

Western Pond Turtle

Actinemys marmorata

Reptile

Scientific Name

Actinemys marmorata

Other Names

Pacific Pond Turtle

Range

West of the Sierra Nevada range, from the Puget Sound to Baja California, and isolated populations near the Carson and Truckee rivers spanning into western Nevada

Habitat

Freshwater ponds, marshes, slow-moving streams, reservoirs and small lakes with abundant vegetation

Description

A small, olive green to dark brown turtle

Average Size

Length: 4 – 8 in.

Weight: 450 – 1500g.

Lifespan

In the Wild: 20 – 70 years

In Captivity: 50+ years

Diet

In the wild: insects, crayfish, plants, aquatic invertebrates and fish

In captivity: insects, fish and invertebrates

Incubation

75 – 125 days

Clutch Size

5 – 20 eggs, up to twice a year

Sexual maturity

10 – 12 years or six inches in length

Predators

Raccoons, skunks, coyotes, birds of prey, and humans

Population Status

Vulnerable



Behavior

Western Pond Turtles reside in both permanent and intermittent waters, as long as the habitat includes large numbers of emergent logs or boulders for basking. They also bask on top of aquatic vegetation or position themselves just below the surface where water temperatures are elevated. These turtles can be seen stacked on top of each other or in a line if basking sites are limited; individuals may display aggressive biting and scratching behavior toward one another if the area becomes too crowded. When threatened, they will quickly dive under water for protection.

When winter arrives, Western Pond Turtles hibernate in the mud at the bottom of a pond or buried in the vegetation and soil, with some individuals traveling up to ½ mile in search of a suitable wintering locale. In the spring, these turtles emerge from their hibernation and move directly to the waterway in search of food, using their keen sense of sight and smell.

Reproduction/Breeding

The breeding season for this species generally lasts from April to August, depending on the location. There is little courtship behavior but males compete for available females.

When the female is ready to lay her eggs she leaves the waterway at night in search of a suitable nesting site. Once found, she empties her bladder onto the ground and then digs a nest with her hind legs in the moistened, loose soil. The completed nest takes about 10 hours to dig. When the nest is complete, the female deposits the eggs, before replacing the vegetation and soil into the burrow. In the future, the female offspring may return to this home nest area to lay their eggs.

When the young finally hatch in the fall, they may emerge from the nest and head toward the water or, as is most prevalent in northern areas, remain in the nest for the winter and come out in the spring. This process, called overwintering, may be necessary for the hatchlings' survival as the nest is the safest place for hatchlings to shelter while they await the return of warm weather.

Hatchlings leave the nest when they are about the size of a quarter, and will live in shallow water for the next year or so, hiding among vegetation to avoid predators.

Continued on reverse

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Conservation

Once common throughout their range, Western Pond Turtles have drastically declined in numbers due to a variety of reasons: loss of hatchling and breeding habitat due to expanding agricultural needs, predation on hatchlings by introduced species (bullfrog, bass) and commercial trapping for food and the pet trade. Because some hatchlings stay in the nest for almost a year, another important key to their survival is an undisturbed nest from early summer through the following spring, which is near impossible in some areas of their range.

The majority of conservation efforts have focused on “head start” programs, where eggs and hatchlings are collected from the wild for captive hatching and rearing. These young turtles are cared for until they reach a size in which they are less likely to suffer from predation, usually within two to three years. The Sacramento Zoo manages a “head start” program, where hatchlings from the lake on Zoo grounds are pampered in the Reptile House for their first years, with visitors getting a rare opportunity to view the young turtles on exhibit.

Amazing Facts

This is the only turtle species native to California.

There are two subspecies of this turtle, a Northwestern and Southeastern.

Pond turtles can remain under water 60 minutes or more, but usually rise to the surface every few minutes to breathe.

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