

A REVIEW OF SUPPOSED INSECT CATCHING
BY BASKING GRAPTEMYS GEOGRAPHICA

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ABSTRACT

The observation by Cahn (1937) of insect catching by basking Graptemys geographica is questioned. New interpretations of the behavior probably witnessed by Cahn are suggested.

Cahn (1937) states that basking map turtles, Graptemys geographica, "may be seen snapping at passing insects, many of which they succeed in catching". Other biologists who have studied this turtle, however, have not mentioned this behavior (Conant, 1938; Everman and Clark, 1916; Garman, 1890; Hay, 1892; Lagler, 1943; Newman, 1906; Penn, 1950), and their findings indicate a strictly aquatic diet with food always being swallowed underwater (Ernst and Barbour, 1972). My observations on the basking behavior of this species in the Illinois River may explain this contradiction. Basking G. geographica were often observed making quick, jerky, forward and lateral motions of the head and neck which from a distance could easily be interpreted as insect catching behavior (in fact, at first observation of this phenomenon I thought Cahn's unusual observations were upheld). Closer observation of many basking map turtles over several days, however, (from a make-shift blind approximately 10 m from the basking site and with the aid of 7x50 binoculars) confirmed that in all cases the head and neck movements were made with the mouth closed, and therefore could not be feeding behavior. If this is indeed the behavior Cahn observed, a more likely explanation for the head jerking motions may be the dislodgement of annoying flies and other insects (which could be seen crawling on the basking turtles) or simply the easing of muscular kinks incurred by maintaining position on basking logs for hours. The presence of terrestrial insects in the digestive tracts of many G. geographica may be explained by my observation of these turtles' eating of drowned insects floating on the water surface.

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