

TURTLE-TAKING TACTICS

By DAVID MANSEAU

It was Sunday, May 10, 1987; the day of the Massachusetts Bowhunters Association's annual carp and turtle shoot. The sun was just a faint glow upon the waters of Lake Quinsigamond when the archers started signing in.

At 7:00 A.M. when the derby began, my partner Dan Mahoney and I slipped my canoe into the water and headed for a small, shallow cove on the south side of the lake. The area that we were going to had always held a lot of carp in past spawning seasons, which means plenty of action for the bowfisherman.

Upon rounding the last bend and entering the mouth of the cove, I was pleased to see that we were the only ones in the area. Dan was in the front of the canoe — his 60-pound Wilderness take-down recurve bow in hand — ready for action. This was Dan's first time bowfishing, and I really wanted to show him a good time.

Redwing blackbirds looked at us curiously as we slowly paddled between the patches of cattails in search of our elusive prey. Sunfish were dart-

ing all around our boat as we silently inched along. The sun was getting higher in the sky, and the cool morning air was starting to warm up.

Eight-thirty A.M. and no sign of carp. Wait! What's that on the left? It's moving and it looks like a big fin. Quickly and quietly we paddled toward the object only to have it slowly submerge as we approached.

"I see it moving in front of us," Dan yelled. "It's not a carp. It's a snapper, and it looks like a big one!" I told Dan that he got to shoot first and reminded him to aim a little below the turtle. Raising up on his knees in the front of the canoe, Dan drew and released. Splash! We both watched as Dan's white fiberglass arrow streaked harmlessly beneath the turtle. While Dan was frantically trying to wind the 90-pound braided dacron line back onto his Saunders shoot-through reel, I decided to try my luck on the same turtle. I drew my bow, aimed, and released. There was a dull crack that could be heard through the water as my Sting-A-Ree head penetrated the turtle's shell.

By pulling hard on the heavy mason's dry-line that attached the arrow to my homemade spool, I was able to keep the powerful snapper from burrowing into the mud. When frightened or injured, these turtles will dig themselves into the mud and out of sight. I brought the line in hand-over-hand until I was able to grasp the solid fiberglass shaft and bring the angry turtle to the side of the canoe. Grabbing his thrashing, powerful tail, we lifted the snapper out of the water and lowered him to the bottom of the canoe. We guessed his weight at about 15 pounds. We still hadn't seen any carp, so, having one turtle in the boat, we decided to concentrate our efforts on snappers.

Before I continue my story, I would like to share a little information with you about snapping turtles, and why we should harvest them.

The common snapping turtle lives in slow-moving rivers, shallow ponds, and mud-bottomed lakes, preferably with abundant vegetation. There they spend a great deal of their time in water shallow enough that they can



stretch their necks and poke the tip of their snouts to the surface for air, while their bodies rest on the bottom.

The common snapper (as opposed to the alligator snapper) is easily identified by his black carapace (or top shell) with three distinct ridges running front to back. This shell is covered with coarse scales. A border row of these scales gives the rear of the carapace a notched outline. The snapper's small plastron (or bottom shell) is usually off-white to brown in color.

Snapping turtles usually mate between April and October, but may nest during any time of the year that the air temperature does not fall below 45 degrees Fahrenheit. The female will leave the water and dig a hole about five inches deep into the soil, into which she will deposit between 20 to 30 ping-pong ball size eggs; however, an unusually large female may lay as many as 86. These eggs will hatch 70 to 120 days later. If the eggs are laid late in the season and the weather is too cold, the young will not emerge until the following spring. Once hatched, the young turtles are on their own and often fall prey to fish, other turtles, birds, and small predator mammals.

In the spring and summer, these prehistoric-looking creatures, which can trace their origin back 250 million years, will be found in shallow waters. Curiously, snappers will not climb on logs to sun themselves as will other turtles. You may occasionally see a snapper crossing a road or field heading for another pond or food supply. In winter, they will burrow into the mud on the bottom of a lake or pond where they will hibernate until spring.

Snapping turtles are the scavengers of the waterways. They are voracious and indiscriminate feeders, taking almost any animal they can capture as well as considerable amounts of aquatic vegetation. Snappers have been known to eat frogs, snakes, birds, muskrats, and can be devastating to nesting ducks. Fishermen regard the snapping turtle with much disfavor because of the average snapper's ability to eat as much as 75 pounds of fish a year. That's a lot of panfish and one of the main reasons that we include snapping turtles in our bowfishing derbies.

A word of caution. Snappers may appear to be slow but they can move their heads with lightning-fast speed.

We have all heard stories about turtles that could bite a broomstick in half. Although I haven't seen one do that, I have seen many that could do a nasty job on a man's hand if given half a chance. When handling a snapping turtle, hold it by its tail and keep it at arm's length from your body. You'll be surprised at how long their necks really are.

Now, back to my story. We decided that the best way to find the turtles would be to pole along the edges of the cattails. The area we were bowfishing had a smooth, mud bottom so we looked for "rocks" that didn't belong there.

Suddenly, Dan spotted a turtle in about four feet of water. As he released, the solid sound of his arrow hit-

ting the turtle's shell, and the ear-to-ear smile on his face, told me that Dan was a successful bowfisherman at last. As we brought the huge reptile up to the side of the canoe, we realized that it would weigh at least 30 pounds. Once we had the turtle safely in the canoe, Dan smiled at me and said, "Let's see you beat that one."


Poling to the opposite side of the cove we spotted another turtle about the same size as Dan's, and making a good shot, I put the third snapper in the canoe.

About this time Dan started to get a little nervous. He didn't like the idea of three not-too-happy snappers crawling around his feet. To calm Dan's nerves, I cut some of the mason's line off my reel, and tied one end of it to a hind leg

of each of the turtles, and the other end to one of the canoe's supports.

With the turtles secure, we were able to continue our bowfishing. By the end of the day, Dan and I had each harvested four turtles. The combined weight of the eight turtles was 217 pounds! Our largest turtle was a 39-pounder while the smallest tipped the scale at 15.5 pounds.

Dan and I didn't win the derby, but our collection of turtles sure turned a lot of heads at the weigh-in. The derby was won by a 49-pound turtle shot by my father. But that's another story.

If you decide to bowfish for snappers and are successful, please clean and eat them or give them to someone who will. A true sportsman doesn't harvest game to throw it away. 

Author's Note: Snapping turtles are excellent table fare. Following is the recipe for the best turtle soup I have ever eaten. It comes from my good friends, Louie and Jerrie Dipasquale.

2 lbs. Turtle meat, cubed	7 Medium potatoes (peeled and diced)
4 C. Burgundy	2 Bags carrots (peeled and diced)
1 Stick butter (margarine)	1 pkg. Dry onion soup mix
1 Large onion (diced)	1 Large can stewed tomatoes
2 C. Celery (diced)	4 qts. Water

Cube and rinse turtle meat thoroughly, marinate in burgundy – about 20 minutes – rinse, marinate, and rinse again.

In five-quart kettle, melt one stick butter. Add onion, celery and potatoes. Cook until tender. Add meat – fry until browned – cover with water. Add carrots and bring to a boil. Simmer for ½ hour. Add rest of water and onion soup mix. Simmer 2½ hours. Add stewed tomatoes and simmer for another 20 minutes. *Enjoy!*