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The Life Of A Snapper

July 21, 2008

A widespread if little-understood critter may be lumbering from the waters of the Connecticut River and into the limelight.

The snapping turtle is known to scientists as *Chelydra serpentina*. The rest of us may know it as a menacingly prehistoric, occasionally oversized turtle (the largest can weigh in at more than 75 pounds) with a saw-toothed shell and a plated tail.

The snapper usually makes a brief appearance in late spring or early summer. But after laboriously digging a hole and laying its eggs on the edge of a road or in a garden bed, it vanishes. Returning to a nearby wetland or pond, it leaves our awareness with barely a ripple.

That's some talent. Especially considering that the snapper lives almost everywhere, from polluted urban ponds to lakes in remote wildernesses. Its range encompasses the entire eastern United States, southern Canada and a good chunk of South America.

One factor in the turtle's success is that it will eat almost anything: dead things, plants, fish, frogs, bugs — even snakes, small birds and other turtles. Yet there are a lot of unknowns about this reptile's routine.

Enter the Snapping Turtle Project, a collaboration among Hartford's Riverfront Recapture, a local nonprofit youth agency called Our Piece of the Pie and the National Geographic Society.

With the help of area high school students, the researchers are trapping turtles in Wethersfield Cove and fitting them with remote cameras to get a turtle's-eye view of a day in the life of the Connecticut River. It's the same technology that was used in the Academy Award-winning documentary "March of the Penguins."

The project could take two years to complete. Organizers are hoping for a segment on National Geographic's "Wild Chronicles" on PBS.

We'd welcome an extended feature on this creature. Lions, sharks and other predators that make up the Discovery Channel's fare are undeniably exotic. But the snapping turtle is all ours, and in freshwater habitats all around us, it rules.

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