

# Wild About TURTLES

Turtles have been around for over 200 million years and look nearly the same today as they did then. They are unique creatures - the only living vertebrates with a bony shell which is their main line of defense against predators.

Currently, twelve turtle species live in Canada or off of our coasts. Eight are found inland, in wetland areas and the remaining four are at sea. In the past an additional species, the Pacific pond turtle, lived in British Columbia but is now Extirpated and can no longer be found in Canada.

Most of our turtle species are at risk; their survival is threatened by many factors. Development of shorelines and wetland areas mean valuable habitat is lost. Unwanted pet turtles, like the red-eared slider, are sometimes released into the wild, forcing native turtles to compete for food and space. Other introduced animal and plant species disrupt the balance of their habitat. Pollution, disease, collisions with cars, poaching and the unsustainable collection of wild turtles take their toll on the reptiles. Climate change is also thought to greatly affect turtle populations.

Inland turtles feed on aquatic plants, slugs, snails, earthworms, crayfish, insects and fish to name a few. They overwinter at the bottom of ponds, buried in the earthy base known as substrate, or under rocks, logs and debris near their favourite body of water.

Seaturtles eat food such as seaweeds, sponges, snails, crabs, lobsters and even jellyfish. They spend a lot of time foraging for food and migrating great distances to nesting sites.

All turtle species must leave water to nest on land. The female digs a nest in soil, gravel or sand, deposits the eggs and then covers them. Eggs and hatchlings are vulnerable to predation by animals like raccoons, large birds, crabs and human poaching. The mating and nesting season is also when inland turtles are sometimes hit by vehicles while crossing roadways in search of suitable mates or nesting grounds.

Observing turtles in their natural habitat is a great way to learn about these wonderful animals. Be respectful by keeping your distance and using binoculars to avoid frightening them.

Protecting wetlands and preserving the health of lakes, rivers and oceans benefit wildlife and people alike. Our actions have a greater impact than we know; from our homes all the way down to our oceans. Help by keeping your everyday choices green and creating wildlife friendly spaces. For more information visit [WildAboutGardening.org](http://WildAboutGardening.org).

## A KEMP'S RIDLEY SEATURTLE, *Lepidochelys kempii*

**Identification:** 58-76 cm. This is the smallest living sea turtle. It has a heart-shaped, greyish-green carapace. The head is wide but tapers toward the snout, which bears a hooked upper jaw. **Habitat:** Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico. Juveniles documented off Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. **Quick fact:** Females, once numbering in the tens of thousands (now only in the hundreds), instinctively coordinate travel to a specific location to assemble for nesting - a phenomenon termed "arribada."

## B LOGGERHEAD SEATURTLE, *Caretta caretta*

**Identification:** 70-213 cm. This turtle has an elongated carapace with a serrated rear edge. Its overall colour is reddish-brown. **Habitat:** Pacific, Atlantic and Indian Oceans, Mediterranean and Caribbean Seas. Found far off the coasts of the Atlantic provinces. **Quick fact:** This is the most common marine turtle in North American waters, though their population is at risk due to many threats including bycatch mortality, egg predation and pollution.

## C GREEN SEATURTLE, *Chelonia mydas*

**Identification:** 83-153 cm. This seaturtle has a wide, heart-shaped carapace, faintly serrated along the rear edge. **Habitat:** Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans. Typically a tropical species, but may follow

warm currents north to British Columbia. **Quick fact:** This is the only seaturtle that commonly basks out of water, though it can remain underwater for up to five hours slowing its heart rate to only one beat every nine minutes.

## D LEATHERBACK SEATURTLE, *Dermochelys coriacea*

**Identification:** 132-243 cm. This is the largest living turtle. The leathery, elongated carapace has a near-sunflower-seed shape with ridges that run its entire length. **Habitat:** Widest ranging marine turtles within Pacific, Atlantic and Indian Oceans. Found off of the coasts of Atlantic provinces and British Columbia. **Quick fact:** Jellyfish are its favourite food; eaten with the help of many fleshy, curved tooth-like projections within their mouth and esophagus.

## E EASTERN SNAPPING TURTLE, *Chelydra serpentina serpentina*

**Identification:** 20-49 cm. This large turtle has a carapace with three low keels and a serrated rear edge. It has a large head, long neck, long pointy-ridged tail and strong jaws. **Habitat:** Most permanent, slow-flowing or still waters with soft, muddy or sandy substrate and abundant vegetation. Seldom leave water. **Quick fact:** Snappers rarely bask; instead they expose their carapace to the sun by floating near the water's surface.

## F PAINTED TURTLE, *Chrysemys picta*

**Identification:** 12-25 cm. There are three subspecies of painted turtles in Canada: ■ Western, ■ Midland and ■ Eastern. They all share smooth, oval shells with red markings along the rim and a notched upper jaw. They have striking red, yellow, black and olive patterning, usually with a bright yellow blotch behind the eye. **Habitat:** Small,

slow-moving, shallow bodies of water with plentiful aquatic vegetation and soft substrate; edges of lakes, rivers, marshes. Often found basking. **Quick fact:** Hatchlings may overwinter in the shallow nest where they were deposited; they can survive temperatures as low as -11°C.

## G SPOTTED TURTLE, *Clemmys guttata*

**Identification:** 9-14 cm. Spotted turtles are small and have a smooth carapace with a variable number of yellow spots, also found on the limbs. The neck and head region have orange to yellow spotting, even in turtles whose carapace appears unspotted. **Habitat:** Shallow, clean waters with soft substrate and aquatic vegetation; bogs, marshes, vernal woodland ponds. May wander from water; usually seen in spring. **Quick fact:** These slow moving, secretive turtles are among the first to become active after winter.

## H BLANDING'S TURTLE, *Emydoidea blandingii*

**Identification:** 12-28 cm. The blanding's turtle has a high-domed, elongated dark carapace patterned with light-coloured, elongated streaks or spots. Look for a bright yellow throat and chin with a notched upper jaw. **Habitat:** Shallow waters; alkaline to acidic. Soft, firm substrate; bogs, marshes. Remains close to water; may wander in spring. Bask on logs and along muddy banks. **Quick fact:** These long living turtles are poor swimmers, opting instead to walk along the water's bottom.

## I WOOD TURTLE, *Glyptemys insculpta*

**Identification:** 14-23 cm. A fairly large turtle with a rough, sculpted carapace; the scutes resemble tiny pyramids. The neck, tail and undersides of the fore-feet are yellow, orange or red.

**Habitat:** Clean, moving water with hard substrate. Sunny, cleared areas along edges of streams; woodlands, farmlands, swamps, marshes, adjacent grassland areas. More terrestrial compared to other turtles in Canada. **Quick fact:** Wood turtles stomp the ground, believed to create vibrations that emulate raindrops. This lures earthworms to the surface where the turtle eats them.

## J NORTHERN MAP TURTLE, *Graptemys geographica*

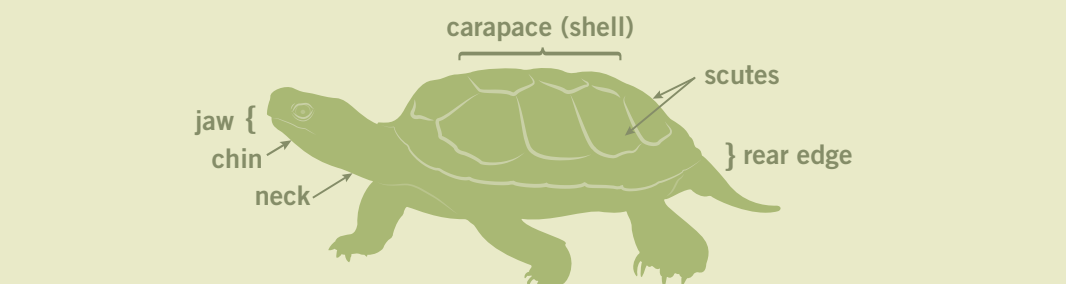
**Identification:** 10-27 cm. The shell is oval and somewhat flattened with a serrated rear edge; it has a low ridge that runs from head to tail. Yellow and orange lines on the shell and body create map-like patterns and a yellow blotch is found behind the eye. **Habitat:** Slow-moving waters and muddy substrate, large rivers and lakes. Abundant basking spots are important; bask on exposed logs at midday. **Quick fact:** If a map turtle is interrupted while basking it will quickly slip into the water, alerting others to do the same.

## K EASTERN MUSK TURTLE OR STINKPOT, *Sternotherus odoratus*

**Identification:** 8-15 cm. The stinkpot is small with a smooth, elongated, dome-shaped carapace. It has a pointed nose and small, pointy, fleshy organs on the chin and throat. Two yellowish stripes run along the sides of the head; their prominence varies. **Habitat:** Still or slow-moving waters with muddy substrate and floating or submerged vegetation; lakes, marshes, swamps, rivers. Rarely leave water; not commonly observed. **Quick fact:** Stinkpots sometimes climb small trees to find optimal basking spots.

## L EASTERN SPINY SOFTSHELL, *Apalone spinifer spinifera*

**Identification:** 13-54 cm. They have a rounded, leathery, carapace marked with circular spots and a thin, dark line along the margin of the shell. On the sides of the face are two yellowish stripes, bordered by black. The webbed feet and neck are spotted or streaked. The snout is tube-shaped, ending in two large nostrils. **Habitat:** Large bodies of water with sufficient oxygen and soft or gravel substrate; rivers, tributaries, lakes. **Quick fact:** These turtles can take in oxygen through their skin from the water.



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