

AQUATIC ANECDOTES

Number 2

Black Water Beasts

Black water rivers in north Florida are unique. Their tannin-stained color comes from the waters journey through swamps, mud, and dying plants. However, this area of Florida has the largest density of freshwater springs in the world. These springs flow crystal clear water from deep underground and often dispel into black water rivers. When it rains, water picks up the tannins but in periods of drought, spring water can make up a consistent portion of the rivers flow. This changes the water from a deep coffee brown and adds a subtle, murky, clarity. This slight visibility is all we need for an adventure.



Figure 1. The view from the bottom of a black water river.

Jack had been planning this for a while. If the smaller rivers clear up during droughts, why wouldn't the larger ones? Jack, Joseph, Sarah and I packed our bags, hoisted a canoe on top of our car, and headed out to a very large blackwater river. This river, which usually looks like a flowing mud pit, had cleared up to where you could just about see your toes while swimming. We were heading out for a fun day on the water with high hopes to see an alligator snapping turtle (*Macrochelys suwanniensis*). These are among the largest freshwater turtles in the world. They can reach upwards of 200 lbs with jaws strong enough to crush turtles and an appearance straight out of Jurassic Park. We had heard good things about this spot, but we had no idea what we were in store for.

We paddled partway down river and stopped at a steep mudbank along the river's edge. We were used to seeing these turtles in holes and ledges, so we were looking for strong rocky structure. We threw on our masks, snorkels, and fins and jumped in. Immediately I was overjoyed to see that there was indeed visibility! I could see about 6 ft to the sandy, mud bottom. I swam out a bit and began diving. In the low visibility, you lose light very rapidly. At around 10ft, everything is a murky haze and around 20ft, it looks like somebody threw their sweatshirt over the sun. Swimming around that depth, looking under jagged logs and branches is quite... well spooky. It's dark, ominous, and the constant thought of alligators is tough to shake. But the excitement of finding a BIG turtle far outweighs these thoughts. At this first spot, we didn't see much. There weren't any holes or ledges, and the bottom was mainly sand, we didn't explore for too long before hopping back in the canoe and heading further down river.

Our next stop was determined by some large overhanging cypress trees. Half of the soil holding these trees in place had been washed away by the river, leaving the roots exposed like hands reaching into the water. We figured this would be a good place to look as there were many places for turtles to hide. We jumped in and started snorkeling around. It wasn't long before Jack began to shout "Got one! Got one!". I love this

moment; my heart begins to race, and my mind explodes with curious thoughts - how big is it? Is it going to get away? Will it still be around by the time I make it to Jack? I zoom over and sure enough, there on the bottom is a beautiful 20lb female alligator snapping turtle. We stayed with it for a while, snapping photographs and just enjoying the moment. After we decided we had bothered her enough, we jumped back in a canoe - this time with a newfound bliss and excitement.



Figure 2. A 20lb alligator snapping turtle observed in the roots of a large cypress tree.

We moved just across the river to a spot with some large treefalls. We discussed how our trip was already spectacular and anything else would just be a bonus. After suiting up, we slid back into the cold dark water and began our search once more. This spot was a bit extra spooky. The water was deep and nearby were some thick plants that looked like the perfect hiding spot for a big alligator. I had just begun looking at the

first tree fall when Joseph begins yelling "Here! Here! Here!". I swim over, dive down and sure enough, a massive 90lb male alligator snapping turtle. Unlike the other ones I have seen, this turtle was just sitting on the river bottom, looking a little lost. Most turtles dart away when they see people. But these are giants - kings of the river - when I approached this turtle, instead of swimming away, it turned towards me and approached my camera. They have eyes like dinosaurs. Small and beady but truly beautiful when examined closely.

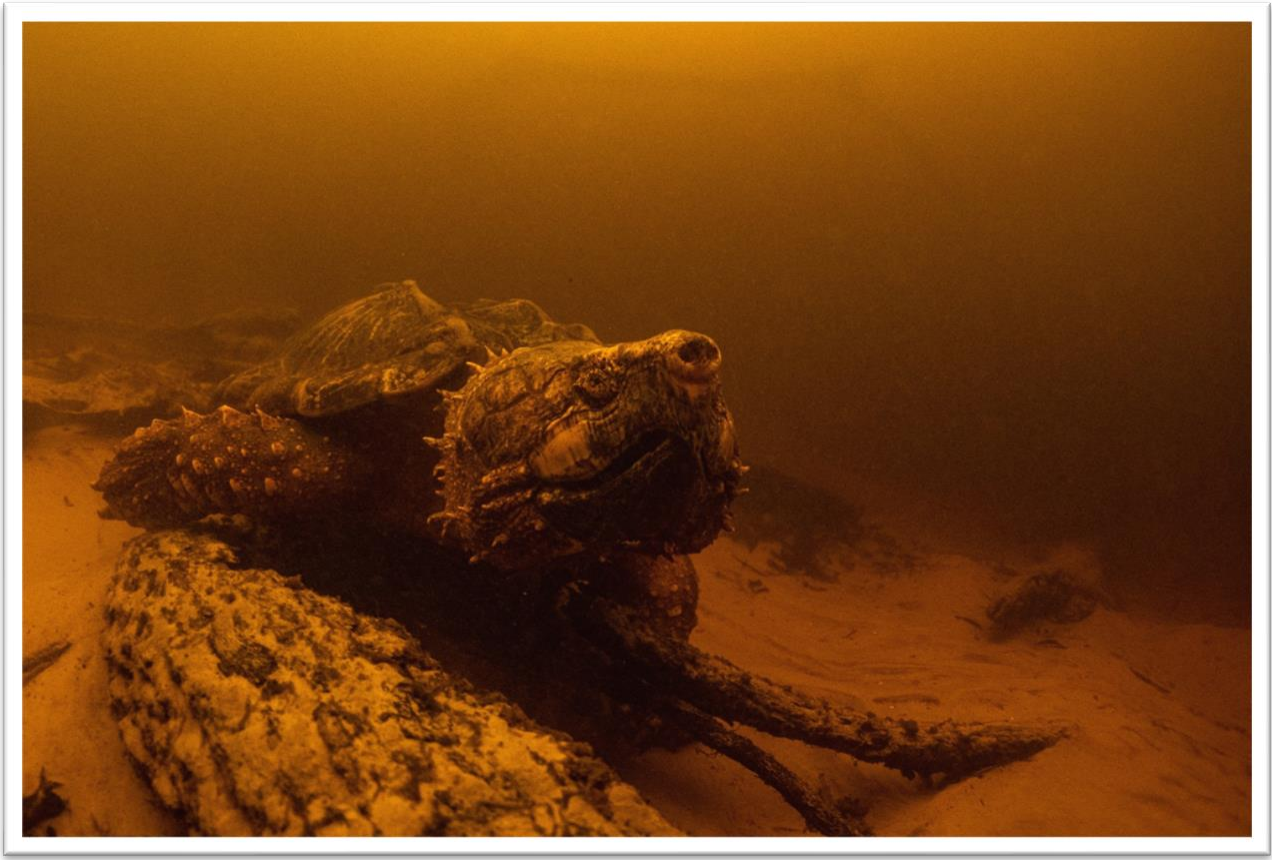


Figure 3. A giant 90lb male alligator snapping turtle hanging out at the bottom of a blackwater river.

My friends and I were ecstatic. Two alligator snapping turtles in one day?? Truly an unforgettable experience. The sun was already getting low but we were running on a concoction of excitement from finding the turtles and the constant adrenaline from diving in the spooky waters and decided to explore one more spot. Just like before, we moved just a little way down the river and found a spot with some large tree falls. We

hoped in the water and begun our exploration. The spot looked great right off the bat. Lots of sunken branches and logs scattered the riverbed. Just a few minutes since jumping in, I saw the familiar shape below me. A giant shell nestled up by a sunken tree. I swam down, very careful not to disturb it and snapped a few photographs of where he lay.



Figure 4. A very old, 70lb male alligator snapping turtle nestled by a sunken tree.

We estimated this turtle to be around 70lbs and very old. You'll notice the smooth shell compared to our first turtle (Figure 2). This is from years of wear - climbing under logs and rocks. The head on this turtle is white. This is from the skin wearing off, exposing the skull underneath. This is normal for alligator snappers, but really only seen on old turtles.

We were all in disbelief, three alligator snapping turtles in a single day. Not only was the feat spectacular but we had only spent a total of 45 minutes actually searching for the turtles! Although this river was packed with them, most places are not. Alligator snapping turtles were once heavily trapped for their meat. This practice has stopped but accidentally bycatch from fisherman still kills thousands of turtles every year. Additionally, poaching has led to severe declines in this species. Due to their unique look and size, they are very valuable in the pet trade. However, if you ever get a chance to observe one of these turtles in their natural habitat, you'll know that they are most valuable to the ecosystem in which they belong.