

BONAPARTE'S GULL CAUGHT BY SNAPPING TURTLE

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While working as a Dune Naturalist at The Nature Conservancy's El Dorado Beach Preserve in Jefferson County, New York, I have observed common Snapping Turtle (*Chelydra serpentina*) predation of migratory shorebirds before; in August 1994, two Semipalmated Sandpipers (*Calidris pusilla*) and one Lesser Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*) were captured by Snapping Turtles within six days of each other (Pryor 1996). More surprising to me, however, was the capture of an immature Bonaparte's Gull (*Larus philadelphia*) in July 1995, at the same site and under the same circumstances.

During the summer months at El Dorado Beach, green algae (*Cladophora glomerata*) washes in from eastern Lake Ontario and forms thick algal mats offshore. These mats entrap invertebrates and small fish, and thus attract a variety of predators including shorebirds, songbirds, and gulls. The algal mats also attract Northern Water Snake (*Nerodia sipedon*), Eastern Painted Turtle (*Chrysemys picta*) as well as Snapping Turtle. Large Snapping Turtles frequently are seen around these mats, and will submerge themselves under the algal suspension to ambush the shorebirds feeding above.

On 21 July, 1995 at 3:00 PM EST, a large Snapping Turtle captured an immature Bonaparte's Gull from beneath the algae. From shore, the gull appeared merely to be sitting on the mat with outstretched wings (Figure 1). After walking into the algae and disturbing the bird, though, I observed a Snapping Turtle pulling the gull into the mat by its right leg. I dug into the algae below the gull and revealed the turtle's head, whereupon it released the bird. The gull swiftly flew away and was not observed again. The turtle was buried under 13 cm of algae and could not move. The algae had hardened in the summer heat, and the turtle's head maintained an opening to the surface for breathing. Upon extricating the turtle, I estimated its weight to be approximately 9-11 kg, and measured its carapace at 27 cm in length. I believe the capture of the Bonaparte's Gull was a desperate predatory attempt by the hungry turtle, firmly fixed in solidifying algae.

Although gulls are known to be preyed upon by Snapping Turtles from underwater (Alexander 1921), observations of predation from under the algal mats are unique and intriguing. The Snapping Turtles adopt this

unusual hunting tactic seasonally, in response to a transitory environmental condition. Some older turtles presumably repeat these learned behaviors annually. Perhaps these ubiquitous opportunists play a much greater role in the lives of birds than we currently realize.



Figure 1. Immature Bonaparte's Gull (*Larus philadelphia*) captured by Snapping Turtle (*Chelydra serpentina*) in eastern Lake Ontario on 21 July 1995 at El Dorado Beach Preserve, Jefferson County, NY. Photograph by G. S. Pryor.

LITERATURE CITED

- Alexander EG. 1921. Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla*) captured by snapping turtles. *Auk* 38:596.
- Pryor GS. 1996. Observations of shorebird predation by snapping turtles in eastern Lake Ontario. *Wilson Bull* Mar;108(1):190-2.