

Amphibian and Reptile Frequently Asked Questions

#5 - Turtles



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5. Turtles

5.1 Question 1: Are turtles dangerous?

Generally speaking, no, turtles are not dangerous. All turtles may bite if they are harassed or feel threatened. Two species that are especially prone to biting are the snapping turtle (which is found in most water bodies throughout the state) and spiny softshell (which is found in most water bodies aside from wetlands and ponds throughout the state). Give both of these turtles plenty of space (3-5 ft) if encountered on land. These species rarely leave the water, and have no interest in harming or even encountering people. Individuals found on land are likely nesting females and will return to the water after they have laid their eggs.



Spiny Softshell
(photo by J.M. Kapfer)



Snapping Turtle
(photo by J.M. Kapfer)

5.2 Question 2: Can I keep the turtle I found on the road or in my yard as a pet?

There are several endangered and threatened turtle species in Wisconsin. These include the wood turtle and ornate box turtle. It is illegal to possess or handle these for any purpose (adults, juveniles, eggs or shells) and they **cannot** be kept as pets. Please note that there are additional regulations in place for all other species of turtles in Wisconsin and that they are in place to keep their populations healthy. The best option for any turtle discovered in the wild is to observe and appreciate it in its natural setting, then leave it where you found it. In addition to several species being protected in Wisconsin, most species are difficult to properly care for in captivity and require large enclosures or aquaria to thrive, although it is legal to keep a non-listed (not threatened or not endangered) turtle as a pet.

5.3 Question 3: How can I identify an endangered or threatened turtle?

Two species of turtles are listed as endangered or threatened in the state (wood turtle and ornate box turtle). If you are attempting to identify one of these species it may be helpful to first determine if you are in appropriate geographic location, then the appropriate habitat and finally the identifying characteristics of the turtle.

5.3.1 Geographic Distribution: First it is important to know the range of Wisconsin's rare turtle species to determine if you are within the correct geographic location for a rare turtle species.



Wood Turtle



Ornate Box Turtle

5.3.2 Preferred Habitat: If you determine that you are within the geographic range of these species, it is important to next determine if you are near suitable habitat.

- The **wood turtle** is usually associated with wooded riparian habitat near perennial streams and rivers. These streams are often quick flowing, with clear water and sand or cobble bottoms. Although most often found in wooded riparian areas, they are also known to occur in open canopy habitats (i.e., grasslands) near streams. This species will spend a significant amount of time on land both for nesting and daily activities.
- The **ornate box turtle** is Wisconsin's only fully terrestrial (i.e., land-dwelling) turtle. It is found in prairies, meadows, grasslands and oak savannas with dry sandy soil. It also occasionally found in association with agricultural habitats.

5.3.3 Identification: After you have determined what habitat you are in, you can use the following identifying characteristics to determine which species you have observed.

- The **wood turtle** is also dark with some yellow around the neck sockets and leg sockets (it does not have the bright yellow chin of the Blanding's turtle, however). It also has a more flattened upper shell than the Blanding's turtle, and each individual scute (shell segment) of the shell is pyramidal in shape. The lower shell is yellowish with dark blotches on each individual scute.



Photo by A.B. Sheldon

- The **ornate box turtle** also has a high-domed shell, like the Blanding's turtle. However, each individual shell segment contains beige/yellow lines and dashes that radiate from the center (unlike the Blanding's turtle's upper shell, which is black with yellow flecks). There are also many beige/yellow lines and blotches on the head and legs. Males can be distinguished from females by their red or red/orange eyes.



Photo by A.B. Sheldon



Photo by J.M. Kapfer

5.4 Question 4: Why do I see turtles on the road?

If it is mid-May through early July, those turtles are likely females that are migrating to nest or lay their eggs. Nesting female turtles are known to travel large distances from water in order to find suitable nesting locations and this often forces them to cross roads. Unfortunately, the turtles that are found along roads are often pregnant (gravid) females.

5.5 Question 5: What is the best way to help a turtle that is trying to cross a road?

You should only attempt this if you can do so safely. Do not attempt this on busy interstates or highways. If the road has a safe shoulder to park along and you will not endanger yourself or other motorists by doing so, pull over. For smaller turtle species (such as painted turtles, Blanding's turtles, or one of the three map turtle species) simply pick up the turtle and deposit it safely off of the road *in the direction it was heading*. For example, if the turtle was facing the road when you encountered it, take it across the road and place it well into the vegetation on the other side. If the turtle was facing away from the road when you first encountered it, move it further off of the road in the direction it was headed, well into the adjacent roadside vegetation. For larger species such as snapping turtles or softshell turtles that are more apt to bite, take caution in moving them off the road.

5.6 Question 6: Why do I see turtles in my yard?

If it is mid-May through early July, the turtle in your yard is likely looking for a place to lay eggs. In addition, turtles are known to occasionally crawl out of the water and onto lawns near lakes, rivers, streams or wetlands to bask in the sun and keep their bodies warm. You may also find newly hatched turtles in your yard in late August/September if adults have built nests somewhere on or near your property. These newly hatched individuals are sometimes encountered as they migrate from their nest to the nearest water source. Wisconsin is home to two species that are found frequently on land. These are the ornate box turtle (which is strictly a land turtle) and the wood turtle (which is semi-aquatic, meaning it spends equal time on land and in the water).

5.7 Question 7: What do I do if I find a snapping turtle in my yard?

First, it is important to make sure you have properly identified the turtle as a snapping turtle. Some of Wisconsin's turtle species, such as the eastern musk turtle, can appear somewhat similar. See pictures in 5.1 above. If you have confirmed the turtle is a snapping turtle, your best option is to leave it be. It will move along its way and leave the area in time (usually several minutes, but perhaps longer if it is a female that is nesting in your yard). During this time do not allow pets or children to go near the turtle to avoid a potential bite.

5.8 Question 8: A turtle nested in my garden/lawn, how do I protect the nest?

There are many species of mammals that raid turtle nests and eat the eggs, such as raccoons and opossums. You can help protect the nest from these predators by placing a wire mesh material (openings of 3 inches or slightly larger) over the area and buried several inches on each side. This will prevent predators from getting into the nest but the openings are large enough so that the hatchlings can exit the area once they emerge. Keep in mind that the eggs of some species hatch in several months, while the hatchlings of some species are able to overwinter in their nests and do not emerge until the following spring.

5.9 Question 9: I have a turtle that I collected from a nearby pond, which I have been keeping as a pet for my child. We don't want it anymore. What should I do with it?

You have several options for the turtle. If you have not had the turtle for a long period of time and have not kept the turtle with any other pets or in situations where disease transfer could have occurred you should release the turtle exactly where you found it (you do not want to release turtles into the wild that

may have been exposed to disease as they could spread captive diseases to wild populations). You could also contact local schools or nature centers and see if any would like to take the turtle as an educational animal. You can contact local zoos to see if they would be interested, however most zoos only take animals that have been quarantined and habituated to captivity and many zoos will not take animals that have been collected in the wild. In general it is often best to not remove turtles from the wild.

5.10 Question 10: I'm worried that snapping turtles will kill the ducks and geese that use my pond. Will this happen? How can I remove these turtles?

In small water bodies, such as small natural or artificial ponds, snapping turtles are known to eat ducklings and goslings and this is a naturally occurring event. However, the rate at which they eat these juvenile waterfowl depends on a variety of factors (water temperature, pond size, amount and type of other prey available, and the number of snapping turtles in the pond). Therefore, it is difficult to estimate the level of impact snapping turtles may have on ducklings and goslings. In situations where Canada geese have become far too numerous on a given water body (a common occurrence these days), the presence of these predatory turtles could be considered beneficial as a means of population control. In larger water bodies (lakes, streams, rivers) the impact that snapping turtles have on ducklings and goslings is significantly reduced. Turtles can only be removed by individuals with the correct aquatic turtle traps and proper permits within the turtle season, for more information see the WDNR Amphibian and Reptile Regulations: <http://dnr.wi.gov/files/PDF/pubs/er/ER0102.pdf>.

5.11 Question 11: Should I be afraid of being bitten by a snapping turtle while swimming?

It is very rare to be bitten by a snapping turtle while swimming. Snapping turtles are usually much more aggressive when on land nesting, and out of their “comfort zone” in the water. They are more likely to bite in defense or fear in those situations. Considering how many people enjoy swimming in rivers and lakes, the number of cases where people are bitten by these turtles while swimming or wading is small. These turtles are inherently shy and tend to avoid areas of high human activity. Therefore, if you restrict activity in natural water bodies to areas frequently used for recreational swimming, you further reduce the likelihood of encountering snapping turtles.

Suggested Citation:

Kapfer, J. A. 2011. Amphibian and reptile frequently asked questions – turtles. PUB-ER-671. Bureau of Endangered Resources, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Madison, Wisconsin.