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The snapping turtle is Canada's largest freshwater turtle, reaching an average length of 20-36 cm (7.8-14.1 in) and a weight of 4.5-16.0 kg (9.9-35.2 lbs), but it can grow larger. The long, spiked tail and serrated, ridged shell contribute to its prehistoric appearance. An algae-covered shell adds to its primitive mystique. Newly hatched snappers are about the size of a loonie and are dark in colour; they, too, have ridges along the length of their shell. Eggs hatch into either female or male turtles, depending on the temperature of the nest.

The snapping turtle is presently designated as a species of Special Concern under the Ontario Endangered Species Act as well as the federal Species at Risk Act. In addition, it is recognized as a Specially Protected Reptile under the Ontario Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act. A snapper can live a very long time in the wild, often reaching 70 years of age and even surpassing the century mark. It is a "habitat generalist," able to survive a wide variety of conditions and environmental variations. So, why all the concern for the snapping turtle? Well, for starters, it matures very late -- females do not start to breed until they are 15-20 years old. The species also has a slow reproduction rate. As many as 90% of snapper nests are destroyed by predators like raccoons, skunks and crows. If the eggs actually get to hatch, baby snappers are eaten by herons, gulls, otters, minks, raccoons, foxes and more. Taking all of this into consideration, it becomes clear why the loss of just a few adult turtles can significantly impact a population.

Sadly, thousands of turtles are injured and killed on our roads each year, mostly reproductive females that are out searching for nesting sites each summer. The sand or gravel shoulder along the roadway attracts the nesting female, further increasing her risk of getting struck by a car. If you choose to move a turtle off the roadway, coax it along in the direction it was heading, or use a car mat or shovel to scoop it up. Never pick it up or drag it by the tail as this can severely damage its vertebrae. If you must pick it up, grasp the back of the shell on either side of the tail; stoop over to avoid injuring the turtle if you should drop it. Unlike most other turtles, a snapper cannot retreat into its shell for protection. Its only defence is to frighten off a predator by lunging, hissing and snapping. So perhaps we can forgive the snapper's reprehensible behaviour during road rescues.

This turtle is often blamed for decimating game fish and waterfowl populations. While it does eat fish and even ducklings, studies show that its predominant food sources are aquatic plants, crayfish, and dead or dying animals. In fact, most of its diet consists of carrion and plant matter, and thus the snapper plays a significant role in keeping our lakes and wetlands clean.

Despite spending most of its life in the water, the snapping turtle is not an especially good swimmer and can be seen walking along the lake bottom. As winter settles in, it usually burrows into mud and leaves in shallow water. Its metabolism will slow way down to the point where it no longer requires oxygen, yet it remains visually vigilant and aware of light and temperature changes...perhaps daydreaming of springtime, when it will bask in the sun's warmth once again.

Margie is a self-proclaimed nature nerd with a passion for all things finned, furred and feathered...even the creepy-crawly-scaly kinds. She's summured on Wolfe Lake since childhood and loves sharing what she learns about our wild things.