

TRAVELOGUE

An Inadvertent Travelogue: Daniel Island, South Carolina

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Photographs by the author except where noted.

“He chased me a couple hundred feet up the creek, that’s what then.” The snapping turtle paused for effect. “But I escaped — lost him in a muddy cloud near the fall-down tree. I watched him walk away, stooping, in the direction we came.”

They were incredulous, this odd collection of compatriots — snapping turtles, mud turtles, and one crayfish (admitted only after a protracted argument regarding the dorsal segment of his crustacean exoskeleton being called a “carapace”). They’d heard rumors of such encounters with these bipedal beasts, but never firsthand. There were vague legends of turtles disappearing for soup or to live out a few short months trapped in a class cage in a boy’s bedroom. But never this. Never an escape.

Although I know Common Snapping Turtles (*Chelydra serpentina*) lack a social structure, let alone the power of vocalization, I couldn’t resist imaging today’s meeting projected with human musings. In this setting, such anthropomorphizing seems almost appropriate: I waded through the mucky waters of this ditch, forested on either side for a mere 100 feet or so, to the echoing songs of cardinals and titmice punctuated by the



WILLIAM SLATER

The author holds an adult Yellowbelly Slider (*Trachemys s. scripta*) with a beautifully textured carapace.



The psychedelic markings of a juvenile Yellowbelly Slider (*Trachemys s. scripta*).

sharp ping of golf balls being whacked. Daniel Island, South Carolina, is no nature preserve. After falling out of the hands of a wealthy family who used the land for occasional sport hunting and cattle grazing, the island became a quick magnet for developers. It is now home to two golf courses, professional tennis tournaments, and the concomitant array of multi-million-dollar homes. As an outgrowth of the City of Charleston, the human population continues to increase exponentially, now at about 7,000 inhabitants. Here for a week to visit family, I could not resist a muddy exploration of this narrow remnant of what this place used to be — wooded and wild.

My encounter was with a smallish snapping turtle, let’s call him an adolescent (which might at least partially explain the bravado with which he relayed his tale), meandering in the mire just off a golf-cart bridge. I saw him, paused a moment to measure the situation, then grabbed firmly (although not without some trepidation) at the rear of the carapace. I set him on the bank to take some photos and admire him closely, as much as one can admire a fellow creature intent on one’s demise (or, more accurately, who saw my demise as the surest path to his own safety). In his version of events, it was his own reaction that produced a quick release, the clawing and sudden snapping, the dramatic pauses with mouth fully agape, daring me to try again. I replaced him in the small brook, much more clumsily than I intended as his rear legs slapped forcefully at the moment

of release, plopping him into the leafy shallows. He then moved fluidly and intentionally upstream, a walking-in-water that lacked the usual implied laboriousness of locomotion in reduced gravity. The sepia tones of the setting were most appropriate for an animal unchanged for some 60 million years, framing him somewhere amongst the ancients, frozen in some past that no longer exists but still haunts us.

Next day, I returned to this spot and ventured farther down-creek (or, more aptly, down-ditch) and chanced upon two Eastern Mud Turtles (*Kinosternon subrubrum*), one basking on the grassy bank and the other just a few inches away, submerged in the tannin-brown water. This pair was much more tolerant of my investigations and photographs than their predecessor; I fancied that word had spread quickly amongst their contingent that I was not to be feared. The mud turtles' survival technique was the antithesis of the snapper's, but no less effective. They tucked in their heads and held steady. Their patience exists on a scale in time with geologic movements and the slow turning of years, not the rush of our harried lives.

This marked the third turtle species I'd seen in the vicinity of my parents-in-law's house during our short visit. The remaining species is, of course, the ubiquitous Yellowbelly Slider (*Trachemys s. scripta*), found basking, often in large numbers, on the tidy shores and drainage pipes of every water hazard and decorative pond. With such a hearty tolerance for sculpted landscapes and close quarters with both humans and conspecifics, these are the suburbanites of the turtle world. Several juveniles made themselves readily available for quick capture, photographing, and release.



A Common Mud Turtle (*Kinosternon subrubrum*) basks on the leafy bank.



A basking juvenile Yellowbelly Slider (*Trachemys s. scripta*), enjoying both the sunshine and a prime view of the golf course.



The author holds two juvenile Yellowbelly Sliders (*Trachemys s. scripta*) recently caught in a golf-course pond.

Natural selection has blessed them with a carapace as psychedelic as any 1960s rock poster, yellows and greens swirling in patterns at once nebulous and repetitive. They grow less ostentatious with age, as do we all — the algae-black adults drift wearily in the middle of ponds, watching us watch them from the safety of distance.

Now this could go one of two ways. On the one hand, these shelled reptiles are to be extolled for their plodding tenaciousness, their ability to survive and possibly even thrive (at least in the case of the sliders) in such a manicured environment. These are tough beasts; they have lived unfathomably long, and, most likely, will continue to do so well after the heyday of humans. We should revere such endurance. And yet, although this may even be true, such perspective lets us off too easy. It's a lesson in compla-



Just some of the ubiquitous Yellowbelly Sliders (*Trachemys s. scripta*) basking on a drainage outlet.



An adolescent Common Snapping Turtle (*Chelydra serpentina*) showing his ferocity in an attempt to ward off the author; he was successful.

gency to believe that our most egregious habitat alterations leave the turtles intact. Perhaps this meager corridor of forest is too small for a proper home range and nesting, perhaps fragmentation prevents gene flow, perhaps the pesticides will catch up with even the sliders eventually. Maybe these are walking ghosts, the last vestiges of what was once, not at all long ago, a truly impressive showing. But this condemning perspective, also perhaps true, does not lead us to answers. A slider prefers a golf course to a mall parking lot, no doubt.

I prefer the lesson of simultaneous reverence and caution. Moralizing, even when warranted, seldom creates solutions. There is great joy at finding such survivors — they are doubtless that — in such close quarters to our homes and businesses. There is no harm in wonder at the quotidian.

It is this wonder that sparks imagination, and imagination is the impetus for preservation. The snapper, the slider, and the mud turtle are not exceptional in the sense of being rare or exotic; rather, if it is not oxymoronic, they are exceptional in their abundance. As three of the most common turtles in North America, the expanded range of this assemblage now covers the better part of the continent as well as a spattering of colonies around the globe. To protect the imperiled, it may be of great benefit to study the flourishing — or, at the very least, admire their staying power.

Our brave snapper and his cohort would agree. Could these turtles organize and petition, as I dream they could on this breezy spring afternoon, they would implore us to be mindful, to watch our steps, to know that they, too, are here.