

# **Wood Turtle (*Glyptemys insculpta*)**

***Family Emydidae***

**Subspecies: None currently recognized**

***Updated 2025***



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**Description/Identification:** The Wood Turtle is a medium-sized to large, semi-terrestrial turtle with only slightly, partially webbed fore and hind feet. Males and females appear similar in overall size and appearance, but males are slightly larger than the females, and are dimorphic in several of their other secondary characteristics. Wood Turtles (not to be confused with the Central and South American genera of turtles from the genus *Rhinoclemmys*, and other genera of turtles found elsewhere in the world which also may be called “Wood Turtles”) usually reach about 4.75 to 9.44 inches in upper carapace length, and have highly sculptured, concentric rings and scutes resembling a tree’s rings or the grains within wood, on their upper carapaces, hence the name “wood” turtle.

Males also have concave plastrons, or lower bottom shells, and longer, thicker tails with their cloacal opening or vent located nearer to the tips of their tails posterior to the margins of the carapace, whereas females have flat plastrons with shorter tails, and cloacal openings much closer to, or underneath the margins of the carapace. Other concentric growth ridges and grooves are also often present on the carapace, and the rear marginal scutes of the carapace are semi-serrated. A low carapace keel may also be present in Wood Turtles. The heads of Wood Turtles are moderately blunt, the rims around the irises may be yellow to gold, and the beak and jaws may be lighter colored than the rest of the head. As with most turtles, Wood 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 color of Wood Turtles may vary from a dull brownish, grayish-brown, or olive-brown to yellowish-brown with darker, radiating flecks and/or lighter yellow rays on each scute. The plastrons are

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usually yellow, with large, rectangular or square shaped black to dark brown blotches along the outer margins of the plastron scutes. The bridges are usually a similar yellow color to the plastron, with alternating darker square-shaped blotches or markings as well. The skin and scalation on the head, neck, and limbs tend to be a dark brown, blackish, to grayish-brown, or dark olive-black in color. The head, neck, and limbs may also be washed or suffused in with much brighter yellow, red, or reddish coloration.

Wood Turtles can be quite variable among individuals in terms of their coloration and patterning, or their color intensity on their head and limbs, and on their carapace. Hatchling Wood Turtles, which are seldom seen or observed, lack the more intense colors and patterns of the adults, but can be identified by their long tails, yellow to yellow-brown mottled carapaces, and pale yellow plastrons with a wide, dark brown to black central single blotch covering most of the plastron. Adult Wood Turtles may also be confused with Blanding's Turtles (*Emydoidea blandingii*), but lack the distinctive yellow chins or throats, and lack the hinged plastrons which Blanding's Turtles possess. Adult Blanding's Turtles also usually have smoother, much more highly domed carapaces than Wood Turtles.



Plastron, © TheTurtleRoom

No subspecies of the Wood Turtle are currently recognized.



© WDNR.

**Range and Distribution:** Wood Turtles occur from the Upper Midwest United States from Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan, to portions of southern Ontario, Canada, through southern Quebec Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, and throughout the New England States through to Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Maryland, and extreme northern Virginia in the eastern U.S. In Wisconsin, Wood Turtles can

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occur in suitable habitat throughout approximately the northern two-thirds of the state, but are most common in northern and western Wisconsin. Populations are also greatly reduced and scattered compared to their former historic ranges, and the ranges into south-central and southeastern Wisconsin are either part of their historical, extirpated ranges or displaced individuals with no evidence for wild populations.

**Habitat:** Wood Turtles are fairly restricted in their habitat preferences to relatively fast moving rivers or streams within their above mentioned range. During the summer months, Wood Turtles may become more terrestrial, foraging in nearby, surrounding deciduous to mixed upland forests and woodlands and open wet meadows or shrub carr, or other adjacent riparian wetlands. Some individuals, or populations of individuals may inhabit the rivers or streams throughout the year, and may remain more aquatic than terrestrial.

**Feeding and Diet:** Wood Turtles are omnivorous, feeding on a wide variety of plant and animal material, and are able to feed both in the water and on land. They are usually not picky eaters, and are opportunistic. They may forage for terrestrial or aquatic insects and larvae, earthworms, crustaceans such as crayfish, snails or other mollusks, small fish or amphibians, or carrion (dead or decaying animal matter). They may also eat and forage for algae, berries, mosses, and other fruit, grasses, leaves, or terrestrial to aquatic plants.

**Natural History:** Wood Turtles may become active in the year as soon as shortly after the ice melts and thaws, and air temperatures consistently reach 50 degrees of greater, in spring from about as early as mid-March through May. Wood Turtles can remain active throughout the year through to October or November, and may breed and copulate at throughout this time period, but most often in the spring and fall when they first emerge or before overwintering. Nesting typically then begins to take place anywhere from about Mid-May throughout June, depending on regional and environmental factors, but hatchling Wood Turtles, unlike many other turtles, are not known to overwinter in their nests.

Copulation can take place in the water, or on land. Wood Turtles typically choose to nest in open to semi-open, gravelly or sandy areas within about 60 meters of water, and can include sand bars, roadbeds or road-grades, sandy banks, or shorelines. The hatchlings then begin to hatch in about 55 to 75 days during mid-July to mid-September. Wood Turtles are primarily a diurnal species of turtle, being most active during the day, where they may forage for food in the water or on land during mid-day, and basking on logs, or stream and river banks during the early morning and late afternoon. Usually, Wood Turtles will lay only a single clutch of eggs per year, numbering 4 to 17 eggs, on average. By October or November, Wood Turtles will overwinter in deep burrows at the bottoms of rivers or streams, or within riverbanks with enough water flow to prevent freezing.

Wood Turtles are a shy, and mild-mannered species of turtle, seldom willing to bite when handled or in defense. Their main lines of defense are to retreat into the water, or into their shells when threatened. Due to overall habitat loss and destruction, riparian development, and widespread overcollection, and

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overexploitation and collecting as pets, or for biological supply, Wood Turtle population numbers have become significantly reduced and scattered when compared to their more historic ranges, and due to this, are currently a State-Threatened species in Wisconsin.

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

**Conservation Status:** In Wisconsin, Wood Turtles are listed as a “State Threatened” species, and populations are greatly reduced and scattered from their historic levels. They are regulated and protected along with all other of Wisconsin’s herptiles. Wood Turtles are currently not protected or regulated federally. Wood Turtles are currently IUCN Red-List Least Endangered (EN).