and you can spot them easily when they rise to or swim just below the surface. The long tail and long neck instantly identify it as no painted turtle.

A few years ago, on the bicycle ride home from work one day in late April, I came across three snapping turtles in succession, spaced apart by about half a mile, each to its own section of the canal. They seemed on the lookout for females

but one turtle had his eye on something else, too. Nearby, a pair of Canada geese and their five goslings were enjoying the late afternoon. The snapper dropped behind a fallen snag in the canal and moved underwater towards them. If the young birds came too close, the snapper would yank them under. Perhaps sensing the danger, the mother goose shooed her offspring out of the water and up the riverbank. In that short instant, an intense drama was playing out in front of me: a moment of doubt, a swift movement, and then a safe conclusion. The snapper would dine on duckweed that evening but not waterfowl.

This seemingly random natural history observation has stayed with me ever since. As visitors to the Potomac riverbank, rather than full-time residents, it's so easy to overlook the life-and-death struggle that plays out all around us. Yet along the Potomac, just as on the Serengeti plains or in the Amazon rainforest, to slip up for a moment is to become a meal, to lose a chance to find a mate, or to lose out to a rival in the search for that perfect nest site. Even seasoned biologists and veteran backcountry hikers can make the mistake of viewing our Potomac wilderness and

its inhabitants as an imitation of the real thing. But encounters like that of the snapping turtle and geese, and many more, remind us that local nature, even if not so often directly threatening to us, is anything but tame. — 