

# **TURTLES OF WISCONSIN**



**Information from  
Wisconsin DNR**

# Western Painted Turtle

## (*Chrysemys picta bellii*)

**Size:** carapace 4 to 8 in.

**Description:** Wisconsin has two subspecies of painted turtles that intergrade throughout much of the state. The western subspecies is typically found in extreme northwestern and western portions

of the state. The painted turtle is distinguished by a relatively flat, smooth, keelless carapace that lacks serrations along the rear edge. The western's carapace tends to be greenish, but is sometimes blackish. Its plastron is usually light orange to reddish with a large symmetrical "oak leaf" shaped gray blotch covering much of it. The western painted turtle's head and legs are dark with thin yellow stripes.

Painted turtles prefer to live in marshes, ponds, shallow bays of lakes, and backwaters of rivers that support dense aquatic vegetation. The western painted turtle is Wisconsin's most abundant turtle species.



# Stinkpot Turtle

## (*Sternotherus odoratus*)

**Size:** carapace 3.5 to 5.5 in.

**Description:** The common musk, one of the world's smallest turtles, is also known as the stinkpot; an appropriate name considering the foul musk it emits when seized. Its carapace is brownish-black, elongated and domed. Its plastron, which is reduced in size, allows the legs a greater range of motion than most turtles, but also makes the stinkpot more vulnerable to predators. Its head has a sharply pointed snout with

two thin, whitish-yellow stripes running along either side and onto the neck. The stinkpot has small, poorly webbed feet and short legs. They prefer habitats with abundant aquatic vegetation, which they use for climbing to the surface. Lakes and backwaters are their preferred habitats although they can occasionally be found in stream and rivers. Common musk turtles spend much of their time walking on the bottom, foraging for snails, fingernail clams and aquatic insects. Basking is usually limited to spring, when females may choose to elevate their body temperatures to speed egg development.



# Smooth Softshell

## *(Apalone mutica)*

**Size:** carapace: fem. 6.5 - 13.5 in., m. 4.5 - 7 in.

**Description:** Softshell turtles are easily recognized by their long, pointed snouts, scuteless, leather-like and streamlined carapaces, and

fleshy-appearing plastrons. Their feet are heavily webbed. The smooth softshell's carapace has a smooth front edge. Young and adult males have an olive-gray or brown carapace with small dark dots and dashes. Adult females have mottled gray or brown carapaces, and grow to about twice the length of males. Both sexes have white or cream-colored plastrons. The dorsal sides of the limbs are dark brown and the undersides are light gray to white. Behind each eye, the smooth softshell has a faint peach line, bordered by black. It has round nostrils, unlike the spiny softshell turtle. The smooth softshell is exclusively a large river species, and has a preference for sandy substrates. It eats a variety of aquatic animals, including fish, mollusks, and crustaceans, but is especially suited for insect hunting.

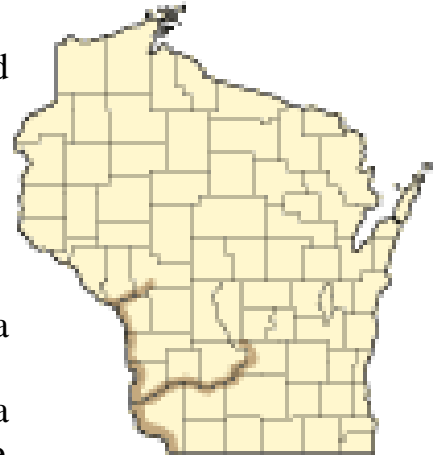


# Ouachita Map Turtle

## (*Graptemys ouachitensis*)

**Size:** carapace: fem. 5.5 to 10 in., m. 3.5 to 6.25 in.

**Description:** The Ouachita map turtle (pronounced wa-chi-tau) has a dark olive green carapace with a strong dorsal (midline) keel, and a strongly serrated back edge. The center ridge of the midline dorsal scutes is black and elevated toward the back. Each carapace scute usually has a dark blotch toward the posterior edge that is outlined by a thin, faint yellow line. These lines often interconnect with other lines creating a map-like pattern on the shell. The head has a large yellowish crescent or blotch behind the eyes and a distinct yellow spot under the eye on the lower jaw. The highly patterned plastron of a hatchling has greenish-gray lines on a pale yellow background, but this fades to a non-descript blotchy bottom with age. Ouachita map turtles are strictly a large river species. They prefer moderate to fast current. Their diet consists of insects, worms, crayfish, snails, naiads, small fish, and aquatic plants.



# Ornate Box Turtle

## *(Terrapene ornata)*

**Size:** carapace 3.5 to 4.75 in.

**Description:** The small ornate box turtle has a dark brown, domed carapace with bright yellow markings radiating from the upper edges of each scute. The plastron is a rich brown color with numerous

scattered yellow rays on it. The plastron is hinged, allowing the front and back sections to close tightly against the underside of the carapace. This feature gives the box turtle its name. Females and sub-adults have brown heads with whitish or yellow markings and brown or yellow eyes. Adult males often have yellow, green or brown heads and red eyes. Males often have yellow, orange or red colored scales on their forelegs. Ornate box turtles are strictly terrestrial and primarily live in dry prairies and oak savannas with deep sandy soils. Sandy soils allow them to burrow deep enough to avoid freezing in winter. Ornaties are omnivores, eating insects, slugs, carrion, berries, and tender, juicy plants. Fruits and plants provide a valuable water source for this semi-desertlike species.



# Midland Painted Turtle

## (*Chrysemys picta marginata*)

**Size:** carapace 4 to 8 in.

**Description:** The midland painted turtle usually has a dark carapace with the marginal scutes strongly marked with red, and its plastron is usually pale yellowish-orange with a narrow elongated gray blotch running down the center. Its tail, limbs,

head, and neck are striped with red, orange, or yellow lines. True midland painted turtles are restricted to extreme southeastern Wisconsin. Most other populations represent some intergradation with the western subspecies. Both painted turtle subspecies prefer aquatic plants, snails, crayfish, insects, and small fish as food. Painted turtles spend a great deal of time basking on logs and on mats of floating vegetation on sunny days to warm themselves, speed egg development, digest food, and to maintain their shells.



# False Map Turtle

## (*Graptemys pseudogeographica*)

*Size: carapace: fem. 5.5 - 10.75 in., m. 3.5 - 5.75 in.*

**Description:** The false map turtle is quite similar in appearance to the Ouachita map. However, the false map lacks the spot under the eye on the lower jaw. Its dorsal keel is less pronounced, and

the crescent or blotch behind the eye is often narrower. The lines outlining and connecting the dark blotch of each scute on the carapace may be slightly more prominent and colored yellow-orange. Strictly aquatic, the false map is another large river species. Their diet consists of insects, worms,

crayfish, snails, naiads, small fish, and aquatic plants. Like all map turtles, false maps can be seen basking communally on fallen trees and snags. False and Ouachita maps are extremely wary, often fleeing at the least disturbance. The false map turtle is less common than the Ouachita map turtle.





# Eastern Spiny Softshell Turtle

## *(Apalone spinifera)*

**Size:** carapace: fem. 7 - 18 in., m. 5 - 9.5 in.

**Description:** The spiny softshell can be distinguished from the smooth softshell by the presence of two yellow, black-bordered lines along each side of the head, a row of spines along the front edge of

the carapace, and a raised nasal septum, giving the nostrils a “C” shape. Young and males have olive-gray carapaces with small black markings often appearing like thin donuts. Adult females have dark olive or tan carapaces with brown and gray mottling. Spiny softshells can be found in large rivers, lakes

and reservoirs, especially those with muddy or sandy bottoms. Unlike smooth softshells, spiny softshells are often aggressive when seized, and can inflict painful bites. Both softshell species, especially juveniles and sub-adults, spend significant amounts of time buried in the substrate in shallow water, especially at night, to remain concealed while inactive. Spiny softshells feed on a variety of animals, including fish, invertebrates, mollusks, and carrion.



# Common Snapping Turtle

## (*Chelydra serpentina*)

**Size:** carapace 8 to 16 in.

**Description:** The common snapping turtle is Wisconsin's largest and heaviest turtle species. Its

carapace can vary from light brown to black in color and it has a saw-toothed back edge. The tail supports a row of jagged dorsal scales and is nearly as long as the carapace. The head has large jaws and a pointed snout with a prominent beak.

Its long neck, powerful jaws and aggressive behavior have rightly earned the snapping turtle its name. The often yellowish-colored plastron is greatly reduced, leaving the limbs very exposed from the underside. Snapping turtles live in most aquatic habitats but prefer ponds, lakes and the backwaters of rivers. Both a predator and a scavenger, the snapper feeds on aquatic animals and plants. They consume almost any animal they can catch, although studies show that their reputation as a duckling predator has been greatly exaggerated. They also feed on slow-swimming, small fish, or fresh dead fish. Snapping turtles are important top-line predators in aquatic food chains.



# Common Map Turtle

## (*Graptemys geographica*)

**Size:** carapace: fem. 6.5 to 10.5 in., m. 4 to 6.25 in.

**Description:** The aquatic common map turtle has a low dorsal keel and an olive-brown carapace that is patterned with fine yellow lines resembling a road map. Its head and neck are

olive-brown with thin yellow lines running from the head onto the neck, and there is a pronounced yellow spot behind each eye. The back edge of the shell is modestly serrated. Adult males are significantly smaller than females. Common map turtles can be distinguished from false and Ouachita map turtles by their uniformly-colored yellow or creamy plastron. They prefer habitats with slow to moderate current, soft bottoms, and abundant aquatic vegetation, such as side channels, backwaters, and some rivers and reservoirs. Their diet includes insect larvae, carrion, crustaceans, and aquatic plants. Females have large broad heads and jaws adapted for cracking mollusk and crayfish shells.



# Wood Turtle

## *(Glyptemys insculpta)*

**Size:** carapace 6 to 9.5 in.

**Description:** The medium-sized wood turtle is most easily recognized by the sculptured growth rings on each scute of its carapace. The carapace is

usually a medium brown, and occasionally has black flecks and faint yellow rays. The plastron is yellow with black blotches toward the outer edges. The head is dark brown to blackish and unpatterned, and the skin on the neck and leg sockets varies from pale yellow to orangish-red. Wood turtles are a semi-

aquatic species that prefers moderate to fast-flowing water. They spend a great deal of time in forested habitats adjacent to rivers and streams, where they feed on berries, greens, night crawlers, worms, and other invertebrates. Wood turtles frequently bask on land and are less observable than other river line turtles. Females often nest communally, and their eggs are often heavily predated. Hatchlings are olive green to light brown with tails slightly longer than the carapace.

