

# Back Trails

## Perspectives on People and Nature

### The Turtle and I

by Russell Shefrin

The narrator of Norman Maclean's novel about life and fly fishing, *A River Runs Through It*, concludes with the observation that he is "haunted by waters." I, too, love to fly-fish and contemplate life. However, rather than the world of rushing mountain streams and hand-tied lures, my experience with nature seems haunted by... snapping turtles.

My first memorable encounter occurred some years ago near my home in western New York. At that time, my exposure to the natural world was not yet via fly fishing but horseback riding. One day, my faithful steed, "Race," and I were approaching a swampy pond, when I suddenly heard a loud hissing sound. Race, whose name was a bit misleading considering his phlegmatic temperament, was unperturbed. But I became alarmed. Nervously surveying the ground near my horse's feet, I discovered that the source of the noise was a large snapping turtle. The reptile was in what I presumed to be a threat posture, crouched down on its front legs, with its shell raised. It was sounding off in a most angry manner. Race and I circled it, maintaining a respectful distance. The turtle remained defiant, apparently ready to take on a full-grown horse and rider. I was surprised, as I have heard that even grizzly bears are reluctant to do that! Only after we had retreated about 50 feet did the turtle relax and proceed on its way.

On a later occasion, I was fly fishing on the Boreas River in northeastern New York. Many people find this activity sharpens the senses and enhances alertness. I, however, tend to be mesmerized by the running water and the charming environs in which trout are typically found. This particular day, I was wading in a stream and was jarred a little from my reverie

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by the sight of a large, round object two feet under the water. It was moving downstream toward me. Still in a slightly hypnotized state, I thought, "What is a flying saucer doing in the water?" As my perception cleared, I realized that I was being approached by a snapper. This time, however, the animal was not at all aggressive. It sedately drifted toward me, occasionally correcting its course with calm, deliberate movements of its webbed feet. Its behavior was anything but threatening. I stepped aside to let the turtle pass, marveling at the graceful movements of a rather ugly creature.

I have since learned that my divergent interactions with the common snapping turtle (*Chelydra serpentina*) actually illustrate two different aspects of its "personality." On land, the animal is typically aggressive; but in the water, it is relatively docile, at least when it is not provoked or in the process of hunting. Due to a variety of factors, including the configuration of its shell, the snapper may have more difficulty avoiding danger on land. As

a result, it may have adopted a "best defense is a good offense" strategy when out of its aquatic world.

My most recent sighting of *C. serpentina* was around noon on a late spring day. I was driving when I spotted one as it lumbered along the grassy shoulder of the road. Most likely, it was seeking a nesting site. Now, I know I shouldn't anthropomorphize, but the creature

looked as if it was heading for the noontime show at the local cinema. Then again, now that the common snapping turtle has been designated our state reptile, perhaps this specimen was on its way to some official function!

In these encounters, whether engaged in serious nature study or flights of whimsey, I have been reminded of the importance of conservation. For it is the protection of open space that creates the possibility of these unexpected meetings. I only hope that future generations will have the same opportunities to interact with wild animals that we enjoy today.

Psychologist **Russell Shefrin** enjoys fly fishing and nature study near his western New York home.



Bill Baranewski

New York State Conservationist, August 2008