

# **False Map Turtle (*Graptemys pseudogeographica*)**

**Family Emydidae**

**Subspecies: Northern False Map Turtle (*Graptemys pseudogeographica pseudogeographica*);**

**Mississippi Map Turtle (*Graptemys pseudogeographica kohni*)\*Introduced**

**Updated 2025**



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**Description/Identification:** The False Map Turtle is a medium-sized to large, semi-aquatic Map Turtle species. As with most members within the Emydidae family of turtles, males and females are noticeably dimorphic in size, and several other secondary characteristics and features, with males usually being much smaller than females. Male False Map Turtles range from a carapace length of about 3.54 to 5.90 inches, whereas females are much larger, and may reach carapace lengths of about 4.70 to 11.00 inches. The carapace is distinctly elevated, with low black knobs on the second, third, and fourth vertebrals, the rear marginal scutes are strongly serrated, and the plastron is flat. Males also have much longer, thicker tails than females, with the ventral or cloacal opening being located much further near the tail-tip posterior to the carapace, whereas the female's tails are usually much shorter, and the ventral opening is located underneath or much closer to the margin of the carapace. Males also have much longer fore-claws than females, and the plastrons of males are concave, rather than flat as in females. The feet of Map Turtles are strongly webbed. As with most turtles, False Map 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 fixed to the inside of the mouth, and does not move freely or protrude outside of the mouth.

The carapace ranges in color from brown, to olive-brown or olive-green, with anywhere from one to six larger, dark irregular blotches on the posterior margins of each scute. These blotches may be encircled with lighter colored yellow or orange, or a lattice of interconnected lines or circles may be present without the dark blotches. This patterning can often become faded or obscured in older adults. The plastron ranges in color from yellow to yellow-orange, and is marked with dark, concentric swirls of alternating yellow and dark greenish-brown. This pattern usually covers about 60% or less of the plastron, and can fade into a brown-yellow mottling in adults, and is replaced by dark lines along the sutures. The irises of the eyes are usually brown or reddish-brown. Map Turtles are so-named for the lighter, concentric lines and streaks on their carapaces said to resemble a topographic map.



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*Plastron, © Amphibians and Reptiles of South Dakota*

The head, neck, limbs, and skin can range in color from blackish, to dark green or greenish-brown with yellow markings bordered in black. The markings on the head can range from having a complete yellow-orange crescent posterior to the orbit, to a more broken crescent with as many as 6 narrow lines in contact with the orbit. The underside of the jaws are marked with alternate longitudinal green to yellow stripes or lines, which anteriorly break up into a variable mosaic pattern on the neck and forelimbs. These narrower yellow, crescent shaped orbital spots behind the eyes, and down to the lower jaws or mandibles distinguish the False Map Turtle from Wisconsin's other two Map Turtle species, the Ouachita Map Turtle (*Graptemys ouachitensis*), and the Northern Map Turtle (*Graptemys geographica*).

Hatchling False Map Turtles appear similar to the adults, except for having more boldly and heavily marked plastrons, more heavily serrated marginal scutes, and more pronounced carapace keels and knobs. The nominate subspecies of Northern False Map Turtle, *Graptemys pseudogeographica pseudogeographica*, occurs in Wisconsin. The Mississippi Map Turtle (*Graptemys pseudogeographica kohni*) is another subspecies of the False Map Turtle, and is an occasional native transplant in Wisconsin, probably from escaped or released pets, or possibly naturally occurring.



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**Range and Distribution:** False Map Turtles are primarily a river turtle species, ranging from the Mississippi and Missouri River basins and their tributaries from Minnesota and Wisconsin in the north, south to Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi, west to Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas, and east to Tennessee, Kentucky and Indiana. Isolated, disjunct populations also occur elsewhere throughout the U.S., probably due to escaped or released pets. In Wisconsin, False Map Turtles are primarily river turtles, occurring in the Mississippi and Wisconsin riverways, and some of their larger tributaries to the St. Croix River, although they can occasionally be found in other areas away from the rivers in southern Wisconsin.

**Habitat:** False Map Turtles are primarily a medium to large-river turtle, occurring primarily in the Wisconsin and Mississippi Rivers in Wisconsin to the St. Croix River. They may also occasionally be found in some lakes or marshes in southern Wisconsin, however, Slower moving sections of rivers, with areas of denser aquatic vegetation, and which are semi-open, are favored by False Map Turtles.

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**Feeding and Diet:** False Map Turtles are omnivorous to carnivorous; feeding on small fish, a variety of aquatic insects and insect larvae, crustaceans such as crayfish, mollusks, carrion, algae, or other aquatic plants. Feeding may occur at the surface of the water, or beneath, although males are said to have more carnivorous diets, and seldom to never feed at the surface, than female Map Turtles. As with most aquatic turtles, Map Turtles must feed in the water.

**Natural History:** False Map Turtles are similar in their basking, overwintering, and nesting habits to Ouachita Map Turtles, as well as in their temperaments. False Map Turtles are usually shy and timid turtles which will withdraw into their shells, or may attempt to claw, hiss, or bite on occasion if handled or captured. False Map Turtles are also extremely wary baskers, and will dive or plunge into the water at the slightest disturbance or suspicion. They are quite gregarious, and can be found basking in large numbers, often with other Map Turtle species. In Wisconsin, and elsewhere, all three Map Turtle species can be found basking, foraging, and overwintering together in the same areas. False Map Turtles rarely bask on the land, almost always basking on areas surrounded by water rather than adjacent to shore.

False Map Turtles are active throughout the year from about mid to late April through October or November, where they may overwinter deep within burrows or holes on the river bottom, underneath and behind submerged rocks and logs, within sand banks, or behind dams. Copulation and mating are similar to that of other Map Turtles, taking place during the spring or fall. Males will stimulate females into copulation using their long fore-claws to tap or drum each side of the female's head anywhere from 1 to 14 times, although there is little to no regularity in the number of drummings or the duration of this behavior, but does appear to be species specific.

Females are able to differentiate males of their own species from the number of, and duration of these "fore-claw" dances males perform, as well as through recognition of their species-specific head markings and/or cloacal scents, so hybridization between the Map Turtle species is not known to occur. These differences in the number of contacts between Map Turtles during copulation is detailed further in Vogt's 1981 publication. Nesting then takes place on sand bars or sandy beaches or sand banks within about 100 meters of the water. About 8 to 22 white eggs are laid from late May through July, and False Map Turtles may lay one or two clutches each year.

Hatchlings emerge from the nests in late August or mid-September, but may also emerge the following spring after overwintering in the nests. Unlike most other species of Wisconsin turtles, both False Map Turtles and Ouachita Map Turtles have a skewed hatchling sex ratio towards females by about 5 to 1, rather than a roughly 1 to 1 ratio. As with other Map Turtles, False Map Turtles are primarily diurnal, basking in the morning and late afternoon, and feeding during the mid-day, and alternating between basking and feeding throughout the day. They rest on the bottoms of the river at night, and are very strong swimmers, having been recaptured in areas up stream as much as one mile or more.

False Map Turtle eggs and hatchlings are most susceptible to a large number of different predators.

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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, skunks, foxes, and coyotes and otters will all readily eat hatchling turtles or turtle eggs. Adult False Map Turtles have relatively fewer predators, but can still be eaten by some carnivorous mammals on occasion.

**Conservation Status:** In Wisconsin, False Map Turtles are listed as “Common”. They are still regulated and protected along with all other of Wisconsin’s herptiles, however under N.R. 16 and 19.275 as well as N.R. 21 and 22.. False Map Turtles are currently not protected or regulated federally. False, or Mississippi Map Turtles are currently IUCN Red-List Least Concern (LC).