

Genus: *Chelydra* (Snapping Turtles) - Darrell Senneke
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Chelydra serpentina serpentina
Chelydra serpentina osceola
Chelydra serpentina rossignoni
Chelydra serpentina acutirostris



This care sheet is intended only to cover the general care of this species. Further research to best develop a maintenance plan for whichever species you are caring for is essential.

A word of caution: This species is NOT an appropriate pet for a beginner or a child. Large *Chelydra* can be very aggressive and dangerous if the owner does not know exactly what he or she is doing. Typical adult sizes are 33 cm (13 inches) and there are exceptional animals that range up to 45 cm (18 inches) in size. Even juvenile specimens can deliver a painful bite that may necessitate emergency medical care.

Snapping turtles have a large range: from eastern North America to Canada - South to Ecuador. They have also been introduced into California. This species is highly carnivorous with a natural diet that relies heavily on fish, carrion, snails, crustaceans, tadpoles, and even other turtles. This opportunistic feeder will also eat some plant material including acorns as well as scavenge on dead fish.

Current knowledge and technology make this an easily maintained species as long as a person is willing to provide for some basic requirements. Thanks to the success that breeders are having with this species, it is now possible to purchase *Chelydra* as hatchlings from captive born stock. Snapping turtles may be locally threatened or endangered in nature, so one should never remove these animals from the wild. Also NEVER purchase a *Chelydra* hatchling unless you are prepared to care for it as an adult.

HOUSING SNAPPING TURTLES INDOORS - The most useful form of indoor accommodation for *Chelydra* consists of an aquarium. For hatchlings I would suggest a water depth of 3 to 6 inches (7.5 to 15 cm) with one end built up with rocks to provide a dry basking spot. Please note: snapping turtles grow rapidly. It is better to start off with a larger habitat than to be forced to replace the one being used multiple times. A reasonable size aquarium for a hatchling is a

Chelydra - Snapping Turtles

- **Location** - Northeastern United States into Canada - West to the Rocky Mountains - South into Mexico and Ecuador.
- **Habitat** - Still or slow moving bodies of water
- **Size** - Adults 33 - 45 cm (13 - 18 inches)
- **Diet** - Highly carnivorous with some plant material also taken
- **Conservation Status** - Varies depending on location
- **Threats** - Habitat loss

20 gallon: 30 inches by 12 inches, (75 cm by 30 cm). As the animal grows, the size of this habitat should be increased. All Snapping turtles are “bottom walkers” There should be at least a portion of their habitat where they can stand on the bottom and easily stretch up their necks to reach the surface to breathe. Snapping turtles will often utilize a sub-surface basking shelf as well as climbing completely out of the water to bask.

Water quality is very important. Many problems with aquatic turtles can be averted if one spends a little time and money designing and purchasing an adequate filtration system for your pets. Snapping turtles frequently feed by grasping the fish or other prey item in their mouths and shredding it with their front claws. This practice leads to rapidly fouled water conditions. For adult Snapping turtles, we advise canister filters as they are easily cleaned and provide for excellent water quality. Hatchlings are often more difficult to provide good filtration for due to the shallower depth of the water. For these, a submersible foam filter or power filter and frequent water changes is the rule.

While Snapping turtles have been successfully raised without the use of basking facilities, in my opinion the daily light cycle is important for normal behavior and I would include it in any planned habitat. In one corner of the environment a hardware store reflector clip light lamp should be positioned over a dry basking area as well as a slightly submerged shelf to provide artificial basking facilities. This should be positioned to provide a basking spot of 90 degrees F (32 degrees C) in that section of the habitat. The habitat should also be equipped with a full spectrum fluorescent light to provide for UVB. A UVB source is necessary for Vitamin D3 synthesis (needed in calcium metabolism). If preferred to this lighting arrangement a Mercury vapor bulb may be used that fulfills all requirements, but in the case of this species the money needed for one of these lamps may more usefully be put towards a more efficient filtering system. Live or plastic aquatic plants are suggested to provide a sense of security as well as hiding places. Please be aware that snapping turtles will destroy any living plant life. Provision will need to be made for frequent replacement if live plants are used. Snapping turtles if offered one, often utilize a hiding place, such as half of a large clay flowerpot.

OUTDOOR HOUSING - Predator proof outdoor habitats offer many advantages over indoor accommodations and should seriously be considered as an option during warm weather. A child’s wading pool sunk into the ground in a secure enclosure makes for a serviceable outdoor habitat. Larger ponds with advanced filtration can be used to provide a spectacular outdoor home for your Snapping turtle, though please be aware that Snapping turtles are shy and retiring animals. In such a setup it is doubtful that much will be seen of them.

DIET. Be careful not to overfeed your *Chelydra* as they can easily become obese rapidly. I recommend only feeding 2 to 3 times a week for adult turtles and every day or every other day for the rapidly growing hatchlings. Snapping turtles are highly carnivorous and crayfish, insects, worms and fish may make up a large part of their diet. Do NOT feed hamburger as the fat content is too high and the meat spoils rapidly fouling the water. Some vegetable matter is also taken such as duckweed and water plants. Many of the commercially prepared turtle diets that exist on the market today are excellent Snapping turtle food when given as part of a varied diet.

Additional calcium supplementation is essential. Powdered calcium can be sprinkled all foods or placed inside of food items. It is suggested that one use calcium supplemented with vitamin D3 if the animal is being maintained indoors and calcium without D3 if it is outdoors. Provision of a cuttlefish bone, which can be gnawed if desired, is also recommended. Addition of multivitamins if a commercially prepared turtle diet and/or live fish are NOT used is essential for proper fat metabolism. The freezing process for fish destroys the vitamin E which is an important component for maintaining a healthy Snapping turtle.

HANDLING: While many books suggest picking up *Chelydra* by the tail, do NOT do this. This is particularly true with larger animals but inclusive of smaller ones as well as the danger of causing vertebral damage is high if they are handled in this manner. If necessary, it is best to pick up specimens by the rear of the shell just in front of their back limbs. Be EXTREMELY careful as they have a long reach with their necks and are lightning quick.

Some snapping turtles hibernate in nature. After careful research of methods used to safely do this, hibernation facilities may be provided for those that do so.

Taxonomy: The taxonomic naming on this care sheet reflects the thinking as of the date of its preparation. As an example of the ever changing world of taxonomy the following outlines changes in *Chelydra* presented on the "Crocodilian, Tuatara, and Turtle Species of the World - An Online Taxonomic and Geographic Reference" web site.

Gaffney 1975, Fieldiana: Geol. 33(9):157-178, studied the phylogenetic relationships of the genera, and included *Platysternon* in this family. Whetstone 1978, Univ. Kansas Sci. Bull. 51:539-563, also studied the phylogeny of the Chelydridae and removed *Platysternon*.

It should be noted that turtle and tortoise care research is ongoing. As new information becomes available we share this on the World Chelonian Trust web site at www.chelonia.org. Serious keepers find it to be a benefit to have the support of others who keep these species. Care is discussed in our free online email community, which may be joined from the web address above. Please contact us about the many benefits of becoming a member of the World Chelonian Trust.

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