

WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

Common Snapping Turtle

Although everyone has heard of this turtle — and those of us who hail from the northern states have probably seen more than a few up there — the Common Snapping Turtle is encountered not nearly as often in Florida.

Red-bellied sliders, cooters, box turtles, gopher tortoises, and big, flat softshell turtles are seen much more commonly here than snappers. I've photographed them at Lake Apopka, the Everglades, the Panhandle, and a few other Florida places, but I've yet to see one in Victoria Park.

There are actually 2 separate geographical races,

or subspecies, of this turtle. In the Florida Panhandle and extending all the way up to Canada is the Common Snapping Turtle. In peninsular Florida this is replaced by the nearly identical Florida Snapping Turtle, but for all intents and purposes they can both be called Common Snapping Turtle. And there is a third, very different species of snapper in the Panhandle, Louisiana, Alabama. and nearby southern and central U.S. states — the massive Alligator Snapping Turtle. This monster — the world's largest freshwater turtle — sometimes exceeds 200 pounds, and has even been reported to reach 300!

Common Snapping Turtles are much smaller than Alligator Snappers, although their carapaces (upper shells) reach 20 inches in length and they may weigh 40 pounds. The biggest one I ever caught and put on a scale weighed 38 pounds. These turtles can inflict a serious bite with their sharp, powerful jaws and lightning-fast strikes, and their long necks

enable them to reach far beyond the edges of their shells. On land, a snapper becomes very defensive since it's out of its element and very slow-moving. That's when one will elevate its hindquarters or stand high on all 4 legs and snap at anything that threatens it. In water, however, they swim away and rarely, if ever, snap.

A Common Snapping Turtle can be recognized by its long, spiked tail, brown shell that is also spiked or serrated along its back edge, and very reduced plastron (lower shell). Females are seen more often than males when they emerge from the water in spring or early summer to dig holes in which to deposit their white eggs, which look exactly like ping-pong balls. It takes 2 or 3 months for the babies to hatch and emerge, but more often than not the eggs are excavated and eaten by raccoons or other mammals.