



SNAPPING-TURTLES.

THE alligator snapper (*Macrochelys lacertina*), the largest of fresh-water turtles, has its head-quarters in the shallow, tepid bayous of Louisiana, although it ranges up the Mississippi to the Missouri. It bears a strong resemblance to a common snapping-turtle greatly magnified in size and ugliness, and in this latter quality might well contest the palm with the South American matamata, a turtle, by the way, of which no correct cut has fallen under our notice. It is usually represented with a thick head and neck, whereas they really look as if a log had fallen on and flattened them. In our present species the head and neck are out of all proportion to the body, giving it an overbalanced appearance, and rendering it impossible for the animal to more than slightly draw the neck beneath its shell. As far as protection is concerned this is of small consequence, for none of the co-residents of its haunts would think of attacking it, their chief concern being to avoid falling into its clutches. Lurking in the shadow of some rock or log, or partly buried in the mud, with neck retracted as far as possible, its rough brown skin and moss-covered back give it so much the appearance of an old stump that it is unnoticed by the fish sporting in the vicinity, until, perhaps, one ventures too near. Then, with a sidelong spring, at the same time darting out its neck, the turtle seizes his prey, which he devours at leisure, holding the fish down and under him as a dog would a bone. It is so voracious as to cause sad havoc among the fish, while its wariness renders it difficult to capture. A gentleman who had introduced a pair into a small fish-

pond found them so destructive that he wished to get rid of them. They preyed upon the fish, and also came to be fed whenever the fish were. One was speared while feeding; but the larger kept out of the way until he was tempted to seize a hook baited with a large minnow. Finding himself caught he braced against the rock, and, with a sudden jerk, broke the hook. After this escape he was more careful than ever, and succeeded in keeping out of danger.

This turtle occasionally attains a length of 6 feet and a weight of 150 pounds, but the most common size is from 10 to 50 pounds. It is brought into the markets to some extent as an article of food. The eggs, like those of all other turtles, are deposited in the sand and hatched by the heat of the sun. If the eggs are broken the immature young will snap in a feeble way, showing that this part of their disposition is inborn, and not the result of education.

Not long since (says a traveller in the States), while on a business tour through the central States, I made the acquaintance of a very singular character. I wished to write a letter home, and while waiting for the train asked the proprietor of an eating-house at the dépôt for a sheet of paper and an envelope. These were given me "without money and without price," and I noticed that each was ornamented with a well-executed cut of a snapping-turtle! At first I suspected that the obliging man was a "sprig of nobility," and that this was his coat-of-arms. Hence sundry questions concerning the queer animal that occupied so honoured a place on his stationery. His reply interested me still more, and I was easily induced to spend an evening with him by the promise that he would tell me "all about the snappers." In this

way I became the possessor of some facts that may interest others also. He conducted me to a beautiful, well-furnished house in which he resides. This is within a few rods of the *dépôt*. On entering the front door he remarked, "This house was built and furnished with money that I made out of snapping-turtles."

After tea, he asked me to look into his vats, containing each several thousand barrels of water, and designed as receptacles and feeding-places for his animals. Here they are kept "subject to order" when the market is right for selling them. There are times when the snappers can be bought very cheaply. A wise dealer will hold on to his stock until there is a scarcity, and then he can obtain his price. Few persons understand the habits of the animal in question, and it is possible that my informant really deserves the proud appellation that his neighbours have given him—"The Boss Snapping-Turtle Catcher of the United States." Be this as it may, he is not at all ashamed of the designation, and loves apparently to get hold of a man who will sit down and listen to the narration of his strange adventures in search of the scaly reptile concerning whose habits the people generally know so little. For more than thirty years he has pursued the business in which he is now engaged, and he is able in consequence to impart information on the subject of the snapper that cannot readily be obtained in books. The demands upon him at times for these animals are far beyond his ability to supply. He may be regarded as a successful monomaniac in respect to this particular branch of trade, and is known far and wide among sportsmen and fishermen, of whom he is regarded as chief.

No one can listen to his stories without becoming interested in snappers.

His attention was first drawn to these animals about thirty-five years ago. There lived at that time near his father's

house a man who made his headquarters on a canal boat, and furnished genuine turtle-soup all summer and all winter at five cents a bowl. There was no marvel in the fact that he could do it in the summer, but how could he procure the animals in winter? was the question that perplexed many.

The boss was yet in his early boyhood, but even then was fond of aquatic sports, and he determined to make himself master of the situation in the art of capturing snappers in winter. In order to accomplish his purpose he watched carefully the movements of the person who furnished the people with turtle-soup in winter, and he discovered that the snappers were captured by the use of a stick not unlike a walking-cane; one end corresponding to the head of the cane having a hook fastened to it. The lower end was in all respects just like the lower end of a walking-stick, only it had a longer and sharper iron point. The old soup-man was often seen walking up and down the canal bank. Few persons suspected that during these excursions he was following his regular business. The stick was used in discussing the mud and sounding for snappers. As soon as he happened to strike the creature on the *carapace* or back he had a pre-emptive claim on the property. The only thing now necessary was the reversion of the stick. Here the big hook came into use. This was driven into the flesh of the animal, and the next moment the creature was made to see the daylight. The operation was simple, but required great dexterity. Others might procure sticks with hooks at one end and sharp steel points at the other, but in their unskilled hands these were like the club of Hercules without the power of wielding it.

The shrewd boy who had made up his mind to capture turtles studied well his opportunities along the canal, and, having procured a stick, spent a long time in acquiring the requisite skill in handling

it. After much practice he "got the knack," as he calls it, and thenceforth had no trouble in getting all the snapping-turtles he wanted. He has studied carefully the habits of the animal in question, and, like a true philosopher, has shown a willingness to instruct others in the mode of its capture, but none of the disciples have proved equal to the master, and nearly all his pupils have given up in disgust.

The boss is a natural sportsman, and his habits for thirty years have become so fixed that if he should be translated to any other place this side of heaven where there are no snapping-turtles he would probably be supremely miserable. He loves to put others in possession of the information that he has acquired during these many years of "sport," as he terms it. Some of his hard-working neighbours seem to have no sympathy with him. One of them, who is glad to get 1 dol. 50 cents per day for his labour in hauling iron ore, was overheard making a sneering remark about "a full-grown man fooling away all his time along the creek." Coming home one day with a coffee-sack full of snappers that he had captured in a few hours, the boss took great pleasure in telling the man who had made the allusion to this business that his income that afternoon was equal to a week's pay for hauling iron ore! he also reminded him that one calling was just as honourable and honest as the other, and that while the iron trade was subject to fluctuations, the snapper business had been steadily increasing for twenty-five years! The boss is not a loafer or rowdy, but a sturdy, honest, sober man, well known among the people as an earnest advocate of temperance. He loves to speak of the distinguished characters who have been his companions while he was engaged in hunting turtles. A few weeks before he was accompanied by a man who was at the time a candidate of his party for the highest office in the State. It was

amusing to hear this gentleman called by his first name as familiarly as if he was nothing but an ordinary mortal! It is gratifying also to learn that many of our distinguished lawyers, doctors, preachers, and congressmen, when they get out into the woods and along the water-courses or lakes, can lay aside their dignity and act just like common people!

These creatures are always to be looked for in the ground near a stream, generally in musk-rat holes. In cold weather you sometimes find them snugly ensconced under the roots of a tree a mile or more from the stream. Here they hibernate and can live four or five months without any visible means of support.

The pond turtle dives down into the mud at any place and moves about without the fear of detection. It never goes into retirement where it cannot, if necessary, poke out its head during the time of high-water. It can live for months under the surface of the water. Before it descends into the mud it fills its lungs with air. This is necessary for the maintenance of its life. As soon as the creature is detected in its muddy retreat the air is expelled from its lungs with a peculiar gurgling noise, and immediately after it comes to the surface for a fresh supply of the vital fluid. Herein is the golden opportunity of the expert with his stick. This well-known fact that the snapper cannot play possum, and that when struck he will at once let go his life-preserver, is a great inducement to hunt in the mud for turtles. The air-bubbles are indicators that the game has been struck.

The snapper never goes down stream in search of a suitable place in which to spend his winter months. Occasionally he is found crossing fields in going and returning from his winter quarters. Although his fast continues from October to May, he comes out in the spring fatter than he was in the fall. He is seldom

caught in swift, stony, or gravelly creeks or rivers, but loves to roam about in slow, sluggish streams with muddy banks, and he is particularly fascinated with the charms of a secluded mill-dam. Twice in the year it will not pay to hunt for snappers—in the fall after the water has become chilly, and in the spring before the warm weather has lured them from their winter retreat.

The period of torpidity commences generally about the 15th of September. Along our inland streams the snapper seldom exceeds thirty pounds in weight. One weighing less than eight pounds is not regarded as merchantable. The snapper lives on fish, crabs, and small dainties of that sort. The muddiness of the water favours his operations in search of an honest livelihood, but in the fall, when the water becomes clear, the small fry regard his presence as disagreeable. His unpopularity in his favourite element now compels him to seek pleasure elsewhere, and so he betakes himself to the land. Those who have studied his habits when out of the water pronounce him an expensive visitor on the farm. It may surprise some to learn that he is in reality a great enemy to the corn. He is worse than a racoon or muskrat. These creatures are somewhat particular in respect to their diet, and will take only certain parts of the crop; but the snapper is more voracious than a Kansas grasshopper, because, on entering a cornfield, he will devour the corn, stalks, husks, tassels, and leaves. The boss thinks that he would relish the roots also, but he is too lazy to dig them out. He says that if the census was taken accurately it would be found that the United States are paying enormously for the maintenance of snappers. He estimates the number in one small creek in the Buckeye State at 40,000, and as all these are high livers the Commonwealth is compelled to sacrifice at least one fish per day for the support of every snapper!

There is no danger of exterminating the race of snappers, unless, peradventure, this article may stimulate too many boys to follow the example of the boss. He predicts that the trade in this delicious sort of game will increase rapidly, and in a few years snappers will become as popular as oysters. They do now fill a great vacancy in the stomach of the epicure, who can hardly get along in comfort during the months that have no R, when it is perilous to indulge in oysters, and man must be satisfied with clams.

The snapper has a far more composite character than the celebrated image of Nebuchadnezzar. That had only five parts, but he has seven different kinds of meat. He is like a fish in the mouth, like a calf in the legs, like an ox in the shoulders, like a chicken in the loins, etc. Strange assortment—a veritable walking butcher-shop or market-house! Call for any kind of meat you want, and the snapper will fill your order.

Another fact worth noticing: the meat of this creature does not grow tough by reason of age. Snapper-meat is all good, and that of the old patriarch is just as tender as it was when he was a babe.

The boss has discovered a method of capturing turtles in summer, which, though so communicative, he does not propose to make known to the public just now.

The soft-shell turtle lives in swift, stony or gravelly streams, and internally and intrinsically is in all respects just as valuable as the snapper, but is so easily killed by rough usage or exposure that he is unfitted for transportation, and thus his price in market is much below that of his brother with the hard carapace or shield, which covers his back.

The turtle belongs to the ingenious class of animals that understand the value of sunshine. It will lay its eggs in the sand on the bank of a stream and leave them to be hatched out by the sun.

It lays from eighteen to thirty-five, each as large as an ordinary-sized black walnut, and each distinguished by a singular white band that runs around it, reminding you somewhat of the equatorial circle on the globe representing the earth.

The snapping-turtle is not convivial. In order to be true to his name he is compelled to be unsocial. You seldom discover two snappers enjoying each other's society. When you see several sitting on one log you may be sure, first, that they had not logs enough to reach around and give one to each snapper, and, second, there is no evidence in their sitting together that they are forming a conspiracy. They are afraid of each other's shadow, and consequently sit as far apart from each other as circumstances will allow. Snappers never injure their neighbours or anybody else by gossiping. Each baby turtle, as soon as it has broken out of its shell, commences "roughing it," and takes care of itself. It never tastes "its mother's milk," and is not in the habit of playing with its brothers, sisters, or cousins, except in special cases, and it has no personal acquaintance with its parents or aunts, and has never been known to wait in sweet expectation for their death so as to come into possession of their fortune.

It has a remarkably slow growth. When only a year old it weighs about an ounce, and when two years of age its weight is perhaps three ounces. If you happen to meet one that weighs eight pounds, you must not hastily conclude that he is a novice in sublunary matters, but that he has heard the frogs croak and has seen the violets bloom for at least a dozen successive seasons.

A few of the foregoing statements may have staggered the belief of some, but I might have reported others that were stranger still.

A word now on the vitality of the snapper. This is perhaps his most

striking characteristic. It is to be expected that a creature of such strange habits in life will also exhibit queer dying peculiarities. He enjoys a fine reputation for holding on to life; but, notwithstanding his tenacity in this respect, he also is mortal, and here is a method by which it can be proved. Hit him with a club on the tip of his nose. This will induce him at once to protrude his beautiful head, and he will stretch his neck and wonder what has broken loose. Now is your opportunity. With a heavy, sharp knife sever at one blow the head from the body. But please remember that this heroic surgical operation, although fatal in all other animals, is only partially so in the case of the snapper. You may throw his head over the fence, but the headless portion is not dead. It will kick and scratch and claw, and keep on kicking, scratching, and clawing, until the last joint is cut, and then the creature is not quite dead; but give him a little more time, and he will be quiet.

The boss tells of one that had his head severed from the body, and a week afterwards the two portions of the animal were each as pugnacious as ever. He remembers another that was left out in the cold all winter and was completely frozen, but in the spring was thawed out, and then it went on its way rejoicing. He also recalls the strange adventures of an old porker that was lurching on the *dissecta membra* of a snapper that had been thrown into an alley-way back of a restaurant two days before. Suddenly that hog started off with tail erect, and ran for nearly a quarter of a mile, filling the air with unearthly squeals, and creating an alarm among the people, who supposed it was a veritable case of hydrophobia or demoniacal possession. None knew the cause of this strange action except those who happened to see, securely fastened to the nose of the hog, the head of the snapper that had been cut off, and was "lying around loose" in the alley forty-eight hours!