

Wild Things in Your Woodlands

Painted Turtle (*Chrysemys picta*)



The painted turtle is a brown, somewhat flattened, medium-sized freshwater turtle with several bright yellow blotches or lines on the head and throat, and often with yellow or red markings on the legs and tail. It gets its name from these markings and the attractive patterns of red and yellow along the margin of the shell. Although the shell markings are bright and colorful in many individuals, they can be faint or even absent in some older turtles. The carapace of an adult male can measure up to 15 cm (5.8 in.), and females usually are larger than males.

In the northeast, painted turtles are perhaps the most conspicuous turtle, often seen basking on logs and rocks, and along banks of ponds. Painted turtles thrive in marshes, ponds, slow rivers, and along edges of lakes with shallow water, abundant vegetation, muddy bottoms, and plenty of basking logs or rocks. To fulfill their nesting requirements, there should be some nearby open areas with sandy or loose soil. The painted turtle is tolerant of a wide range of conditions and can be seen in swift-flowing and even brackish waters. They also fare well near human developments, in moderately polluted lakes, farm ponds, and golf course ponds.

Painted turtles are widely distributed throughout eastern North America and extend in a continuous band, from the east coast to the west coast, along the northern U.S. and southern Canada. In the northeast region, painted turtles are common from sea level up to 300 m (1000 ft), but become scarce at higher elevations. Individuals can be seen basking on sunny days from March to early November. They may be seen mating in spring and actively feeding from April to the end of September. Although primarily aquatic, individuals may be seen on land, especially during the nesting season in June and July. At this time, females may be seen nesting around the edge of ponds, in open areas and along dirt roads, or often moving across roads and highways. During winter, painted turtles remain below water, usually burrowed into the muddy bottom or bank. If the ice is clear, they can be seen resting or sometimes moving slowly along the bottom. They remain under water until the ice melts, and do not become fully active until around mid-spring. Painted turtles reach sexual maturity after they are at least four years old. It is relatively easy to determine the sex of painted turtles that are larger than 9 cm (3 1/2 in.) in carapace length. On their front feet, males have very long claws they use to attract the attention of females during courtship. Males also have much longer thicker tails. Courtship and mating occurs in April and May. Females nest throughout June and early July, and nesting activity is often associated with rainy weather. Excellent long-term studies in Michigan showed that some females will not nest in years when conditions are

harsh, but may lay eggs more than once in other years. A typical clutch of eggs contains from three to nine eggs, depending mostly on the size of the female. Painted turtles hatch out of their eggs by autumn, but most hatchlings remain underground during their first winter. There they remain very still, expending minimal energy, until they emerge the following spring and head into the water.

Painted turtles are omnivorous, eating a variety of plants, fish, tadpoles, and invertebrates. They also are willing scavengers. Although individuals can move on land, they tend to be faithful to the same habitat for their entire lives. Individual painted turtles can live for more than 30 years in the same pond.

The usual group of predators such as raccoons, foxes, skunks, birds, and dogs preys upon eggs, young, and adults. Adults frequently are crushed and killed on roads as males move about in the spring and as females travel to nesting sites in the summer. Painted turtles are too small to be of great commercial value for harvesting by humans. They also present very little nuisance to humans, and are generally viewed as a welcome member of any community. Their acceptance and the relative ease with which they adapt to disturbed and artificial environments combine to make the painted turtle extremely common throughout most of its extensive range.

Turtles are excellent examples of animals whose strategy is to live a long time. Male painted turtles take 4 to 6 years to reach maturity and females take from six to 10 years. Other turtles can take more than 15 years. Once turtles begin to reproduce, they can continue to do so for many more years, even for decades to come. Normally it is very difficult to determine the age of animals in the wild. However, many turtles carry around their own age and growth records imprinted on their shells; you just need to know how to read the code properly. Long-term studies over many decades have shown that, at the onset of cold weather each year, turtles stop growing and this creates visible lines. If you look at the individual scutes of many turtles, you can plainly see the rings that represent each year of growth. Thus, aging turtles is much like aging trees: you merely count the rings.

Landowners can enhance habitat for painted turtles by providing basking logs in lake, pond habitats. A tree or two dropped into the water can offer a place for turtles to bask, and for people to view them. By maintaining open areas with loose soil near aquatic habitats, landowners can also ensure that these turtles have adequate nesting sites. Old log landings, maintained as open habitat, can make suitable nesting sites.

Kristi Sullivan coordinates the Conservation Education Program at Cornell's Arnot Forest. More information on managing habitat for wildlife, as well as upcoming educational programs at the Arnot Forest can be found by visiting the Arnot Conservation Education Program web site at ArnotConservation.info

Painted turtle photo courtesy of
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service