

## Chelonian Bandits

A herpetological Story By Keith Begin.

Even as a boy turtles and tortoise have been my favorite. For some reason they have held my curiosity and imagination captive for as long as I can remember. Growing up across the street from a huge swamp surely had something to do with it. Every year when spring would arrive I would wake up and rush across the street to see if any of my shelled friends had returned to their foraging grounds. Surrounding the swamp there were many vernal pools, off set to the main body of water, which would dry up by midsummer. These vernal pools were homes to hundreds, possibly thousands, of amphibians. They would gather in these pools every spring to mate and lay their eggs. American toads and various species frogs and salamander would deposit their eggs into these temporary, fish free, pools which would provide the swamps most common turtle, the spotted turtle, with a valuable food source.

The turtles would venture out of the swamp and travel from pool to pool and feast on the eggs, tadpoles, and froglets. I remember one trip into the wet lands where I saw several spotted turtles in a shallow pool feasting. As I approached I realized the water was black with an abundance of tadpoles, I watched as the turtles gave chase. The day grew late I went home but returned the following morning and found that the turtles had completely devoured every tadpole! As I examined the pool I noticed a few had found refuge under the leaf litter, but for the most part they had been wiped out. Witnessing this as a young boy I wondered how the frogs and other amphibians ever manage to reproduce themselves successfully.

As I grew up I continued to follow these turtles every spring, eventually I found them mating and laying eggs. When I encountered nest sites, I would mark them when I returned I would find they had been unearthed and every egg had been carefully opened and emptied. Who would do such a thing? By this age I was old enough to realize that they had been eaten by a predator, but what animal was so skilled to find and dissect them? I decided then that I would I started protecting the nests. I tried covering the nests with rocks, carpet, and even a steel wire milk crate but something very smart was always figuring out way to dig over, under or maneuver my protective attempts. Sometime during these failed attempts I began to notice many other nest sites had been raided....ones I hadn't even known about – Gone! The situation was always the same, every egg, every nest, every time...with each egg sliced open and emptied.

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It's the chipmunks, or birds, or maybe even the squirrels! I had to find out, but how?

The Plan: A trap! I'll trap them! I'll rent a "Havahart" trap, the kind that traps without injury, I wanted this culprit alive. I waited till the following season and just like clockwork the turtles were soon in full swing, I found a female nesting and marked her nest and headed home for my trap and camping gear. Late that night my trap was sprung and whatever was trapped inside was very angry, but what worse was that there were others just as angry....and they weren't trapped.

"Raccoons!"...."Raccoons!" I yelled "get away from those eggs!" as I chased them away. Raccoons are smart and I defiantly had a formidable opponent on my hands.

Eventually though, I made a cage that would hammer into the ground around the nest that would keep raccoons out but still let the hatchlings through when they hatched. The fun was mostly in the challenge of keeping the raccoons out but also in the knowledge gained as a young naturalist. You see, the turtles surely rained terror on those amphibian eggs, but the frogs and other amphibians always managed to reproduce themselves enough to sustain proper numbers. The turtles, with an egg or two escaping the wrath of the raccoons the turtles manage as well.

Uncovering the "Circle of Life" as a boy was fun, the circle is generally kept in balance, until it is disrupted, usually by humans. Unfortunately it's almost always our fault when things become out of balance, but that's another story.

As an adult I often tell this story and reflect on the things I learned. I learned how fragile life is, I learned how "Life feeds on Life" and all the small miracles that happen within that otherwise brutal phrase. Those other raccoons that I chased off that night, were just pups, just baby raccoons likely getting their first class in "turtle nest raiding" from their mom. It isn't until there are too many of these predators that there is any real problem at all, there just needs to be a balance.

I also learned how to take advantage of the skilled raccoon. Nowadays I like to go camping along the brackish waters of the North River in Marshfield and whenever I hear those raccoons I will follow them around to the river banks and they will always tell me where to find (snapping

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turtle) eggs, just watch where they dig. Of course you'll also have to have the correct time of year, June is a popular nesting season but if you listen closely to raccoons chatter he will tell you where to find some eggs. Sometimes I'll save a few and hatch them out after all, they are my *favorite*.

In recent years I had thoughts about how it would really be beneficial if a raccoon enthusiast were to train a raccoon to seek out turtle eggs in areas where biologists are working to learn more about specific turtles. In the country of Louse they train rats to sniff fields to detect land mines prior to farmers attempting to cultivate the land, why couldn't people do the same with raccoons to locate endangered species of turtle eggs to be hatched and released? With the intelligence level of raccoons it couldn't be as hard as training a rat! Maybe someday somebody will use the cunning nose of the raccoons to help sustain a threatened population of a turtle and then Chelonian Bandit will have come "Full Circle."



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