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THE 'TEEN WINDOW

... An Opening On The Natural World Around Us

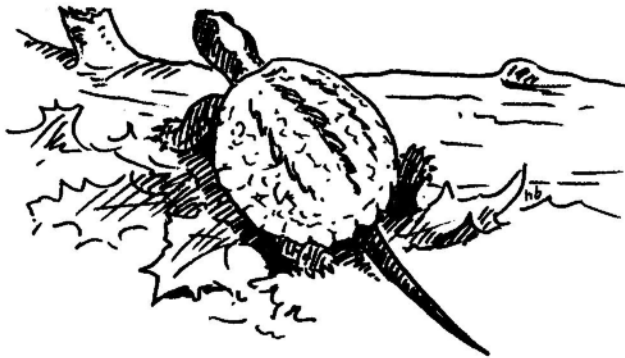
by
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INTREPID TURTLES

I'VE BEEN THINKING about turtles, who have become symbols of slowness, although the sloth is even slower. Slowness doesn't win the race, yet turtles have survived for a long time, in spite of their special handicap.

Turtles, of course, have the supreme advantage of carrying their shelter with them, as noted in this verse by Charlotte Baker Montgomery:

I live in a house but I'm always outdoors.
My house has no roof, no walls and no floors.
Although I travel I never leave home.
I pay no hotel bills wherever I roam.
Everything in my house suits me to a T.
I'll never sell my house—for my house is ME.



One word describes the turtle: intrepid. A synonym for that word is "dauntless," which the turtle certainly is. Early one spring, while digging for a foundation, my husband and I uncovered baby painted turtles deep in the ground. Guided by instinct, they unerringly headed for the pond, 50 feet away. I watched one hesitate with his feet partly submerged, looking around with an air of perplexed curiosity. Having taken account of the world for the first time, he ambled into the water and began to swim. His strokes were feeble, but he evidently knew just what he was about. Then he encountered ca-

lamity. His shell caught against a straw on the water's surface, pulling him askew.

He struggled valiantly, and though his power was weak, his persistence was invincible. Ultimately, he overcame the straw and headed onward — intrepid from the very beginning.

This September, I had occa-

sion to watch another turtle on a different, but equally hazardous journey. I was sitting in the woods, observing migrating birds, when a rustling sounded five feet away. There came a snapping turtle, as shown by three broken ridges down his back and a tail as long as his body. Recently hatched, he was not much bigger than a 50-cent piece. His light gray shell was matched by gray on top of his head, but his undershell, neck and eyes were black.

He walked determinedly through leaves bigger than himself, and he conquered one fallen branch after another. He was

headed southwest, away from the pond, which was more than 1,000 feet to the north. He moved on past me, at one point falling against my shoe when he stumbled over a branch. Immediately righting himself, he kept on his way, crossed a dirt road, and disappeared into woods on the far side. I believe he was seeking a place in which to hibernate, for in spring I've seen adult snappers come to our pond from distant places, where they must have spent the winter underground, although often snappers hibernate in mud underwater.

At the edge of this same dirt road, I had seen a female snapper laying eggs (which she carefully covered) and this youngster may have hatched there just in time to hibernate.

Snappers have the reputation of being vicious, and they do kill and eat baby ducks and other small creatures who venture within their reach. This little fellow, however, would eat mainly insects, as well as small fish and crustaceans. Contrary to popular opinion, snapping turtles also feed on many kinds of water plants. One spring I met a large snapper munching on newly-emerged stalks of arrow arum, a plant which abounds in our pond.

More about turtles next month.

NOTE: *Have you been doing some thinking lately? If it is about animals, what you've seen that disturbs or delights you, write a letter to this column. Here's a chance to express your deepest feelings, your most profound thoughts. If you are 12-18 years of age, we would like to hear what you think about animals. We may publish what you say (unless you specifically request that we do not). Sorry, but we cannot answer each letter personally.*

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