

ALLIGATOR SNAPPING TURTLE

Macrochelys temminckii

Order: Testudines
Family: Chelydridae
FNAI Ranks: G3/S3
U.S. Status: none
FL Status: none



Description: Also called the western alligator snapping turtle (to distinguish it from the recently named Suwannee species (*M. suwanniensis*), this freshwater turtle reaches immense proportions: adult males as large as 30 in. (76 cm) and more than 200 lbs. (90 kg), with females somewhat smaller (to 24 in. = 60 cm). Like all snapping turtles (Chelydridae), it has a rough brown shell and very long tail, nearly as long as the body. Both currently recognized species of alligator snapping turtles are characterized by three sharp ridges or keels that run the length of the carapace, an exceptionally large head that is roughly triangular from above, a strongly hooked beak, laterally placed eyes, and an extra row of scales near the edge of the carapace between the outer marginals and inner costals. The caudal notch (posterior edge of carapace over the tail) typically is narrow and triangular or U-shaped, though subject to variation.

Similar Species: The two species of alligator snapping turtles are genetically distinguishable but also show minor morphological differences, the most obvious being the shape of the caudal notch (that of *M. suwanniensis* being broader and more rounded); other minor skull and shell differences exist. Both are often confused with the common snapping turtle (*Chelydra serpentina*), which can also reach large size (to 18 in. = 46 cm). Although common snappers may have low keels on the carapace, especially when young, these are never as pronounced as those of alligator snappers. Also, the common snapping turtle has more dorsally situated eyes, a less strongly hooked beak, more rounded head in dorsal aspect, considerably longer neck, and no extra scale rows on the carapace between the marginals and costals. The long neck of *Chelydra* allows it to strike more rapidly and viciously than its larger cousins (*Macrochelys*), a character that is almost invariably demonstrated in the field.

Habitat: Strictly a turtle of rivers and their tributaries, though utilizing backwater swamps, overflow lakes, and impoundments as well as main channels.

Seasonal Occurrence: Present year-round but rarely observed because of secretive, bottom-dwelling habits. Females nest from late April through mid-May, with young emerging in August and September.

Florida Distribution: Native to rivers draining into the upper Gulf of Mexico, from the Ochlockonee River westward throughout the panhandle. Populations are known from the Ochlockonee River, Apalachicola River, Econfina Creek, Choctawhatchee River and Bay, Yellow River, East Bay River, Blackwater River, Escambia River, Perdido River, and a few smaller drainages. Reports from the St. Marks and Aucilla river systems east of the Ochlockonee require additional confirmation. Thomas et al. (2014) had erected the name *M. apalachicolae* for populations in the eastern portion of the range, from the Choctawhatchee River eastward, but this was rejected by the Turtle Taxonomy Working Group (2017) following Folt and Guyer (2015). A rough polygon encompassing known occurrences encompasses 26,350 sq. km.

Range-wide Distribution: Principally rivers of the lower Gulf coastal plain from Florida to eastern Texas, but extending as far north as southern Illinois and Missouri in the Mississippi River drainage.

Conservation Status: The species was unquestionably reduced by decades of extensive commercial trapping in parts of its range, though this threat has been ameliorated by recent rules prohibiting or limiting take in many states, including Florida. It still seems to be common in at least some Florida panhandle rivers. Much of the floodplains of inhabited rivers in Florida has been protected by state and federal land acquisition, but water quality of several rivers remains threatened by pollution. The Apalachicola River in particular is threatened by growing demand for water by the greater Atlanta metropolis. Global warming (which could reduce numbers of male offspring produced) and coincident sea level rise (inundating lower stretches of rivers) are expected to impact the species' long-term viability negatively, particularly in Florida.

Protection and Management: Take or possession of this species from the wild, as well as purchase, sale, or possession of turtles, eggs, or parts, is prohibited by Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission rules, except as authorized by agency

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permit. Enforcement requires continued vigilance by Commission law enforcement personnel. Management should focus on publicly acquiring remaining unprotected floodplains and immediately adjacent uplands within occupied river systems, as well as protection of water quality and flow throughout the drainages. Remove illegal or unattended trotlines, setlines, bush hooks, and traps, and consider prohibiting such methods in inhabited waters.

References: Ernst and Lovich 2009, Ewert and Jackson 1994, Ewert et al. 2006, Moler 1996, Pritchard 2006, Thomas et al. 2014.



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