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Alligator Snapper Stuck in the Mud: Evidence of Aestivation

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The Alligator Snapping Turtle (*Macrochelys temminckii*) is the largest freshwater turtle in North America, capable of reaching a weight of 113 kg with a carapace length of 80.0 cm (Ernst et al. 1994). These turtles are confined to river systems of the lower Mississippi Basin and rivers that drain the northern Gulf of Mexico (Ernst et al. 1994, Trauth et al. 2004). The Alligator Snapping Turtle is highly aquatic, and only the female leaves the water to nest (Ernst et al. 1994, Pritchard 1989). Little is known of the behavior of this species under natural conditions, especially during low water when individuals might become stranded.

On 3 September 1993, while working on Panther Creek (Yazoo County, Mississippi) during low-water conditions, I observed an Alligator Snapping Turtle that appeared to be aestivating while buried deeply in mud. After encountering the turtle, my coworker and I returned the following day to take pictures and collect data. The sediment depth of the buried turtle was 35.6 cm, and the turtle had moved 17.8 cm since first observed 16 h earlier. The sediment surrounding the turtle was soft mud that contained seepage from a spring. The temperature of the seepage was 22 °C. The maximum carapace length of the turtle was 66 cm. The individual was a male and weighed just over 45.3 kg.

On 24 October 2003, while sampling fishes in the Quiver River upstream from Hwy 3 in Sunflower County, Mississippi, a coworker and I observed a second Alligator Snapper stranded in mud. Only the upper half of the turtle's body was exposed. Apparently the turtle had been stranded during low-water conditions and was waiting for a rise in the river to initiate movement. Ernst et al. (<http://nlbif.eti.uva.nl/bis/turtles.php>) reported turtles aestivating in drying riverbeds to prevent desiccation. Although other colleagues also have observed Alligator Snapping Turtles stranded or aestivating during low water conditions (Bill Lancaster, retired turtle trapper, Sunflower County, Mississippi; Brent Harrel, USFWS, pers. comm.), this account appears to be the first published documentation of *Macrochelys temminckii* stranded or aestivating in natural habitat.

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Excavating an Alligator Snapping Turtle from the mud during low-water conditions in Panther Creek, Yazoo County, Mississippi.