

# The Birmingham News

## Alligator snapping turtle could be one step closer to endangered species list

By Dennis Pillion  
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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has agreed to decide by 2020 whether the alligator snapping turtle should be federally protected under the Endangered Species Act, according to the wildlife group Center for Biological Diversity.

The wildlife group has been pushing for the Wildlife Service to list the alligator snapping turtle as endangered or threatened since 2012, and the agency concluded last year that protection for the turtle may be warranted based on available population information.

“Alligator snapping turtles are disappearing from many of the areas they historically lived,” said Elise Bennett, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity. “The evidence is strong these freshwater giants need Endangered Species Act protection to survive.”

The turtles were once commonly found throughout most of Alabama, but these days are most easily seen in south Alabama, according to Auburn University biologist Jim Godwin, who studies the alligator snapping turtle.



A 55-pound alligator snapping turtle is released back to the wild in 2011 after being treated at the Birmingham Zoo after a fishing hook was removed from its throat. The turtle was released into the Warrior River. (AL.com file/Joe Songer)

Godwin said the alligator snapping turtles face a number of challenges, including habitat loss, natural predation of its nests and lingering effects from widespread hunting, which was common in previous generations.

The turtle is now protected in Alabama, but not at the federal level.

“The probabilities of the female having a successful nest where some of her young attain maturity is very low,” Godwin said. “So, when we have commercial harvesters come in and they’re trapping as many turtles as they can and taking females out of the population, it takes a long time for that population to recover.”

The Center believes that the turtles may have declined by up to 95 percent within their historical range, but Godwin said it’s hard to know for sure because the animals are difficult to survey. The turtles spend a lot of time submerged at the bottom of murky rivers, and are not commonly seen at the surface.

He said he is unsure whether the species should be listed under the Endangered Species Act, but adds that there could be an ecological downside to listing it.

“The [Fish and Wildlife Service] is underfunded as it is with regards to the number of species needing attention,” Godwin said. “Adding more species will mean less funds available per species.”

Under the terms of a 2011 agreement with the FWS, the Center can choose 10 species per year for expedited decisions on whether they should receive Endangered Species Act protection. The other nine priority species for 2016 include the monarch butterfly, Canoe Creek pigtoe, and Barrens topminnow. Under the settlement 147 species have gained protection to date, and 35 species have been proposed for protection.

The alligator snapping turtle is among the largest freshwater turtles in the world. It is sometimes mistaken for the much more abundant common snapping turtle, though there are distinct differences between the two.