



Western Painted Turtle

Chrysemys picta bellii By Laura Roady

A bump on a log this time of year may indicate a unique sign of spring: a western painted turtle, one of only three native turtle species in Montana—along with the snapping turtle and the spiny softshell turtle—catching some midday sun.

In late spring and summer, increasing numbers of painted turtles emerge from muddy pond bottoms and climb onto logs for prime basking sites. Sometimes a dozen or more will crowd along a sunny spot, staying dead still until the slightest movement on shore sends them tumbling back into the water for safety.

Appearance

With such a name, it's no surprise the painted turtle is colorful. The olive green head, neck, tail, and legs are accented by bright yellow stripes. The plastron (shell covering the belly) has an agate-like pattern of red-orange, yellow, and green. The carapace (shell covering the back) is olive to black, with an under edge of red and yellow and plates (scutes) bordered with yellow.

Painted turtles can reach the size of dinner plates, with females larger (up to 9 inches long) than males (up to 7 inches long). Males can be distinguished also by longer front claws and a longer, thicker tail.

Habitat and Distribution

Painted turtles prefer the shallow water of lakes, ponds, sloughs, ditches, and sluggish streams and river oxbows containing a soft

Scientific name

Chrysemys is from the Greek *khrysos*, for "golden," and *emys*, for "turtle."

Picta is Latin for "painted," and *bellii* honors Thomas Bell, an English zoologist and world-renowned turtle expert of the mid-19th century.

bottom and aquatic plants.

The species is found throughout Montana except in the Bitterroot Mountains along the Idaho border.

Food

These opportunistic omnivores eat whatever they can find: insects, snails, earthworms, frogs, tadpoles, aquatic plants, and small fish. The painted turtle prowls water bottoms, jutting its head into vegetation to stir prey out into the open water, where it gets snapped up in the reptile's toothless, sharp-edged jaws. To eat floating vegetation and aquatic insects, a painted turtle often swims along the water surface, mouth agape.

Predation

Just as painted turtles eat almost any prey, almost every predator eats painted turtle eggs and the soft-shelled young. Garter snakes, herons, crows, ground squirrels, skunks, badgers, and foxes gobble down the vulnerable hatchlings. Adults, heavily armored, are generally safe except from raccoons. When attacked, adult turtles kick, scratch, and bite, and when flipped upside down are able to right themselves.

Reproduction

A sexually mature (two- to four-year-old) male painted turtle typically initiates courtship by swimming after a mature (four- to eight-year-old) female and maneuvering in front of her with outstretched legs. He may stroke her head with his long claws. If the female is willing, the two sink to the bottom to mate.

In midsummer, the female leaves the pond and looks for a sunny, south-facing slope with soft soil to lay her eggs. After digging a hole roughly 4 inches deep and 2 inches wide with her hind legs, she lays 6 to 20 white, elliptical, leathery eggs, covers them with soil, and leaves the nest.

The sun warms the eggs while rain keeps them moist through summer. The average temperature of the nest determines the hatchlings' gender—warmer conditions produce more females per hatch and cooler temperatures favor male production. Hatchlings either leave the nest in autumn or wait until spring to head out on their own.

Behavior

In spring and early summer, painted turtles sunbathe on logs, rocks, and vegetation mats. The reptiles must bask to warm their cold-blooded bodies. Basking also rids turtles of parasites, such as leeches, which dry up and die in the sunlight.

To stay safe from predators, painted turtles usually bask on objects completely surrounded by water. Approach basking turtles carefully and quietly so they don't dive underwater and disappear from sight.

At night, turtles swim to the bottom and rest in mud. During winter, they burrow into the bottom and their metabolism slows. Unable to breathe in mud, the turtles absorb oxygen through their skin and the lining of their throats.

Status

Water pollution and traffic are the turtle's main human-caused threats. Fortunately, the species is considered healthy and in no conservation danger in Montana.

A lookalike species is the non-native red-eared slider, a common pet store turtle illegally released in many Montana waters. The slider has a red slash along either side of its head and a spotted bottom shell. 🐢