

NatureNotes  
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**Adrienne Hess of Bristol, Tennessee asks, “Snapping turtles look very prehistoric; how long have they been around?”**

Adrienne, you are absolutely right; snapping turtles do look like very ancient creatures, as you can see in this 19<sup>th</sup> century lithograph, but the answer to your question will surprise you!



The species of snapper that occurs locally is the Common Snapping Turtle (*Chelydra serpentina serpentina*), and believe it or not, is a relative newcomer to the turtle world. This turtle is known in the fossil record as early as the Pliocene epoch, approximately 4 million years ago. This was the time in Earth history immediately following the Miocene epoch, the age of the Gray Fossil Site of Washington County, Tennessee. The family that snapping turtles belong to, called *Chelydridae*, has been on Earth since the Paleocene, shortly after the extinction of the dinosaurs, about 60 million years ago.

Still, 4 million years may sound like quite a long time ago, but compare that to another group of local turtles, the softshells of the genus *Apalone*, which have been around, nearly unchanged, since the late Jurassic period, a whopping 150 million years ago! That's right; the softshells win the longevity award as they truly are turtles left over from the time of the dinosaurs.

In fact, turtles as a whole are what you might call “living fossils”, as they are the only surviving members of an entire group of reptiles called the Anapsids. The Anapsids were the first true reptiles on Earth, and had their greatest glory long before the dinosaurs. Most went extinct at the end of the Permian period (in the largest mass extinction of all time), but some persevered, and every turtle and tortoise in the world today harkens back to that otherwise lost group of reptiles!

Regardless of their prehistoric status, though, one fact is clear: as some of the region’s more common turtles, snappers are certainly around today, and it doesn’t appear that they are going anywhere anytime soon. But, the next time you see any turtle basking on a log, or walking through your yard, remember that, in some ways, you’re also looking back in time.

To submit *your* nature question, write to: Steele Creek Nature Center, P.O. Box 1189, Bristol, Tenn., 37621. You can also e-mail [jstout@bristoltn.org](mailto:jstout@bristoltn.org).

**- Jeremy B. Stout, Naturalist**