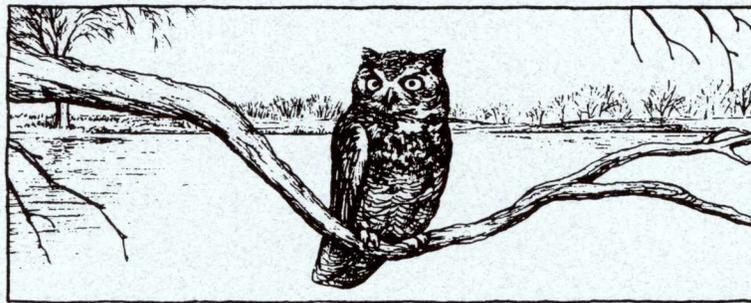


# STILLMAN NEWSLETTER



©SUMMER 1997

## BIG and Little Turtle

--Mark Spreyer

A long, long time ago, before there were any people or any earth, according to an Iroquois legend, the gods lived above the sky and below was nothing but water populated by animals such as swans, muskrats, turtles and toads. One day, two swans were swimming on the water when they heard a thundering noise and looked up to see a Sky Woman falling through a hole in the sky.

The swans caught her in their wings but realized that they could not live in the water and they could not hold her up forever. They called a meeting of the water animals to decide what to do.

Big Turtle said, "If someone will dive down into the water and bring up some earth from below, I will hold the earth on my back and we shall have land for Sky Woman to live on."

So, the water animals took turns diving. Muskrat tried but could not find the earth below. Beaver made a deep dive but did not reach the mud. And so it went.

Finally, Little Toad tried. He was gone so long that the other animals thought he would never come up. When at last he surfaced, his mouth was full of earth. The animals took the earth and spread it all over Big Turtle's back.

When this was done, a marvelous thing happened. The amount of earth grew larger and larger until Big Turtle had all of North America on his back.

Sky Woman was happy with her

new home but there was no light and she had a difficult time finding her way in the darkness. The animals again met in council.

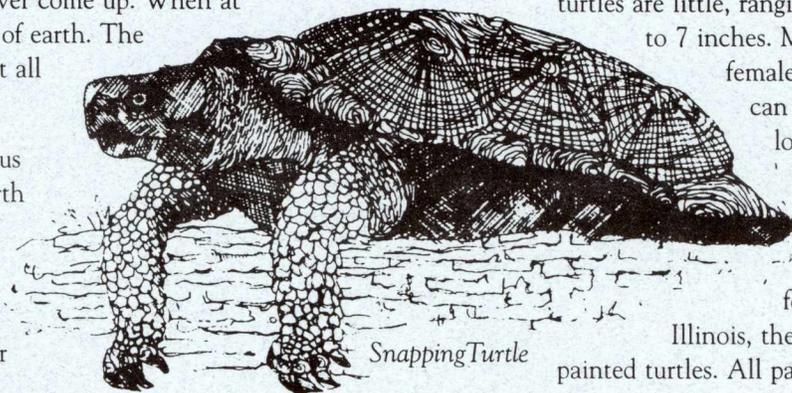
"Let me go up to the sky," Little Turtle said, "I will put a light there for the Sky Woman."

Then, a great thundercloud rolled over the waters and Little Turtle jumped into the cloud and rode up to the sky. He snatched some of the lightning out of the cloud and rolled it into a ball which he fastened to the roof of the heavens. In this way, Little Turtle made the sun in the sky.

There are, of course, other versions of this Native American creation story but I am particularly fond of this one because at Stillman, you can see almost all these water animals. As I type this, a muskrat swims along the shore of the pond. And, do we have turtles! This spring, students have counted as many as 35 turtles basking on one fallen tree. These 35 were all painted turtles (*Chrysemys picta*) or, what I like to think of as Little Turtle's descendants.

Compared to Stillman's other resident terrapin, painted turtles are little, ranging in length from 4.5 to 7 inches. Males are smaller than females and, when mature, can be recognized by the long nails on their forefeet.

Two different subspecies are found here in Northern Illinois, the midland and western painted turtles. All painted turtles have an



Snapping Turtle

# STILLMAN NATURE CENTER

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olive-green *carapace*, or upper shell portion, and a yellow to red lower shell, called the *plastron*. At Stillman, all the painted turtles I have seen are of the western variety. The western is the largest of the painted turtles and has a intricate, dark pattern on its orange plastron.

As mentioned earlier, these turtles are commonly seen basking together. A period of basking usually lasts about two hours. Basking is most frequent from April through September and peaks in the morning. In northern regions, morning basking is probably necessary to raise this cold-blooded reptile's body temperature to operational levels.

Once at those levels, the turtles forage for food. They are generalists which dine on a wide variety of plants and animals including algae, duckweed, leeches, slugs, crayfish, dead fish, tadpoles, beetles, water striders plus larval mayflies, damselflies and mosquitoes.

When watching painted turtles basking on a log, I can't help but wonder if they know that they are enjoying the warm benefits of Little Turtle's efforts. Perhaps their plastrons are orange because a little part of the sun that their ancestor formed remains stuck to their shells.

If the latter is so, than part of the earth is still clinging to the back of today's Big Turtle, the snapping turtle (*Chelydra serpentina*). How big is big? Their shells are 8 to 12 inches in length and weights of 10 to 35 pounds are common in the wild. A fattened captive specimen tipped the scales at 86 pounds. The length measurements do not include the head or long, saw-toothed tail.

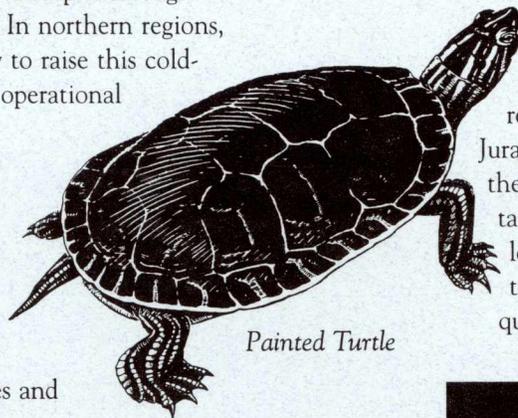
Unlike painted turtles, snapping turtles rarely bask and when they do, they do it alone. Instead, a snapper likes to rest in muddy shallows, with only its eyes and nostrils exposed.

Under the water, a snapper is usually shy, swimming away or just pulling its head in when disturbed. However, if encountered on land or lifted from the water, watch out! It will strike repeatedly and can inflict a serious bite.

Its choice of foods is only limited by what fits into its jaws. A study in Michigan found that the snapper's diet was 37% plants and 54% animals by volume. A partial list of the animals consumed includes spiders, snails, crabs, clams,

leeches, snakes, birds, salamanders, small turtles plus the eggs, young and adults of various fish, frogs and toads. Carrion is also eaten.

A young turtle will actively seek out food while an older snapper simply waits and ambushes its prey. Small items are swallowed whole while larger prey is held in the mouth and scraped with the strong foreclaws into more manageable pieces. Feeding usually takes place underwater.



Painted Turtle

The images of these plated, primitive reptiles does suggest a wetland version of Jurassic Park. Perhaps Big Turtle does still carry the continent on his shell. If so, Californians take note. Big Turtle grows weary of his massive load from time to time and will move his shell to shift the weight. That's why the earth quakes.

## PROGRAMS

### BIRD BANDING OPEN HOUSES

Watch Mark Spreyer (a licensed bird bander) measure, weigh and record data about our resident and migratory birds. Catching birds is not always predictable, so come prepared to hike the trails. If it's raining, the activity will be cancelled.

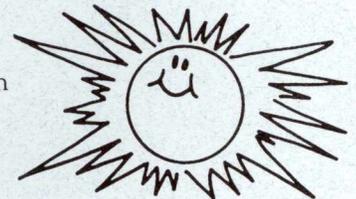
Date: Sundays; June 8 & July 6

Time: 9:00AM to Noon

Fee: None

### SUMMER SOLSTICE\* CELEBRATION

The summer solstice marks the beginning of summer and is the day with the most sunshine. Join the two Susans (Allman and Hargreaves) as they lead you and your children in activities designed to celebrate the sun's role in fueling life on planet earth.



Date: Sunday, June 22

Time: Noon

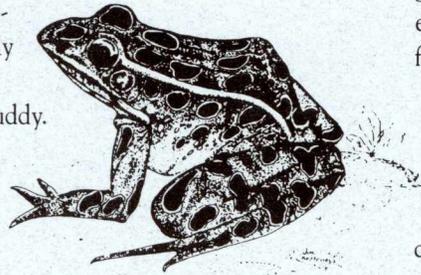
Fee: None

\*Yes, we know the solstice is a day earlier but, hey, we're open on **Sundays**.

## POND LIFE: From the Bottom Up

This afternoon, with the help of long-handled dip nets, visitors will scoop into our pond in hopes of catching crayfish, dragonfly larvae, tadpoles and other rarely seen pond inhabitants. Dress in clothes you don't mind getting muddy.

Date: Sunday, June 29  
Time: 2:00PM  
Fee: None



## BUTTERFLIES, MOTHS & CATERPILLARS

Join Stillman's naturalist and search the nature center's woods and fields for moths, butterflies and their caterpillars. We will visit Stillman's butterfly garden where you can learn about plants that attract these colorful insects.

Date: Sunday, July 13  
Time: 2:00PM  
Fee: None

FOR MORE PROGRAM INFORMATION OR  
TO MAKE RESERVATIONS,  
PLEASE CALL (847)428-OWLS.

## RAPTOR UPDATE

### *The Cooper's Move In*

As some of you will recall, last year we had a Great Horned Owl who successfully nested in our laundry basket nest. This year she returned but, unfortunately, something got the eggs, perhaps a raccoon, and she did not re-nest.

The owl nest failure occurred in March. A month or so later, volunteers and I began spotting a Cooper's Hawk hunting the grounds. On May 10, during the annual spring bird count, birders from the Chicago Audubon Society along with our own Roger Laegeler found the Cooper's Hawk nest.

It was not so long ago that such a discovery would be extremely rare. The Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter*

*cooperii*) had been on the state's endangered species list for many years. In 1981, this species was known to breed in only four Illinois counties. By 1992, the number had grown to 21 counties. Last year, due to significant increases in the breeding population, this hawk was removed from the Illinois Endangered and Threatened Species List.

Illinois has always had a more sizable winter population of Cooper's Hawks as those birds that nest across southern Canada and the northern U.S., migrate to Illinois and other more southerly states to spend the colder months.

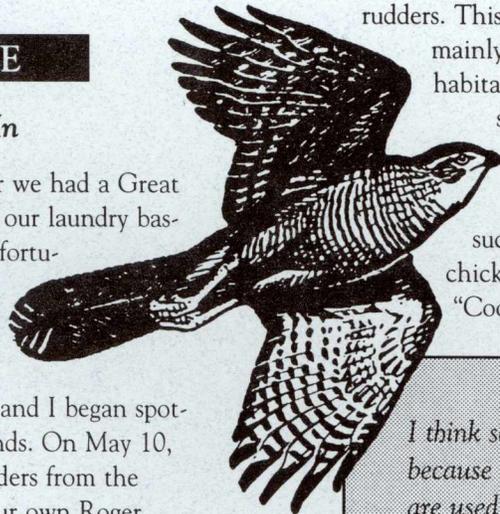
The nesting population is highest in the northern and southern reaches of the state, where nests are found in forested areas. The Cooper's Hawk lays two to five eggs, which are all white or white with brownish markings.

Hawks can be divided into three groups: falcons, buteos and accipiters. Falcons are streamlined raptors with long pointed wings and tails that narrow at the tip. They are built for swift flight and the larger ones, such as the Peregrine Falcon, specialize in taking prey on the wing.

Buteos have wide rounded wings, a robust body and a broad fanned tail. Examples include the common Red-tailed Hawk which is often seen soaring over open country or sitting on a fencepost looking for mice or rabbits.

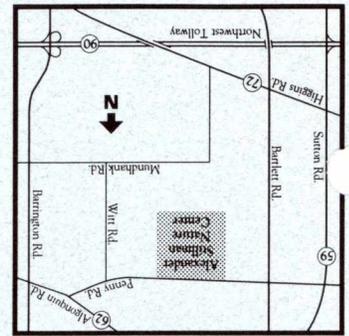
The Cooper's Hawk is one of the accipiters. Accipiters have short wings and long tails which act like rudders. This design facilitates zig-zag pursuits of prey, mainly birds and small mammals, through wooded habitats. During the winter, they are sometimes seen making the rounds at suburban bird feeders.

It is heartening to see a species make such a dramatic comeback and, although the chickadees might not agree, we welcome the "Cooper family" to the Stillman Nature Center.



*I think some foppish types become fishermen because those cute artificial gnats and fleas are used as bait. How would it look to have a lot of fat worms attached to a tweed fedora?*

--Mike Royko (1932-1997)



Email: [stillnc@flash.net](mailto:stillnc@flash.net)  
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 33 West Penny Road

# STILLMAN nature center



Open Sundays 9-4

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*If you aren't already a Friend, please consider joining us.*

- Yes, I'd like to become a Friend of the Stillman Nature Center. I enclose my tax deductible contribution of \$\_\_\_\_\_.
- I'd like to help as a volunteer with programs or land management at the Stillman Nature Center, please call me.
- Please send a gift membership from \_\_\_\_\_ to the name and address listed below.

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