

Painted Turtle (*Chrysemys picta*)

Family Emydidae

Subspecies: Midland Painted Turtle (*Chrysemys picta marginata*); Western Painted Turtle (*Chrysemys picta bellii*)

Updated 2025



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Description/Identification: Painted Turtles are small to medium-sized, semi-aquatic turtles with a carapace, or upper shell length ranging from about 3.9 to 9.8 inches in size. Male and female Painted Turtles are dimorphic in size, with females being much larger than males. Male Painted Turtles also have much longer, thicker tails than the shorter tails which females have, and the cloacal or ventral openings in males are located much further from the margins of the carapace than the female's, which are located much nearer to, or directly underneath the carapace. Males also have much more concave plastrons than the flat plastrons of the females, and much longer fore-claws on the front feet. The feet are strongly webbed in addition. As with most turtles, Painted 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 is low, streamlined, smooth, and oval in shape, having smooth marginal scutes that are not toothed or serrated. The plastron is large, solid, and lacks a hinge, and the rest of the head, neck, and limbs are fairly non-descript in physical form and characteristics, except for the upper jaws or beaks being notched by two tooth-like projections one each side. The carapace may range in color from black, gray, to olive-green (particularly when they are submerged in water, or have been recently wettened), and the large scutes on the carapace are unpatterned, and separated by white or light colored sutures between the scutes. On the bridge and marginal scutes, there often may be red or orange markings along the peripheries and along the underside of the carapace.

The plastrons may be highly variable in color and pattern. Two subspecies of Painted Turtle occur in Wisconsin, the Midland Painted Turtle (*Chrysemys picta marginalis*), and the Western Painted Turtle (*Chrysemys picta bellii*), which intergrade across a wide band over Wisconsin. The plastrons of the Midland subspecies typically are a lighter pale cream color to yellow or yellow-orange, usually with a single, grayish to pale greenish mid-plastral stripe, while in the Western subspecies, the plastron may be a much more vibrant red, pink, or orange, with a darker green, greenish-brown, or yellowish-brown "oak leaf" pattern which radiates outward. Intergrades Painted Turtles can have much more variable colors and patterns on the plastron, and in some areas the plastrons can be stained by excess melanin in their shells or by external chemicals and minerals to appear much more obscured or solid darker reddish-brown or even violet color.

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Western Painted Turtle Plastron (*C. p. bellii*), © Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife



Midland Painted Turtle Plastron (*C. p. marginata*), © Maryland Biodiversity Project

The skin on the head, neck, and limbs usually tends to be a blackish, dark brown, or dark olive-green, and are striped with red, yellow, or orange stripes. A yellow stripe also usually runs peripheral from behind the eye to the bottom-rear of the jaws. Behind each eye is also usually a large dorsolateral yellow spot and yellow streaks. Hatchling Painted Turtles are similar in appearance to the adults, but are usually more brightly colored, and may have a white mid-dorsal stripe down the carapace as well.



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Range and Distribution: Painted Turtles are very widely distributed across Canada and the United States, from the western coast in British Columbia (B.C.), Washington, and Oregon, through Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, and Quebec. In the United States, these turtles extend south in the central Great Plains states to Colorado, New Mexico, Kansas, and extreme northern Oklahoma, and throughout much of the eastern United States and provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, Canada. In the U.S. only the south-central portions of Texas, Florida, and lower southeast lack Painted

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Turtles.

In Wisconsin, Painted Turtles are perhaps one of the most widespread and ubiquitous species of turtles, being found throughout the state. Pure western Painted Turtles occur most commonly in the western half of the state, and pure Midland Painted Turtles in the south-central, eastern, and southeastern Wisconsin, but the two subspecies intergrade over a broad band across Wisconsin, making identification down to subspecies often difficult.

Habitat: Painted Turtles are a common and widespread species of turtle, which may be found in nearly any type of permanent to semi-permanent wetland or body of water. Springs, or spring fed wetlands, marshes, swamps, bogs, wetland ridges and swales, ponds, slower moving streams and rivers, river floodplains and sloughs/river backwaters, shallow to deep lakes, or even more ephemeral or temporary woodland ponds or other wetlands all may be home to Painted Turtles. These turtles are also quite tolerant of polluted or degraded waters as well, and can continue to exist even in urbanized environments.

Feeding and Diet: Painted Turtles are omnivorous, and may feed on a wide variety of plant and animal material. They may eat algae or other aquatic plants and bottom detritus, aquatic insects and their larvae, crayfish or other crustaceans, earthworms, leeches, or other worms, carrion (dead or decaying plant or animal matter), small fish, snails or other mollusks, or small amphibians on occasion, such as frogs, or amphibian eggs or their larvae. As with most aquatic turtles, feeding takes place in the water.

Natural History: Painted Turtles are one of Wisconsin's most familiar, widespread, and ubiquitous species of turtles, and are sometimes informally referred to as "mud turtles". They emerge from overwintering by around late March or throughout April, but on warm winter days, they may be seen moving about underneath ice. Painted Turtles are primarily diurnal, or active during the day, basking readily on shorebanks, partially submerged rocks, logs, beaver or muskrat dams and lodges, overhanging branches, or other basking sites.

Depending on air and water temperatures, Painted Turtles typically alternate throughout the day between basking and feeding in the water, where they actively forage or hunt for food along or near the bottoms. Copulation and mating can take place throughout the year, but most commonly in the spring and fall, before or after overwintering, where the males patrol the water for females to copulate with. Male Painted Turtles will use their long fore-claws to "tickle" and stimulate the females, while also nipping at them. Thereafter, females leave the water and may travel overland for as much as 1.9 miles or greater in search of sandy or gravelly nesting sites. Painted Turtles may nest communally in the same areas along roadbeds or road-shoulders, hillsides, or other sunny, sandy, semi-open places.

Males may also leave the water and travel over-land for reasons less well known, but perhaps to disperse to new habitats, or during periods of drought or other unfavorable conditions. Painted Turtles during

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these times are often seen wandering across roads and sidewalks, in the case of females in search of nesting locations, from late May through early or mid-July. Female Painted Turtles may lay up to two clutches each year, laying anywhere from 4 to 20 spherical whitish eggs in a small cavity or hole dug by their hind claws and feet. Hatchlings then emerge anywhere from 50 to 70 days later, by late August or through September, although in some areas, the hatchling Painted Turtles may overwinter inside of the nests until the following spring.

Painted Turtles may remain active throughout the year until October or November, where they will often congregate in large numbers from the area to overwinter in springs, or will bury themselves down underneath the mud or other bottoms in self-excavated burrows, within or behind dams, or underneath, behind, or within submerged logs or rocks, or within the banks of their wetland habitats. As with most turtles, sex determination of the hatchlings is usually roughly 1:1 males to females, although different factors may influence or skew this in some areas.

Painted Turtles are normally wary, and will slip or plunge off of their basking sites if disturbed or approached too closely, and will submerge themselves at the bottom or amongst vegetation for up to 20 to 30 minutes before resurfacing, or they may swim back up to the surface a little ways out in the water to assess the threat. If Painted Turtles are encountered or handled on land, they may hiss, urinate, gape open their mouths, or withdraw into their shells, although they may bite if a stray finger goes too close to their heads.

Painted 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 Painted Turtles have relatively fewer predators, but can still be eaten by some carnivorous mammals on occasion.

Conservation Status: In Wisconsin, Painted 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. Painted Turtles are currently not protected or regulated federally. Painted Turtles are currently IUCN Red-List Least Concern (LC).