

Blanding's Turtle (*Emydoidea blandingii*)

Family Emydidae

Subspecies: None currently recognized

Updated 2025



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Description/Identification: The Blanding's Turtle is a medium-sized to large, semi-terrestrial or semi-aquatic turtle with a smoothened, highly domed carapace, although hatchlings and juvenile turtles may have a more sculptured or keeled carapace. The highly domed carapaces of these turtles are often distinctive, and are sometimes said to resemble the lobe of half of a watermelon, or that of an old World War II army helmet. The marginals around the entire periphery of the shell are smooth, and are not serrated or toothed. The plastron has a distinctive partial hinge located on the forward, or anterior third or so of the underside, and the head and neck are long and slender. The carapace lengths of adult Blanding's Turtles usually ranges from about 5.9 to about 10.0 inches.

Blanding's Turtles are also easily identified by the notch located in the upper tips of their beaks and jaws, giving them a permanent "smiling" appearance. The toes and feet are partially webbed. Male and female Blanding's Turtles are similar in size and appearance, but males have thicker, longer tails than the shorter tails of females, and the ventral or cloacal openings on males are located further posterior on the underside of the tail to the edge of the carapace than are in females, which have their cloacal openings located almost directly underneath or much closer to the margin of the carapace. Males also may have more concave plastrons than females. As with most turtles, Blanding's Turtles are toothless, and instead have hardened, bony, keratinized beaks and horny plates along the maxilla and premaxillae on the inside of the mouth. Also as with most aquatic turtles, the reddish to pinkish tongue is triangular to somewhat rounded, and fixed to the inside of the mouth, and does not move freely or protrude outside of the mouth.

The carapace, or upper half of the shell usually ranges in color from a dark blackish, bluish-black, or dark olive-black with lighter yellow, cream colored, reddish, or orangish radiating small spots, dashes, flecks, or streaks on each carapace scute, which often tend to become more visible when the turtle is

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submerged in water, or has been recently wettened. The occasional individual may be a lighter brown, tan, or horn color with brown mottling on the carapace. The plastron is usually a bright yellow with black or dark brown rectangular or square-shaped blotches lining the posterior lateral third of each plastron scute. In some specimens, the plastron may be much more heavily stained or pigmented with a dark reddish or blackish.

The skin and scalation on the limbs, upper neck and head can range from a black or dark bluish-black, or dark brown with smaller light brown to yellow spots or flecks scattered throughout. The undersides of the bottom jaw and chin, throat, and sometimes extending onto areas on or around the fore-limbs are a characteristic bright yellow, which makes Blanding's Turtles distinctive even from a distance. Hatchlings are similar in appearance to adults, but have proportionately longer tails, and the plastron is covered by a single, large, dark black, brown, or reddish brown central blotch covering about 60% or more of the plastron lined with yellow. As they become older, juvenile Blanding's Turtles are much more heavily spotted or patterned than the adults, and may be confused with Spotted Turtles (*Clemmys guttata*), which do not occur in Wisconsin, or Ornate Box Turtles (*Terrapene ornata*), which are less patterned on the heads, necks, and limbs, have a more prominent carapace keel, and a fully and more well-developed hinge on the plastron.



Plastron, © Andrew Hoffman

Adult Blanding's Turtles can also be confused with Wood Turtles (*Glyptemys insculpta*). Wood Turtles, however, typically have much more sculptured carapace scutes and carapaces, and lack a hinged plastron. No subspecies are currently recognized of Blanding's Turtles.



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Range and Distribution: Blanding's Turtles range from southern Ontario and extreme southern Quebec,

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Canada, to northwestern Pennsylvania, through the Upper Midwest in Michigan, Wisconsin, and southern Minnesota, into Iowa, Nebraska, Illinois, and northern Indiana and Ohio. Isolated, disjunct populations also occur in the Northeastern U.S., in New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and New York. In Wisconsin, Blanding's Turtles may occur throughout most of the state in suitable habitat, except for the forested north-central region, in scattered or locally common to uncommon populations.

Habitat: Blanding's Turtles are a species which forages both in shallow water and on land, and can be found in a variety of quiet, contiguous, relatively in-tact and undisturbed wetland habitats or types of waterbodies. Large, open, grassy marshes, swamps, wetland ridges and swales, bogs, wet or wet mesic prairies, fens, shallow, slow moving rivers and river backwaters or sloughs, or prairie pothole ponds may be habitats for Blanding's Turtles. They may also be found in spring-fed streams, ponds, lakes, or other spring-fed wetlands. The only aquatic habitats not usually inhabited by Blanding's Turtles are more heavily forested wetlands, faster moving rivers, and northern-most wetlands. They are perhaps most common along the Wisconsin and Mississippi Rivers, as well as some of the other large marshland preserves scattered throughout the state. They nest in open to semi-open, sandy or gravelly, adjacent road-grades or road beds, sandy fields or prairies, sand dunes, or sand barrens nearby.

Feeding and Diet: Blanding's Turtles are omnivorous, and may forage for a variety of plant and animal material both in the water and on land. They may consume snails or other mollusks, crayfish and other crustaceans, aquatic insects and insect larvae, earthworms, small fish, frogs and other amphibians and their eggs or larvae, carrion (dead and decaying animal matter), grasses berries, algae or other aquatic plants. Unlike most aquatic turtles, Blanding's Turtles can feed both underwater and on land.

Natural History: Blanding's Turtles emerge from overwintering as early as mid to late April, although during warm winter days, they may be seen swimming about underneath the ice. Breeding and copulation can occur throughout the year, but most often shortly after these turtles emerge in April. Males will search for and patrol for females to mate with, and will bite and nip at the female's head and limbs until she becomes submissive and receptive to copulation. Copulation may last for up to several hours, and mating or copulation usually takes place in shallow water, where these turtles can occasionally be observed in the process.

In late May through early July, depending on the local environment, female Blanding's Turtles will then leave the water and move across over land for distances of up to one mile or more in search of a sandy or gravelly, sun-exposed open nesting location in which to deposit the eggs. Late afternoon, dawn, or dusk are usually the peak times for Blanding's Turtle nesting, where anywhere from about 6 to 15 elliptical white eggs are laid, and the hatchlings begin to emerge by late August or September. Overwintering and emergence the following spring may also occur with Blanding's Turtles. The characteristic bright yellow chins and throats of these turtles do not usually develop until at least three or four years of age. Because of their more terrestrial habits, Blanding's Turtles, especially hatchlings and nesting females, are especially susceptible to nest and egg-over-predation, and road and highway mortality.

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Blanding's Turtles are usually shy and wary, mild-mannered turtles which may be quick to dive off of their basking sites on exposed logs, rocks, or shorebanks when startled or approached, and will submerge themselves for up to 20 to 30 minutes hidden at the bottom. Blanding's Turtles are intermittent baskers, basking longer and more frequently than snapping turtles and musk turtles, but less frequently than painted, softshell, and map turtles. When encountered on land, Blanding's Turtles retain their mild-mannerisms, rarely attempting to bite or otherwise act offensively, although they may hiss by forcing air out of their shells as they withdraw their heads and necks into their shells, which they can seal shut using the anterior hinge on their plastrons much like box turtles. Because of this, Blanding's Turtles are sometimes called "semi-box turtles", although they are not within the same genus as box turtles (*Terrapene*).

In some areas, and in captivity, resident Blanding's Turtles may readily lose their wariness around people, and can be much easier to approach. Blanding's Turtles are generally active throughout the year until October or November, during which time they will usually overwinter buried in deep burrows or caverns in the deepest parts of their wetlands, or deep within river, pond, or stream banks.

Blanding's Turtle eggs and hatchlings are most susceptible to a large number of different predators. Many different species of birds, including large wading birds, large fish, snakes, sometimes other turtles, large amphibians such as North American Bullfrogs, large predatory or carnivorous aquatic invertebrates such as waterbugs, and a wide array of carnivorous mammals such as raccoons, opossums, skunks, weasels, foxes, and coyotes and otters will all readily eat hatchling turtles or turtle eggs. Adult Blanding's Turtles have relatively fewer predators, but can still be eaten by some carnivorous mammals on occasion.

Conservation Status: In Wisconsin, Blanding's Turtles are currently listed as a "Special Concern" Species and State "Protected Wild Animal" Under N.R. 16. Prior to 2014, they were listed as a "State Threatened" Species. They are regulated and protected along with all other of Wisconsin's herptiles, as a result under N.R. 16 and 19.275 as well as N.R. 21 and 22.. Blanding's Turtles are currently not protected or regulated federally. Blanding's Turtles are currently IUCN Red-List Endangered (EN).