

# Savannah Morning News.

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## Alligator snapping turtle rarer than once thought

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Alligator snapping turtle.  
Garry Tucker/USFWS

By Savannah Morning News

ATLANTA— New research shows the alligator snapping turtle, known to grow to 200 pounds and live almost 100 years, is actually three species and therefore rarer than previously thought.

The new study, published in *Zootaxa* last week, found that the back part of the turtle shell varied widely among the three now-recognized species of alligator snapping turtles. Snappers living in the Suwannee River system have a notch in the rear of their shell that is about 4 inches long, while the notches of the other two species are much smaller.

By analyzing the fossil record, modern turtle morphology and genetics, the researchers revised the taxonomy of the alligator snapping turtle to identify two new species. Turtles

farthest west in their range — river drainages of the Mississippi and Mobile rivers — will remain as the alligator snapping turtle. Turtles from the Suwannee River system in Florida and Georgia are now the Suwannee alligator snapping turtle. Turtles from the Apalachicola and other panhandle rivers in Florida, Georgia and Alabama are now the Apalachicola alligator snapping turtle.

In 2012 The Center for Biological Diversity filed an Endangered Species Act petition for alligator snappers with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Service is required to make an initial finding within 90 days of receiving a petition about whether protections may be warranted — but it has not yet done so. The animals are considered threatened in Georgia, where they live in the southwest portion of the state.

The new study makes an even better case for federal protection, said Collette Adkins Giese, a Center biologist and lawyer focused on protecting reptiles and amphibians.

“This new study shows the extremely rare alligator snapping turtle is even rarer than we thought,” she said, citing threats noted in the study including water pollution and overcollection for food and the pet trade. “If we don’t act quickly to protect these dinosaurs of the turtle world, they, too, could go extinct.”

With their heavily armored shells, bear-like claws and powerful beaked jaws, these prehistoric-looking turtles have no natural enemies

and once thrived throughout the southeastern United States. Early in the 20th century, they were abundant in U.S. river systems draining into the Gulf of Mexico, from the waterways and lakes of the upper Midwest to the swamps and bayous of Florida, Louisiana and Texas.

But recent population surveys demonstrate the turtles are now likely extirpated in Iowa, Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri and Tennessee, with declines up to 95 percent over much their historic range from overharvest and unchecked habitat degradation. These slow-moving, largely sedentary behemoths spend so much of their time sitting on river bottoms waiting for food — they use a wormlike process on their tongue to lure prey — that algae grows thick on their shells. They're easy prey for hunters, who still look to feed thriving world markets for the exhibition and consumption of the turtles.

“Now we know alligator snappers in the Suwannee River are a unique species found nowhere else in the world,” said Adkins Giese. “And the much-needed Endangered Species Act listing for these turtles would help ensure that the Suwannee River is protected for the turtles — and for humans.”