

Turtle hunter is ducky friend

JANESVILLE — It's like a scene from "Jaws."

A prehistoric animal rises from the depths to devour a hapless swimmer.

But this scene plays out in Milly and Dave Babcock's peaceful 20-acre pond in rural Milton, where an unusually large number of big ol' hungry snapping turtles live in the shallow water.

The unsuspecting swimmers? Milly's precious wood ducks.

The Babcocks have 27 wood duck houses, and the couple take shell corn to the pond almost every night. Milly spends hours watching the birds raise their young before they fly south for the winter.

Milly estimates the ducks hatched between 300 and 350 ducklings this year.

Babcock had seen the turtles eggs on her lawn. She knew the snappers were out there, threatening her tiny balls of fur.

Then she heard about Bob Swann of Edgerton.

Turtles have long fascinated Swann, 66, a retired aerospace engineer.

When he was younger, he collected them on vacations to his family's summer home on Lake Koshkonong. He has since retired to that home.

Like Milly, Swann appreciates wood ducks. He admires the birds' beauty with their subtle violets and iridescent greens. The first decoy he carved was modeled after a wood duck.

Now, after three seasons, he continues to be amazed at the number of turtles he's trapped in Babcock's pond—36 and counting. And most have been big—anywhere from 16 to 20 pounds and 16 inches in length. It is not unusual to trap three in a 24-hour period.

"Trust me," Babcock said. "My toes have never been in that water. And never will."

Swann figures turtles thrive in the private pond because it is secluded and has a diverse fish population of shiners, carp, bullhead and pan fish.

The turtle season is July 15 to Nov. 30, but Swann usually traps in mid-July, which he said is prime season.

Baby ducklings are “especially vulnerable to predation”—a nice word for being eaten—because the turtles forage in shallow water where the ducklings are easily ambushed, Swann said.

“The main reason I’m here is turtle trapping benefits Milly’s wood duck propagation,” he said.

The first year at Babcock’s pond, Swann waded through the knee-deep water with his kayak in tow, searching for the wide, tell-tail bubble trail that marks a turtle’s progress below.

Turtles usually aren’t dangerous to humans in the water—they’ll often turn away or just hunker down, Swann said. But being captured triggers their aggression.

Within a half-hour, Swann had snagged one turtle with his turtle hook—a broom handle with a curved piece of steel—and lifted it into the boat.

Nearby, he heard some commotion and saw two turtles fighting.

“When I separated those two, I was the enemy,” he said.

Three turtles in a half hour—now that was impressive, Swann said.

Each was 16 to 18 pounds and, he figures, about 30 years old.

“Turtles in this concentration are a very real danger,” he said.

“They may have taken lots of ducklings over the years.”

Swann has since refined his trapping techniques and now uses baited nets.

The biggest turtle he’s taken from the pond was probably 22 pounds.

But in true fisherman style, he suspects the big one is still out there.

It is legal to trap only turtles whose shells are between 12 and 16 inches. That’s because the state wants to protect the resource, Swann said. Larger turtles lay up to 50 and 60 eggs.

Babcock is fascinated by the turtles’ ages, and Swann figures the majority taken from her pond are 25 to 30 years old.

Swann said snapping turtles have been around 200 million years and are Wisconsin’s largest and heaviest turtle species.

A picture doesn’t do them justice.

They're big. They're ugly. They smell.

Slime grows on their dark, saw-toothed shells. Their pointed, snake-like heads rear up from long necks. With mouth open, they look like a moray eel from the deep.

Snapping turtles don't have teeth, but that doesn't matter. Their powerful jaws clomp down on anything and won't let go—even after the head is separated from the body.

Their pink, pimply skin is tougher than leather.

Their tails have the razor back of a dinosaur. Feet are tipped with sharp claws.

“There's no other creature put together like a turtle,” Swann said,

To butcher the animal, Swann cuts off its head and then cuts off the claws so the headless body doesn't walk away.

Then he uses a sharp knife.

“They give up their meat very reluctantly,” he said. “You don't want the details.”

Swann barbecues or fries the meat or makes it into soup.

As for Babcock, she sleeps easier knowing the wild is a bit less wild for her baby wood ducks.

“I am feeling far more confident,” she said.