

Painted Turtle

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Chrysemys picta

The painted turtle is one of the most widespread turtles in North America. Three subspecies occur in Alabama. The eastern subspecies occurs in the Chattaahoochee drainage system in the east-central part of the state. The southern subspecies has the largest distribution in Alabama in the western half of the state from the Tennessee River system to Mobile Bay, while the midland subspecies occurs in the extreme northeast corner of the state. Intergrades exhibit a mix of characteristics where their ranges overlap.

DESCRIPTION

The painted turtle is a small turtle reaching up to 10 inches in length. The carapace (top of shell) is olive to black with yellow or red borders on seams and red marking on the marginal scutes (bony plates or scales on the shell); a red or yellow stripe down the middle of the shell is variably present. The plastron, or underside of the turtle, is yellow and may have a dark blotch. The neck, legs, and tail are striped with red and yellow, while the head exhibits complex yellow markings that include large spots behind the eyes. The upper jaw is notched. Color patterns vary among subspecies.

HABITAT

Painted turtles occur in slow-moving, shallow streams, rivers and lakes. They prefer locations with soft bottoms, plenty of vegetation, and suitable basking sites such as half-submerged logs or rocks.

These turtles are fond of basking and often dozens can be seen on a single log, sometimes stacked on top of each other in several layers. This sunning helps them to eliminate parasitic leeches and maintain their preferred body temperature. However, the turtles will dive quickly at the first sign of danger. They can also retract their head and legs into their shell for protection from predators.

DIET

Painted turtles feed on plants and small animals such as fish, snails, slugs, crayfish, tadpoles, carrion and aquatic insects. Young painted turtles are carnivorous, but become more herbaceous as adults. They will feed opportunistically on almost any available food item. Because they have no teeth, their jaw has tough, horny plates for gripping food.

Painted turtles are active during the day and spend the nights sleeping on the pond bottom or on a partially submerged object. They become active at sunrise and

bask for several hours before foraging for food in the late morning. They may forage again in late afternoon or early evening.

REPRODUCTION

Nesting occurs from May to mid-July. The female will prepare a flask-shaped nest, about 4 inches deep, in slightly moist soils at a sunny site near water. Females lay two to four clutches per year, with each clutch containing two to 20 eggs. Depending on habitat and body conditions, they may not reproduce every year. Once eggs are laid, they cover the hole and leave, having nothing else to do with the nest. The young hatch and dig out of the nest on their own, and are independent immediately.

Incubation averages 10 to 11 weeks. The gender of the hatchlings is determined during a critical phase of incubation and is dependent on temperature. Temperatures under about 84° Fahrenheit produce males and higher temperatures produce females. At the pivotal temperature of about 84° Fahrenheit, both males and females are produced.

LIFE SPAN

Male turtles reach maturity in two to five years and females in four to eight. They may live as long as 35 to 40 years in captivity, but most will not survive for this long. A variety of predators such as raccoons, otters, mink and foxes will prey on painted turtles and their eggs. 

FACTS ABOUT PAINTED TURTLE

- ▶ The painted turtle gets its name from the bright yellow and red stripes on its head, neck and tail.
- ▶ The shell colors and markings of hatchlings are brighter and more pronounced than those of adults.
- ▶ Whether a turtle egg develops into a male or female hatchling depends on the temperature of the nest as the eggs are developing. Warmer nests will produce female hatchlings while cooler nests will produce male hatchlings.