

Spotlight on Species

Western Painted Turtle

The Western Painted Turtle is one of the most colourful of the turtle species and is the only native freshwater turtle found in British Columbia.

Characteristics:

The Western Painted Turtle is named after the bright yellow stripes on its head, neck, tail and legs, and the red on its belly or plastron (shell covering the belly) and under-edge of its carapace (shell covering the back). The red and yellow patterns contrast with the olive-green of the skin and the dark colouring of the upper shell. Western Painted Turtles are the largest of their species. They can grow to over a foot in length with the shell measuring up to 25 cm long, which is roughly the size of a dinner plate.

Distribution

The Western Painted Turtle is the most northerly occurring turtle in North America. They can survive underwater in ponds that are 2 C and covered with half a metre of ice.

In British Columbia, Western Painted Turtles are found in pockets throughout the southern interior, as far north as Golden. This includes the Okanagan Valley, Kamloops Lake, Shuswap Lake, and the Creston and Nelson Area. They are less common on the coast. Western Painted Turtles are also found in low numbers in parts of the Fraser Valley from Vancouver to Hope, southeast Vancouver Island, and Sechelt-Powell River area.

Breeding

Once temperatures warm up and the ice leaves the water, Painted Turtle courtship and mating begins. By June or July, female turtles lay six to eighteen oval eggs, about 3 cm long or the length of a two-dollar coin. Females build their nests between dusk and dawn on open, south-facing sites with loose soil without allot of plants, roots, and rocks. These sites can be up to 150 m away from the water. Once the eggs are laid, the female fills the nest with soil, compacting it with her feet and plastron (belly), and then covering it with vegetation and debris. If predators do not find the nest, the hatchlings (baby turtles) break out of their eggs around September. Most hatchlings stay in the nest until the following spring. Survival is quite low due to freezing and predation of both eggs and hatchlings.

Female Painted Turtles reproduce about every second year, and when they do reproduce, they lay only one clutch (batch of eggs) in a summer. This means that relatively few juveniles are produced every year. Luckily, the few juveniles that survive to maturity experience much higher survival.

Diet

The Western Painted Turtle is an omnivore that eats a variety of foods including insects, snails, earthworms, frogs, tadpoles, algae, aquatic plants, and carrion (dead animal matter). Painted Turtles always swallow food under water, as they seem to have difficulty swallowing dry food.



Photo by Melissa Tesche

Habitat

Western Painted Turtles live in wetland habitats and prefer the margins and shallows of lakes and ponds, ditches and sluggish streams with muddy bottoms and lots of aquatic plants. These areas provide important habitat for feeding, basking, shelter from predators, and hibernation. Western Painted Turtles also require nearby upland nesting areas without vegetation.

Most adult Painted Turtles spend the winter hibernating in the mud at the bottom of ponds and lakes.

To avoid the predators, Painted Turtles like to bask on vegetation mats and logs completely surrounded by water. On a warm summer afternoon, Painted Turtles can be found stacked a few turtles deep at particularly good basking sites.

Latin name: *Chrysemys picta bellii*

Conservation status: BLUE

listed provincially and federally listed as a Special Concern. **BLUE** listed refers to a species that is considered to be of special concern in British Columbia because its populations are sensitive to human activities or natural events.

Threats

Road mortality particularly females who often have to cross roads to reach a good nesting site

Extensive loss of wetland habitats. Over 85% of wetland habitat has been destroyed in the South Okanagan-Similkameen

Introduction of non native aquatic species such as the American Bullfrog, the Red-eared Slider Turtle that prey upon the Western Painted Turtle's eggs and hatchlings

Nest sites often are destroyed by off-road vehicles and recreational activities

Wild turtles are brought home as pets and often starve to death in captivity. Their plight is not often apparent because their outer shell conceals their real condition.



Ministry of Environment photo



Photo by Ducks Unlimited Canada

What you can do

- ✓ Maintain and/or restore wetlands on your property.
- ✓ Never release pet amphibians and reptiles into the wild
- ✓ Stay on trails when biking or using off road vehicles to protect nesting sites
- ✓ Keep cattle and horses away from ponds and wetlands or restrict their access.
- ✓ Use pesticides responsibly and remember that run-off chemicals can get into local water systems.

WANTED: TURTLE SIGHTINGS!

We need to know where we presently have turtle populations. If you know of any, please pass these locations on to us!

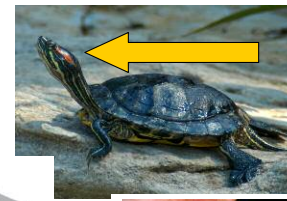
British Columbia also has large numbers of "released" pet turtles, mostly Red-eared Sliders, in our wetlands. These photos will show some of the key differences:

Western Painted Turtle
Up to 25 cm shell length
Yellow stripes on head, neck and legs
Shell dark brown, olive or black
Plastron (under shell) bright red with black and yellow markings



Jim Harding photo

Slider
Up to 28 cm shell length
Red ear stripe behind eye (may be yellow)
Shell green in young animals, dark in older ones
Plastron yellow with dark markings



John White photo



Western Painted Turtle distribution

To report a turtle sighting of either species, please contact us at BCFrogwatch@Victoria1.gov.bc.ca

Please include date, detailed description of location, and coordinates if you have them (or a good map). Digital photographs can be very helpful in confirming which species. If you're not sure, send us the information anyway and we can confirm. Data will be shared with the Conservation Data Centre. Thanks for helping!



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