

# Common Snapping Turtle vs. Alligator Snapping Turtle

(August 2019)

Common snapping turtles and alligator snapping turtles are distant cousins. They look similar in many ways, but they have several important differences between them.

The alligator snapping turtle has a very restricted natural range. That's because it only lives in the river systems that drain into the northern coast of the Gulf of Mexico. These river systems run through central Florida to eastern Texas and extend as far north as southern Iowa in the Mississippi River Basin. They like deeper water that moves a lot, but once in a while, you might spot them in oxbow lakes. An oxbow lake is a U-shaped lake that forms when a wide meander of a river is cut off. This creates a stand-alone body of water. An oxbow lake gets its name from its unique curved shape. Sometimes, alligator snappers can also be found in other kinds of waterways that adjoin rivers. Common snapping turtles frequent shallow ponds or streams, and from time to time, they even inhabit brackish waters such as estuaries.

Let's talk about appearances. Both of these turtles look practically prehistoric. In fact, it's difficult for most people to tell them apart. But there are some distinct characteristics that

can help the untrained eye decipher which turtle is which—and pretty easily, too! Perhaps the most noticeable part of the turtle is its shell. The shell of an alligator snapping turtle has three distinctive ridges, while the common snapping turtle has a smoother shell. And how about those skulls? The alligator snapping turtle has a triangular head. The common snapping turtle has an oval-shaped head.

An alligator snapping turtle has two distinct features that its cousin doesn't have. For one thing, the alligator snapper has a red, wormlike lure in its mouth. When it opens its jaw, unsuspecting fish see it and think it's a worm. However, when the fish get closer to investigate, they become the meal. No other turtle in the world has such a lure—not even the common snapping turtle. Alligator snapping turtles also have fleshy eyelashes around their eyes. Common snappers don't have those around their peepers.

Common snapping turtles eat more vegetation than alligator snapping turtles. Alligator snappers much prefer snacking on other animals. They're opportunistic feeders that will dine on both live and dead matter. They especially enjoy fish, mollusks, carrion, and amphibians. They also like snakes, crayfish, worms, water birds, and other turtles. Fully grown adult alligator snappers have been known to kill and eat small American alligators, though this is a rare occurrence. They'll also munch on the occasional aquatic plant now and then. On

the other hand, common snapping turtles eat a more balanced diet of animal flesh and plants, including many invertebrates, fish, frogs, reptiles, birds, and small mammals.

These are just some of the big differences between alligator snapping turtles and common snapping turtles, but there are more you can learn about with a little investigating. Once you get started, finding those facts will be a snap!

### Teacher Resources – Vocabulary

*Potential Words for Further Study:* These words not only help with comprehension of the passage, they also appear more frequently in a wide spectrum of reading, especially in academic text. Therefore, further study of the meaning of these words may be beneficial. The words on this list can be incorporated into subsequent lessons.

#### **Wilson Reading System Vocabulary Level: AB**

**distinct** (adj) not the same; separate; individual

**restrict** (v) to keep within certain limits; put certain limitations on; confine

**unique** (adj) having no like or equal; unparalleled

*Words for Quick Discussion:* Consider discussing these words as they are encountered to help students comprehend the passage. A quick discussion in student-friendly language while reading the text is best.

#### **Wilson Reading System Vocabulary Level: B**

brackish (adj) (of water) slightly briny or salty

crayfish (n) any of various families of small, usually freshwater  
decapods somewhat resembling little lobsters

lure (n) a bait for animals, especially an artificial one used in fishing

mollusk (n) an animal such as a snail, clam, or octopus which has a soft body. Many types of mollusk have hard shells to protect them.

**Definition Source:** Collins English Dictionary. Retrieved from  
<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english>

**Text Easability:****Text Easability Scores**

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1. Visit the Coh-Metrix Text Easability Assessor website at <http://tea.cohmetrix.com/>. If you do not already have a login and password, create one. It is free and easy to sign up for access to the website.
2. Once you have created an account and sign in, you will be taken to a page with an empty, white text box. Copy and paste the text from this passage into the empty, white text box. Make sure you are only copying and pasting the body of the passage. Do not include the title, date, or any of the resources present in the passage.
3. When you have pasted the passage into the text box, click on the red button beneath the text box that says "Analyze." There will be a short delay and after a few seconds, you will see a bar graph appear to the right of the screen.
4. The bar graph will give you the percentages for several text characteristics including: narrativity, syntactic simplicity, word concreteness, referential cohesion, and deep cohesion.
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