

A Quick
Reference Guide to
Ontario's

Turtles

Seven of
Ontario's
eight turtle
species are
now at risk
of disappearing
from our
province.



This guide was created as part of the Reptiles at Risk on the Road Project. We hope that you find it helpful. For more information about our activities, please visit www.reptilesatrisk.org

Assistance for this project was provided by the Ministry of Natural Resources.

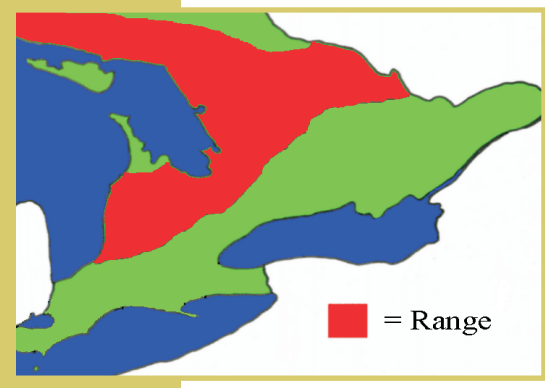


Wood Turtle

Status: Endangered

(*Glyptemys insculpta*)

The wood turtle is the most terrestrial of Ontario turtles, spending the majority of its life on land. Young wood turtles are generally more aquatic than adults; this allows them to avoid terrestrial predators. They may attain a length of approximately 20 cm. The easiest way to identify the wood turtle is by its yellow or orange limbs and dark coloured face. The shell is brown, and rough-textured. The majority of their diet is plants and berries, but they will also eat insects, worms, and other small animals.

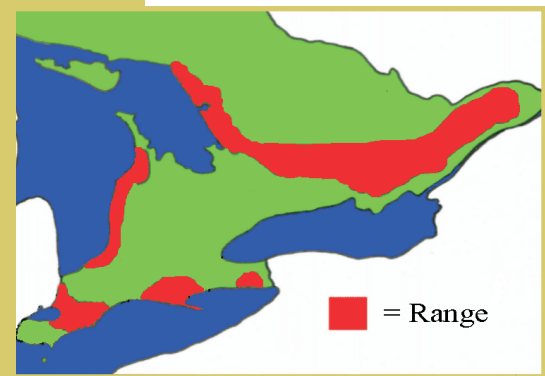


Spotted Turtle

Status: Endangered

(*Clemmys guttata*)

As suggested by their name, these turtles are covered in many bright yellow spots on a black background. They are one of Ontario's smallest turtles, attaining an average size of 10 cm. Spotted turtles are cool weather reptiles—they are most active in the early spring. They live in shallow bodies of water with dense vegetation. Their diet consists mostly of aquatic insects, but they will consume some plants as well. Mating can occur during any time of year, and females can store sperm until they are ready to lay eggs. Spotted turtles reach sexual maturity around 7-12 years of age and lay 2-6 small eggs each spring.



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Conservation Through Education



Blanding's Turtle

(*Emydoidea blandingii*)

Status: Threatened

Blanding's turtles can grow up to 25 cm on average. The best way to identify a Blanding's turtle is their bright yellow chin. Their mouths are often curved up into a "smile" giving them an attractive appearance. Young Blanding's turtles have many small light spots that tend to fade with age. Blanding's turtles have a hinged plastron. This allows them to close up their shells very tightly to protect themselves, and allows them to wander on land more than many other species. Wetlands with lots of plants, such as marshes, are favoured by these turtles, but you may see them in small ponds or lakes as well. In the spring, Blanding's turtles can often be seen basking on logs, and the yellow chin and high, dome-shaped shell make it easy to identify them from a distance. They eat small animals such as insects and crayfish but have been known to eat some plants as well. Females may start laying eggs once they reach 15-20 years old, and lay about 10-12 eggs each spring.

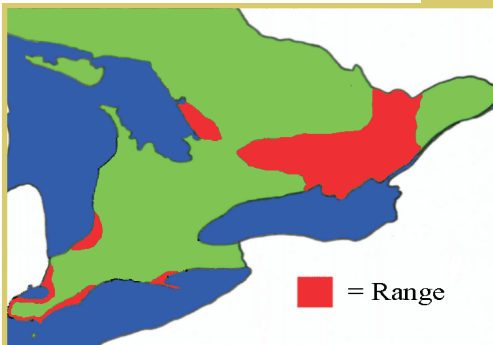


Stinkpot or Musk Turtle

(*Stemotherus odoratus*)

Status: Threatened

Stinkpot turtles are one of Ontario's smallest turtles, averaging 13 cm in length. They seldom leave the water and are rarely seen due to their small size and secretive nature. Their shells are highly domed for such a small turtle. They have two distinguishing stripes from their eyes down to the mouth. Their overall colouration is a dark green, giving them good camouflage when they venture out of the water, which usually happens only at night. If a predator is encountered, a stinkpot will readily pull into its shell to hide, while trying to bite in defence. They will also release a foul-smelling musk to discourage predators, which gives them both of their common names. The diet of stinkpot turtles consists of insects, small fish and algae. One thing that is neat about stinkpot turtles- they lay hard-shelled eggs, instead of leathery, soft-shelled eggs like Ontario's other turtle species!

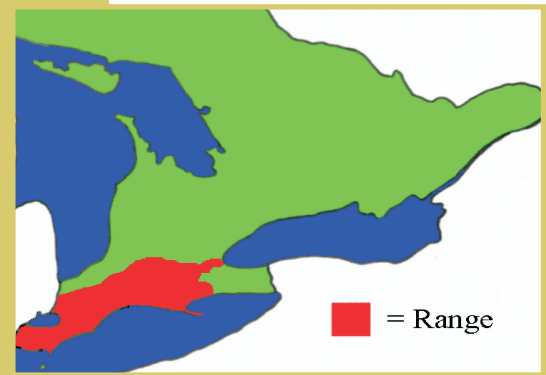


Eastern Spiny Softshell Turtle

Status: Threatened

(*Apalone spinifera*)

Spiny softshell females attain a length of 40 cm, while males only reach 23 cm in length. This turtle is the easiest to identify due to its soft shell. Its shell is round and flat like a pancake, and is usually olive coloured with small dark spots. Due to its lack of protective shell, it can be more defensive than most and spends most of its time in water, coming out to bask only occasionally. Softshells are great swimmers and can move quickly both in the water, and over short distances on land when necessary. They have a long nose and neck, built like a snorkel, and can be found in shallow water with only their nose exposed. Their diet includes invertebrates with some small fish. Starting around 10 years old, softshells can lay up to 30 eggs in one clutch but may lay a second clutch in a good season.

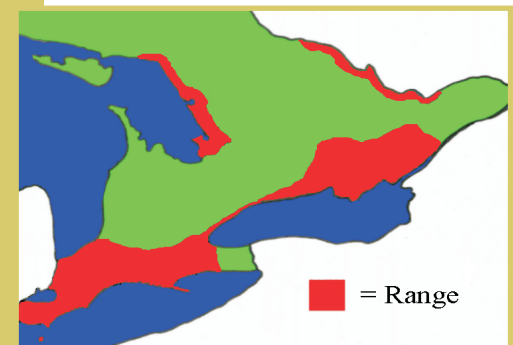


Northern Map Turtle

Status: Special Concern

(*Graptemys geographica*)

Map turtles have strong patterns of yellows and light brown on the legs and head resembling contour lines (hence the name) over a dark green background. The pattern covers the shell as well but is not as distinct because the shell wears down over time. There is a size discrepancy amongst the sexes of this species. Female map turtles can be around 25-30 cm in length, with males about half that size. This offers an easy way to distinguish sex in older turtles. Map turtles are very shy, spending most of their time in the water. They will bask in the sun but are easily disturbed.

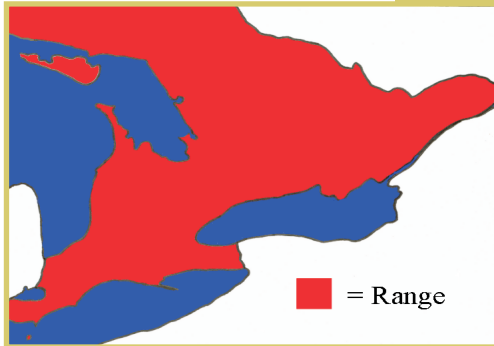


Common Snapping Turtle

Status: Special Concern

(*Chelydra serpentina*)

The snapping turtle is the largest turtle in Ontario, growing up to 45 cm in length on average. The shell is often covered in algae, with a greenish-brown colouration. The tail is long with raised scales along the top, giving it a dinosaur like appearance. They rarely leave the safety of the water to venture on land unless looking for a nesting area. The plastron (the shell on the belly) is greatly reduced in snappers, making it difficult for the turtle to pull its head and legs in for protection. If they are flipped over they do not have enough of a shell to protect themselves from predators, which leads to their defensive snapping behaviour when they are out of land. Snapping turtles do not snap at people in the water, since they have no underwater predators and can simply swim away from any disturbances. The main diet of snappers is not toes but rather dead animals! Scavenging is much easier than catching live food! Snapping turtles reach sexual maturity at approximately 15 years of age and then females can lay up to 40 eggs each spring for decades. Snapping turtles



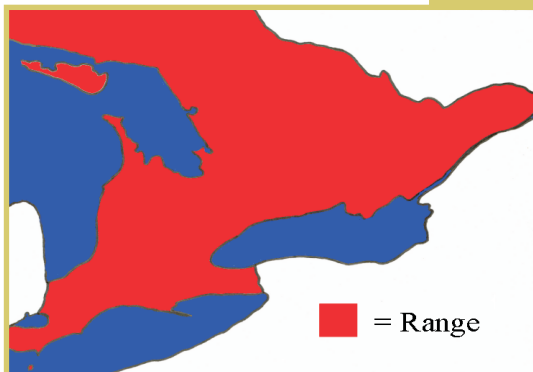
Painted Turtle

Status: Not at risk

yet

(*Chrysemys picta*)

Painted turtles can reach about 15 cm in length at adult size. The coloured stripes on the head and legs help identify these turtles. In southern Ontario, the midland painted turtle has stripes that are yellow on the head and red on the legs. In northwestern Ontario, the western painted turtle has yellow stripes on both the head and legs, and the plastron is orange but this is difficult to see from a distance! Easily observed, the painted turtle is commonly seen basking in groups on logs or rocks. They will often flop into the water as a group if disturbed. Food consists mostly of aquatic insects and vegetation. Painted turtles are also not a species at risk. They seem to be quite numerous in many areas, but their numbers also seem to be going down.



Turtles in trouble- a global crisis!

Turtles have lived on Earth for over 200 million years. They outlasted the dinosaurs, but many species may not outlast one more human generation- some are already critically endangered. This has happened gradually over many years due to loss of habitat, but in recent decades the decline has accelerated. The reasons for this may be complicated, but one thing is very clear- if we want to have turtles around in the future, we'd better do something now to help them out. Please take some time to **learn about turtle conservation issues**, and support efforts to ensure the survival of our turtles- both locally and globally! **Get started at: www.chelonian.org, www.asianturtlenetwork.org.**

Pet turtles *do's and don'ts...*

Do lots of research before you bring home a pet turtle. Read books and websites about turtle care! These animals live for a very long time. Some will grow to large sizes. None grow only to the size of their tank, despite what sales people might tell you. Buy the best water filter you can, because turtles are very messy- it's a lot of work to keep them clean. Good lighting is also very important.

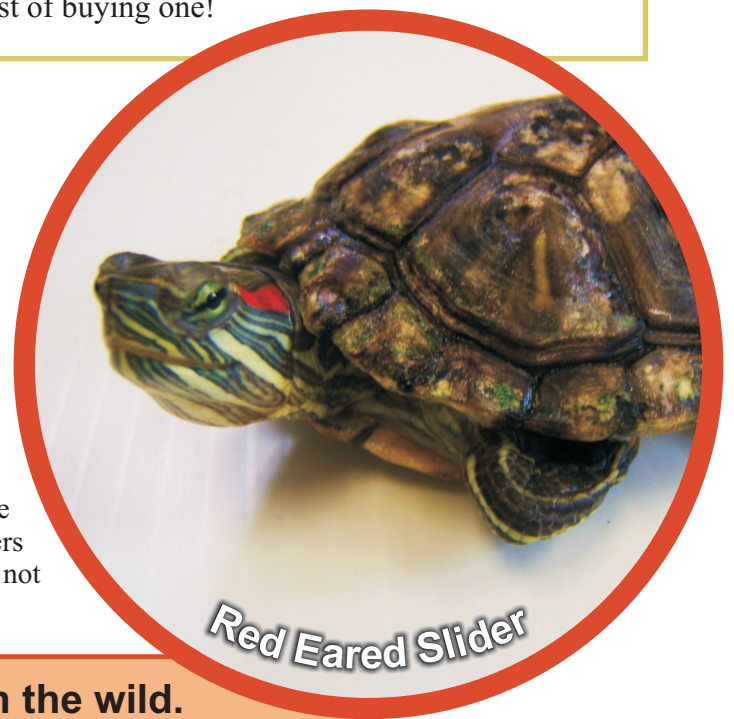
Don't take a turtle from the wild, or buy a turtle that was taken from the wild. This is very bad for wild turtle populations, and is often against the law! Only buy turtles born in captivity.

Do wash your hands after touching your turtle, or the water from its tank. Turtles often carry *Salmonella* bacteria that can make people sick. It's not very much fun, and can be very dangerous- especially for young children. Even if the water looks very clean, it can still have lots of bacteria!

Don't let your pet turtle go in the wild if you don't want it anymore. Find someone who would like a turtle as a pet, and save them the cost of buying one!

The Invader?

Red-Eared sliders are a common pet type of turtle, and they are not native to Canada. However, since they live for a very long time, and can get larger than many people expect, they are often released into the wild when their owners no longer want them. This is never a good idea, and it could be a big problem for our native turtles in the future. Many red-eared sliders survive our winters here in Ontario, and you can often see these turtles basking in the sun on logs just like our native species. In some places, you can see more red-eared sliders than any other type! If you have a pet turtle, please do not release it into the wild!



Red Eared Slider

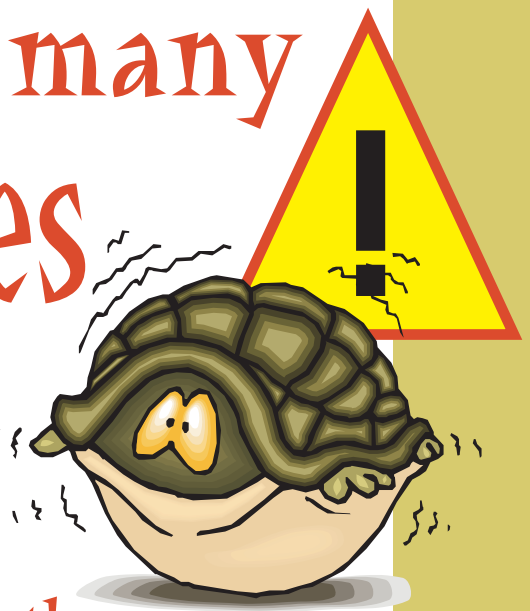
Please do not let pet turtles go in the wild. This is against the law, and very bad for our turtles.



In Ontario, there are many threats to turtles

Seven of our eight turtle species have already declined in numbers enough to be classified as species at risk.

The painted turtle is the only species that has not been designated as a species at risk. It is still fairly common in southern Ontario but appears to be declining in some areas.



The most important threats to turtles are:



Habitat Loss/ Modification: Especially in southern Ontario, many wetlands have been lost already. Even today, some wetlands are drained or filled in. Turtles need these areas to live in; some species cannot live in big lakes or rivers! Modification of the shorelines along lakes and rivers is also a problem, since turtles have to bask and lay their eggs on these shores. Rock walls and other erosion control methods sometimes make this impossible, and mown lawns aren't very useful either. Dams, dykes, or other changes to water levels or flow rates might create habitat for some species, but ruin it for others. Planting trees always seems like a good idea, but shading of nest sites is a problem- especially if there aren't many nest sites for the turtles to choose from in developed areas!



Road Mortality: It might seem strange, but being run over on the road is a huge threat to turtle populations because they reproduce so slowly. Turtles might take 20 years to start laying eggs, and some species lay only a few eggs per year. This only works because once they are big enough to start laying eggs, they are safe from predators and they should live for decades just to lay enough eggs to keep the population going. Unfortunately, their shells can't keep them safe from cars, so the odds of the females being able to cross roads to lay eggs for decades without getting hit are pretty slim. If you see a turtle on the road, you can help by moving it into the ditch, in the same direction it was going. Don't take it back to the water - it walked all that way for a reason! Moving turtles off the road is a great thing to do, and sending injured turtles to a rehabilitation centre is useful, but we desperately need a long-term solution to this problem before we lose most of our turtles.



Subsidized Predators: Raccoons, skunks, and opossums are the opposite of turtles- they can reproduce very quickly, and we have created ideal conditions in southern Ontario for their populations to grow. These animals have a hard time eating adult turtles, but they sometimes chew off a turtle's leg or tail. What these predators are very good at, however, is finding and eating turtle eggs and hatchlings. Although it is natural for a lot of turtle eggs to be eaten, it is not normal for virtually all of them to be eaten! Please don't provide a food source for raccoons and other predators. Keep your garbage secure- this can help the chances of baby turtle



Collection: Taking just a few turtles out of the wild can be a big problem, since they reproduce so slowly. It's the same as if they were hit on the road! Please leave the turtles where they belong. Even worse, some people try to catch lots of turtles to sell them as pets, or for people to eat. This is the biggest problem today for some species. If you see anyone taking turtles out of the wild, please report it to your local Ministry of Natural Resources office, or to Crime Stoppers at 1-800-222-TIPS.





If the turtle is already injured, you can send it to a number of places in Ontario to get its shell repaired.

A few places you could try are...

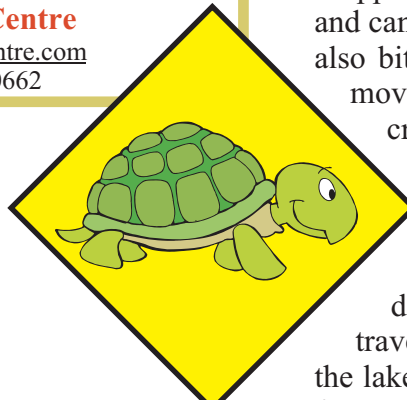
The Kawartha Turtle Trauma Centre
www.kawarthaturtle.org Phone (705) 741-5000

OSPCA Wildlife Shelter in Midland
(<http://www.ontariospca.ca/4-wildlife-rehab.shtml>)
Wildlife Hotline (705) 534-4350

Turtle S.H.E.L.L. Tortue
(<http://www.turtleshellortue.org/>)

Toronto Wildlife Centre
www.torontowildlifecentre.com
Hotline: (416) 631-0662

Please consider reporting your sightings of species at risk to the Ministry of Natural Resources Natural Heritage Information Centre. On-line reporting is available through www.mnr.gov.on.ca. This information can be very helpful in everyone's efforts to conserve turtles, and other species at risk, in Ontario. Knowing where populations are is the first step to protecting them for the future!



Xing

How you can help with turtle conservation very easily!

It's as simple as moving a turtle off of the road before it gets hit.

Snapping turtles can be a challenge- a snow shovel can work well, but otherwise if you find a branch they can snap onto, you can then drag them off of the road with it. Do not pick up snappers by their tail- it contains their spine, and can injure the turtle! Softshell turtles will also bite. A shovel might be a good way to move them, but they are hardly ever found crossing roads.

All the other species are very easy. Simply pick them up and carry them off the road. Just put them into the ditch, in the same direction they were travelling before. Don't take them back to the lake, since they have walked all that way for a reason- probably to lay their eggs.

You can also get involved with these rehabilitation centres to help out, or with your local naturalist or conservation club, land trust, or other groups involved with wildlife or habitat restoration projects.

In this area, consider getting involved with:

