

Turtles Are In Danger and We Can Help Them

Most turtles have remained virtually unchanged for about 200 million years (since the time of the dinosaurs), but many of the world's species of turtles are threatened with extinction.

Ontario turtles, like many other creatures in our ecosystem, are in danger because of road accidents, habitat loss and pollution. As well, turtles in Ontario and other places around the world are hunted for food (i.e. the snapping turtle).

Wetlands once covered vast areas of Ontario. In southern Ontario, approximately 80 percent of these important habitats have been destroyed to make room for agricultural

lands, residential developments, factories, schools and roads. We must all work together to preserve the remaining wetlands for turtles and other species,

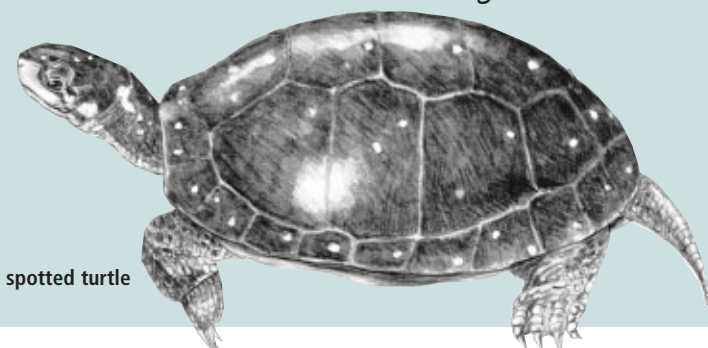
including humans, that rely on these fragile areas.

To find out about a wetland near you, contact the FON (contact information on the back page) and ask about your closest FON club — they will have information about local areas of interest.

Then write a letter to the editor of your town's newspaper and your local politician telling him or her how important your local wetland is and that you want it protected. Start a group to put up turtle crossing signs on roads that turtles use!

DID YOU KNOW...

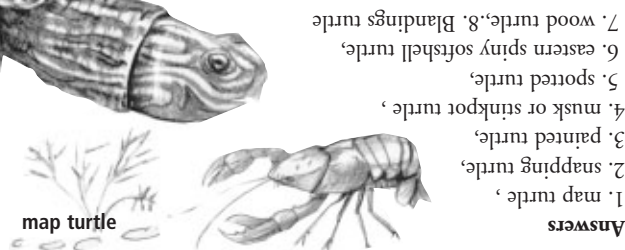
Native Americans believed that the world was formed on the back of a giant turtle.



spotted turtle

It's Time to Play... Name That Turtle

1. You'll never get lost with him by your side. This turtle is a true geographer.
2. This turtle may be aggressive on land, but it's docile in the water.
3. The most colourful of all Ontario turtles.
4. This turtle is named after a not-so-pleasant odour.
5. Mainly underwater food is eaten by this turtle.
6. This turtle is known for its pig-like snout and pancake shape.
7. Ontario's most terrestrial turtle.
8. The turtle that looks like a helmet on a rock.



map turtle

Answers

1. map turtle,
2. snapping turtle,
3. painted turtle,
4. musk or stinkpot turtle,
5. spotted turtle,
6. eastern spiny softshell turtle,
7. wood turtle,
8. Blandings turtle

For More Tantalizing Turtle Tidbits:

From the Federation of Ontario Naturalists:

Life in a Marsh Nature Note,
Life in an Ontario Wetland poster, Ontario Reptiles and Amphibians poster

Other publications:

Familiar Amphibians and Reptiles of Ontario by Bob Johnson
Introduction to Canadian Amphibians and Reptiles by F.R. Cook

From the Web:

Adopt-A-Pond
<http://www.torontozoo.com/adoptapond/>
Natural Resources Canada
http://www.glf.cfs.nrcan.gc.ca/landscape/turt_e.html
Canadian Wildlife Service – Hinterland Who's Who
http://www.cws-scf.ec.gc.ca/hww-fap/index_e.cfm
Native American Myth and Folklore
<http://www.earthbow.com/native/contents.htm>
Native American Lore -
<http://www.ilhawaii.net/~stony/loreindx.html>

Reviewer: Sarah Ingwersen, Adopt-A-Pond Coordinator
Copy Editor: Joan Clark, Editor: Helen D. Gault
Printing: MPH Graphics Inc.

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Supplement to SEASONS, Fall 2003

Totally Terrific Turtles



Blandings turtles

To get to the shell station!

Why did the turtle cross the road?

You wouldn't think of basking in the hot, summer sun — at least not without sunscreen, a hat and a T-shirt. Yet this is exactly what turtles do to absorb the sun's energy and regulate their body temperature. However, when temperatures turn cool in the fall, they must retreat into hibernation. Read on to find out more about these amazing Ontario animals.

Turtles, snakes, lizards, alligators and crocodiles are reptiles. There are several different kinds of turtles and snakes and one type of lizard in Ontario, but there are no alligators or crocodiles!

All reptiles have scales or plates for protection and most have claws (except for snakes — they don't even have feet!). The most important characteristic that all reptiles share is that they rely on the sun and their surrounding environment to control their body temperature, which means that they are "ecto-therms." This is a unique

DID YOU KNOW...

The ancestors of land turtles were much larger than the turtles of today. Fossils of their shells have been found to be over three metres in diameter — that's about the length of a small sports car!

...Ontario's largest turtle, the snapping turtle, can grow to a whopping 32 kilograms! (That's probably close to the amount that you weigh!) How do you measure up against this reptile?

way of regulating their temperature. When their body temperature drops, they must seek out warm, sunny "basking" locations, and when their temperature rises, they must retreat to cooler locations.

In Ontario, there are eight species of turtles. They are found in and around bodies of water such as lakes, rivers, streams, swamps, marshes and ponds.

BLANDINGS TURTLE

This wary turtle lives in secluded bays, lakes and open marshes. It is large — 13 to 18 centimetres. A Blandings turtle has a high, dark domed shell covered with yellow flecks and a

bright yellow chin and throat. From a distance, it looks like an army helmet perched on a rock. It feeds on tadpoles, frogs, carrion, snails, crayfish and aquatic insects.



eastern spiny softshell turtle

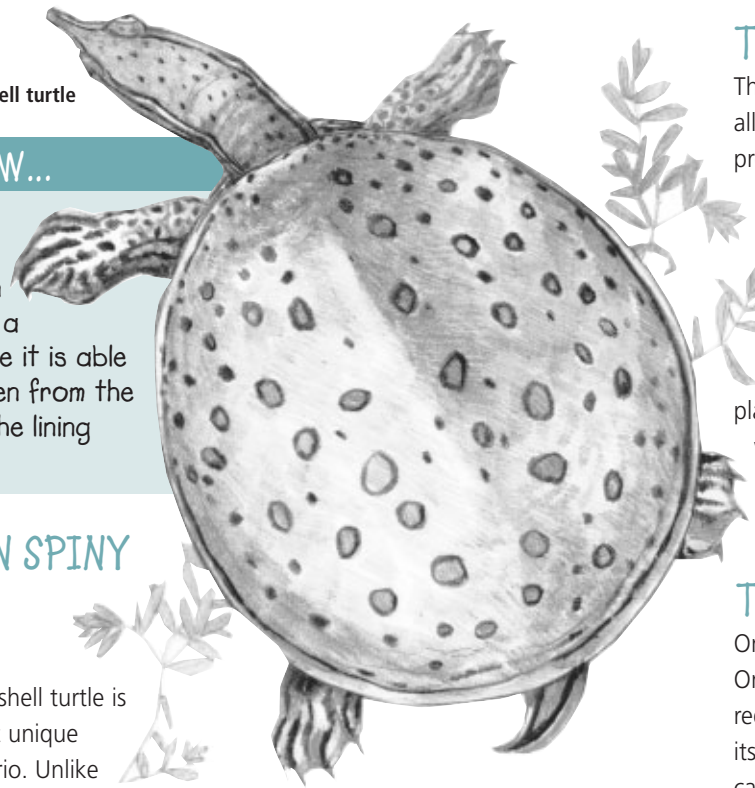
DID YOU KNOW...

The eastern spiny softshell turtle can remain under water for a long time because it is able to extract oxygen from the water through the lining of its mouth!

THE EASTERN SPINY SOFTSHELL TURTLE

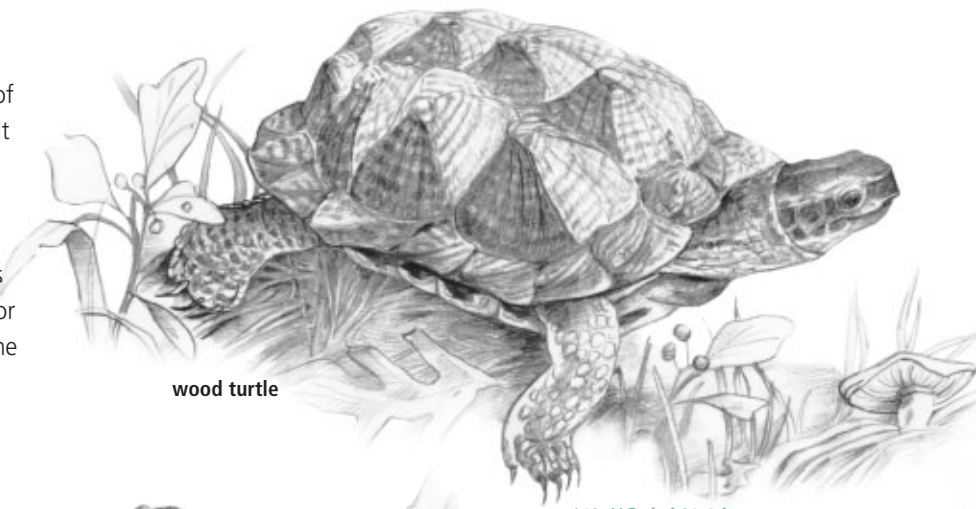
The eastern spiny softshell turtle is undoubtedly the most unique looking turtle in Ontario. Unlike other turtles, which have a hard shell on their backs, the eastern spiny softshell has a soft shell. Its leathery covering is grey-brown, which helps it blend in with the bottom sand and sediment of the ponds and bays that it calls home. A pig-like snout and pancake-shaped body also make this turtle stand out from other Ontario turtles.

Unfortunately because of habitat loss, this unique creature is only found in isolated areas of southern Ontario. It feeds on small aquatic animals such as fish, crayfish, aquatic insects and tadpoles.



THE WOOD TURTLE

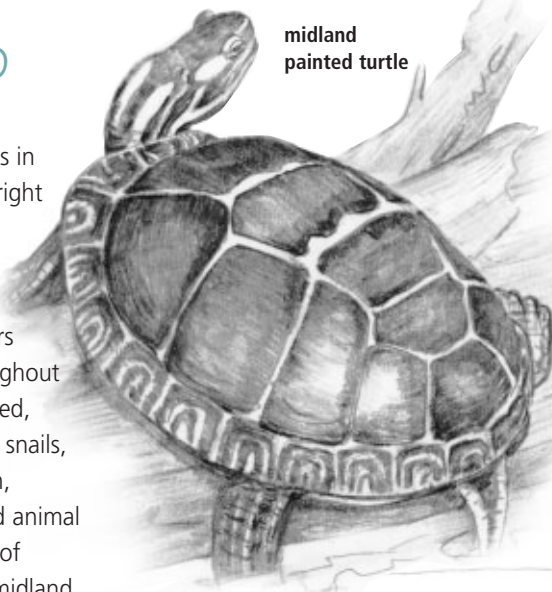
The wood turtle is the most terrestrial of all Ontario's turtles, which means that it prefers dry land, such as open woodlands and meadows. Unlike most other turtles, which have relatively smooth shells, the wood turtle has pointed, pyramid-shaped scutes or scales on its shell. It prefers to dine on the tender young shoots of plants, mushrooms, berries, carrion, worms, insects, tadpoles and frogs.



wood turtle

MIDLAND PAINTED TURTLE

One of the most colourful reptiles in Ontario, the painted turtle has bright red stripes around the edge of its dark green shell. This turtle can often be seen basking on partially submerged logs, boulders or along the sides of roads throughout the province. It feeds on duckweed, algae and other plants as well as snails, tadpoles, fish, insects and carrion, making it an omnivore (plant and animal eater). There are two subspecies of painted turtle in Ontario — the midland painted turtle is found south of Sault Ste Marie, and the western painted turtle is found north and west of Lake Superior.



midland painted turtle

THE MUSK (OR STINKPOT) TURTLE

The musk (or stinkpot) turtle gets its name from the musky odour that it gives off when handled. These reptiles rarely leave the water and are sometimes confused with baby snapping turtles because of their similar colour. Musk turtles have a higher domed shell and a smooth tail unlike the dinosaur-like tail of the snapping turtle. This bottom feeder forages for crayfish, leeches, snails, algae, aquatic insects and dead fish.

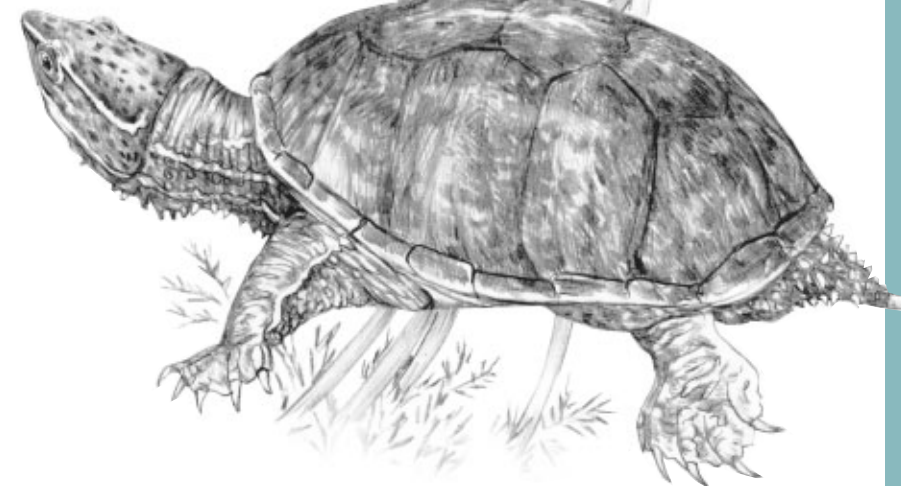


musk turtle

THE MAP TURTLE

(On back page)

The map turtle is brown with many yellow-tan lines in a pattern that resemble a map. This medium-sized turtle lives in ponds, marshes and slow moving rivers, and is found mainly in southern Ontario. Map turtles are carnivores (meat eaters) preying on snails, crayfish, fish and aquatic insects.



THE SPOTTED TURTLE (On back page)

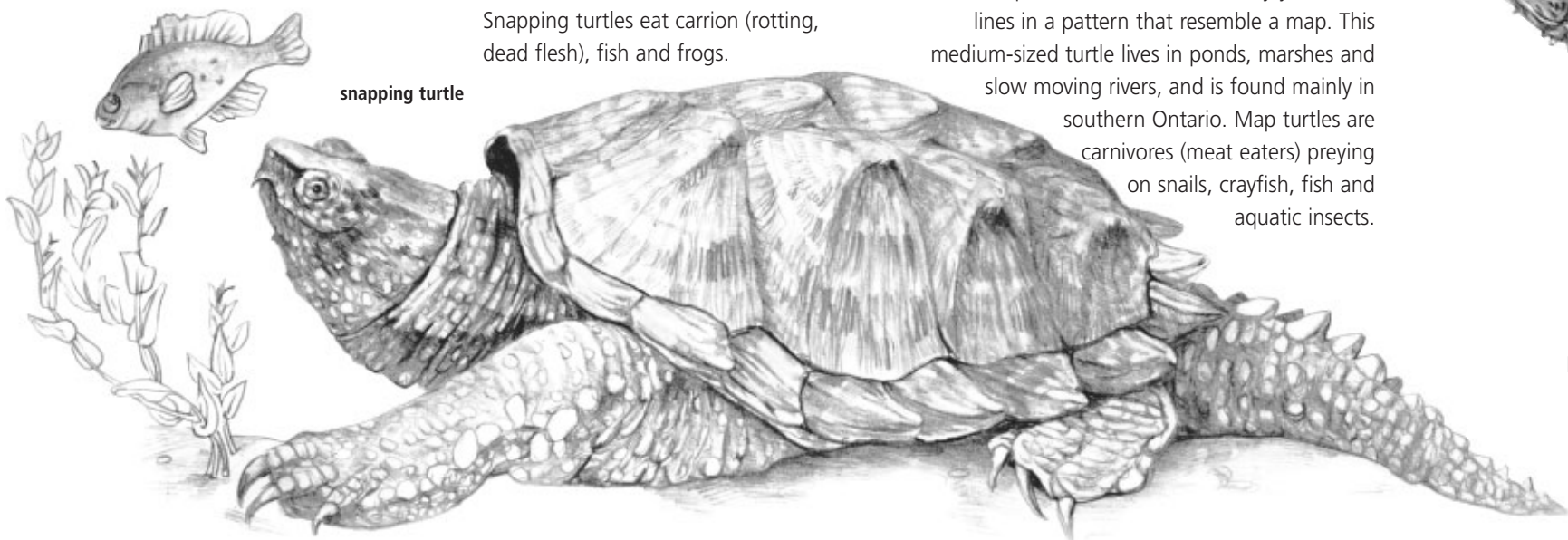
Living in wetlands and along streams, the spotted turtle is easily recognized by the bright yellow dots on its shell, head, neck and legs.

Unfortunately, this turtle is rarely seen in Ontario except for a few isolated spots in the southern part of the province. Preferring to eat under water, the spotted turtle feeds on snails, aquatic insects, fish, tadpoles and aquatic plants.

SNAPPING TURTLE

With a shell of up to 40 centimetres in diameter, the snapping turtle is the largest turtle in Ontario. It is easily recognized by its long, dinosaur-like tail, massive head and hooked jaw. Unlike other turtles, snapping turtles can't protect themselves from predators by tucking into their shells because their lower shell (plastron) is very small. To defend themselves on land, they will snap their jaws and hiss — so admire them from a distance! They are much more comfortable in the water and therefore will not bite swimmers. Snapping turtles eat carrion (rotting, dead flesh), fish and frogs.

snapping turtle



Baby, it's Cold Outside!

In the fall, when the temperature starts to drop, it's time for turtles to find a place to hibernate! They bury themselves in the thick mud at the bottom of a lake, river or wetland. Generally, turtles bunk down for the winter in October and emerge from their slumber in April.

Turtle Defence

Turtles have an advantage over many other creatures when it comes to self-defence. When danger is near, most turtles simply tuck their head and legs into their shells. Once the danger has passed, the turtle simply "unpacks" himself and goes on with his business of basking on a sunny log or hunting for food. Many turtles also use an aggressive display to warn predators. The snapping turtle, for example, will rise up on its legs, swaying back and forth, hiss and snap to protect itself on land. In the water, they are docile and will avoid swimmers.

Turtle Tots



In early summer, the female turtle seeks out a sandy place to lay eggs. She digs a hole and carefully positions herself above it to lay the eggs then covers them with sand. Once egg laying is complete, she leaves the nest and does not return. Depending on the species, turtles lay between two and 40 round eggs in a season. Approximately 90 days later, fully formed baby turtles no larger than a quarter emerge. Just like baby ducks and geese, baby turtles have an egg tooth that helps them slice through the eggshell. The egg tooth falls off shortly after hatching, and they are alone in the world to fend for themselves.

At the time of conception, a human baby is either a boy or a girl. This is not always the case for our reptilian friends. For some Ontario turtles, the temperature of the nest determines a turtle's sex. If the eggs remain at a temperature of about 25 degrees Celsius, then the babies will all be male, but if the temperature reaches 30 degrees Celsius, the offspring will all be female.