

Ouachita Map Turtle (*Graptemys ouachitensis*)

Family Emydidae

Subspecies: None currently recognized

Updated 2025



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Description/Identification: The Ouachita 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 Ouachita Map Turtles range from a carapace length of about 3.54 to 6.30 inches, whereas females are much larger, and may reach carapace lengths of about 4.70 to 10.30 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, Ouachita 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 also often white or silvery. Map Turtles are so-named for the lighter, concentric lines and streaks on their carapaces said to resemble a topographic map.

The head, neck, limbs, and skin can range in color from blackish, to dark green or greenish-brown with yellow markings bordered in black. A large yellow blotch extends from underneath each eye around the posterior border, and meets a pair of longitudinal yellow lines running the length of the head and neck. This crescent may be broken behind the eye, and can have 1 to 4 wide stripes in contact with the orbit. The spot beneath the orbit is large, and directly below this spot there are 1 to 4 large yellow spots on the jaws and towards the underside of the head. These wider, or thicker yellow, crescent shaped orbital

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spots behind the eyes, and down to the lower jaws or mandibles distinguish the Ouachita Map Turtle from Wisconsin's other two Map Turtle species, the False Map Turtle (*Graptemys pseudogeographica*), and the Northern Map Turtle (*Graptemys geographica*).



Plastron, © Andrew Hoffman

Hatchling Ouachita 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. There are no subspecies of the Ouachita Map Turtle presently recognized.



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Range and Distribution: The Ouachita Map Turtle is primarily a large river turtle, being found predominately in the Mississippi river basin, ranging from Wisconsin and Minnesota in the north, to Louisiana, Lake Texoma, Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas in the south and west, and to Indiana, Ohio, and West Virginia in the east. In Wisconsin, the Ouachita Map Turtle is restricted in range to predominately the Wisconsin and Mississippi Rivers, and some of their larger tributaries in western and southwestern Wisconsin.

Habitat: Ouachita Map Turtles are almost strictly a large river turtle, occurring along the faster flowing portions of the Wisconsin and Mississippi Rivers, the mouths of, and some of the larger tributaries thereof. They also favor areas with ample aquatic vegetation.

Feeding and Diet: Ouachita 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.

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Natural History: Ouachita Map Turtles have long been thought to be a conspecific of the False Map Turtle, to which they are closely related species. Therefore, relatively little information was historically available as to the Ouachita Map Turtle's ecological, natural history, and behavioral differences until more recently. In Wisconsin, and elsewhere, all three Map Turtle species can be found basking, foraging, and overwintering together in the same areas.

Ouachita Map Turtles are similar in their basking, overwintering, and nesting habits to False Map Turtles, as well as in their temperaments, usually being shy turtles which will withdraw into their shells, or may attempt to claw, hiss, or bite on occasion if handled or captured. Ouachita 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 has seldom been observed, but is probably similar to that of False 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 15 white eggs are laid from late May through July, and Ouachita Map Turtles may lay one or two clutches each year.

Hatchlings emerge from the nests in late August or early September, but may also emerge the following spring after overwintering in the nests. Unlike most other species of Wisconsin turtles, both false map 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, Ouachita 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.

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

Conservation Status: In Wisconsin, Ouachita Map Turtles are listed as "Common". They are still regulated

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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.. Ouachita Map Turtles are currently not protected or regulated federally. Ouachita Map Turtles are currently IUCN Red-List Least Concern (LC).