



A SNAPPY LITTLE TALE

She arrived in late June, another hit-and-run victim. She was young and petite, just 18 pounds, and was run over by a person or persons unknown as she attempted to cross the street. Bruised and scraped, she was rescued by a good Samaritan who drove her from Arlington, VA to the closest place he knew of willing to treat a snapping turtle, Second Chance Wildlife Center.

During the summer months, turtles often move away from their ponds seeking a safe nursery" where they can lay their eggs. This" migration" explains why you may suddenly discover a large turtle rooting around in the mulch of your flower bed. Sadly, it also leaves snapping turtles vulnerable to being hit by cars as they search for the perfect nest site. Ordinarily, snapping turtles prefer to remain submerged except for a quick breath of air. Even then, they expose only the very tip of their nose and quickly settle back into the mud. Conserving energy, they lay fairly motionless on the bottom until they need to eat. Then, they wait and watch, or float lazily near the surface, for a tasty meal to swim past. They will eat almost anything including aquatic vegetation, invertebrates, fish, ducklings and goslings, not to mention any carrion that winds up in the pond. Being compassionate humans, we often disdain predatory species but all creatures serve a purpose and the predators help maintain nature's balance.

Our initial exam of Snappy indicated that she had, in fact, been very lucky. It appeared that the car tires had missed her completely and she had suffered only some "road rash" on her feet and lower shell (plastron). There was a minor scrape on the highest point of her upper shell (carapace). We felt it wise to hold her for awhile to give the scrapes a chance to heal and, then, we could release her. Alas, that prognosis proved to be overly optimistic. Despite providing the finest cuisine, our turtle would not eat! She clearly did not feel well. Because of a very slow metabolic rate, turtles can go for some time without eating but we were concerned that we might have missed something on our initial exam. Fearing Snappy might be "gravid" (full of eggs), we x-rayed her on July 13. The results were quite surprising; instead of eggs there was a large fish hook imbedded deep in the abdomen. Although we were a bit hesitant to risk giving Snappy a daily shot (she had very powerful jaws), a course of antibiotics was begun. On July 20, she was anesthetized and the hook was surgically removed.

By late August, Snappy still was not eating and was losing weight. The incision site was inflamed and infected. Intensive wound management required soaking the turtle in a disinfectant solution, applying an antibiotic ointment to the wounds and, periodically, removing dead tissue. Despite all of this handling, she never once snapped but tolerated our ministrations with remarkable patience. By mid- October, her weight had dropped to just over 11 pounds!

Finally, in late October, Snappy began eating! Her weight increased to slightly over 13 pounds and we thought we home free. Wrong again. The scrapes on the plastron had not healed and were, in fact getting worse! I realized we had been treating this turtle with a lot of antibiotics. Fungi really groove on a bacteria-free environment and can proliferate unchecked. It is important to remember that some bacteria are, actually, good for us and antibiotics are designed to kill all bacteria.

We started using an anti-fungal medication. Every day, Snappy was removed from her "home" in our bathtub, allowed to dry a bit and, then, slathered up with the anti-fungal medication. This process involved flipping her on her back and, although she made it clear she did not care for the procedure, she still never attempted to bite. Now, turtles do everything very slowly so it took awhile to see results. It was already so late in the year that we knew we would be caring for this snapping turtle through the winter. Eventually, the sores on the plastron began to heal. Snappy's weight is now 18.6 pounds, slightly more than her admission weight, and she is happily consuming nearly anything that winds up in the tub with her.

I found myself becoming very fond of this prehistoric creature. In fact during the winter months, I delighted in hauling her out of the tub to show her to the girl and boy scouts that frequently tour our Center. In early December, I received a call from Ruth Hannesian at The Animal Exchange in Rockville. She was offering her clients the opportunity to have their pet's picture taken with Santa and wondered if we had an animal that we might want to bring over: Snappy came to mind immediately. Santa's expression suggested he was not altogether comfortable with a large snapping turtle in his lap but, I'm sure he had a great story to tell the elves when he returned to the North Pole. I'll bet Snappy's Christmas wish was that she could return to her pond.

I must say, I enjoy "showcasing" animals that are usually maligned by the public and few animals engender more negative feelings than snapping turtles. This was a perfect chance to remind citizens that there are no "bad" animals. Every creature in nature serves a purpose; without predators, prey species would over-populate, cause serious habitat destruction and, ultimately, die of disease or starvation. Predators do not eat other animals because they are evil but because they, too, must live. As caring human beings, we are often repulsed by nature shows on TV that show one animal eating another; however, most of us do the same thing. We may not go out hunting but we still eat the cow. Every animal does what it must to survive.

Snappy did not know that we were trying to help her but she did seem to understand that we were neither a threat nor potential food. I cannot say that she likes us but she does tolerate us. Although she is still with us, when summer warms the waters of area ponds, she will be returned to her rightful place in the wild. Although she is cold-blooded, Snappy has a warm heart and, I hope, her story will help people look at predators as a vital part of our natural world.

UPDATE: Snappy has since been released and is living happily in the pond, remembering us fondly.

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