

BOGDIVERSITY THURSDAY



—*from Head Naturalist Clinton*

Western Painted Turtle and Common Snapping Turtle

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While we are all hunkering down with new snow on the landscape, it might be fun to consider a group of creatures that have been hunkering down all winter. Today, let's take a look under the ice at one group of creatures that we won't see again for a couple of months in the Northwoods: Turtles!

We have three species of turtles documented in the Sax-Zim Bog: Painted Turtle, Common Snapping Turtle, and Wood Turtle. Of those turtles, Wood Turtles are very uncommon, bordering on rare in our area and a species of conservation need in Minnesota. For our purposes today, we will be focusing on the more common Painted Turtles and Common Snapping Turtles!

Painted turtles in our area are really interesting! Perhaps you have seen a little information about this species in one of our earliest Clinton's Critters videos here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpkfREytqp0>

Across their range, Painted Turtles vary widely! There are four subspecies of Painted Turtle: Eastern, Western, Southern, and

Midland. In our region, we have Western Painted Turtles. Out of all of the variation in Painted Turtles, Western Painted Turtles have the most colorful plastron (underside of their shell) of all of the Painted Turtles across their range. One of the coolest things about these turtles is their nesting biology. Right now, there are young Painted Turtles underground. At the end of their incubation period, some nests hatch, but do not emerge. This is why you see hatchling Painted Turtles in the spring, often before adults have started laying eggs!

Perhaps not as colorful, but definitely beautiful in their own right, Common Snapping Turtles are the largest turtle in Minnesota. Adults might reach weights of 50 pounds and have total shell lengths approaching 20 inches! Common Snapping Turtles are amazing predators and occasional scavengers. They eat a number of different things from plant material to insects to ducklings! While Common Snapping Turtles are one of the most widespread and common turtles in Eastern North America, they are a species that has been declining in parts of their range due to overharvest for food. A long-lived species, old individuals might crest 40 years of age and they mature when they are 8-10 years old.

Both Painted and Common Snapping Turtles overwinter underwater and both also remain somewhat active during the winter! The both dip into a torpor, a period of inactivity during cold temperatures, but do remain light sensitive. With some species, like Common Snapping Turtles, they continue to move around underwater during the winter. To a lesser degree than amphibians, reptiles (especially aquatic reptiles) can take in

oxygen through their skin and soft tissue. While they are not actively hunting or finding food, turtles do respond to light during the winter. This response to photoperiod changes also influences when these turtles "turn back on" during the spring!

More information about these turtles can be found in the photos below!

(Photos below by Head Naturalist Clinton and Sparky Stensaas)



Western Painted Turtles are lovely! A fairly common and widespread species of slow-moving waters, lakes, and ponds, these turtles are a common sight across Minnesota.



The underside, or plastron, of a Western Painted Turtle is elaborately marked: with reds and greens and winding maculations.



Common Snapping Turtles are imposing! Even when laying eggs, this female looks like she means business! Their long necks and powerful jaws making them a formidable predator.



The plastron of snapping turtles is really quite different than painted turtles. They don't have the same amount of bone or scutes as other turtles. This is a common trait shared with related turtles like mud turtles and musk turtles.



Soon enough, we will be seeing large groups of turtles basking in the bright spring sunshine!