

Florida's many turtles
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Florida sports some of the finest freshwater, spring-fed rivers in the world. In addition, swamps, marshes and numerous other types of wetlands are found here in abundance. Because of this watery wonderland, the Sunshine state hosts a very large and diverse range of turtle inhabitants.

Perhaps the most common of the turtles is the Peninsular Cooter (*Oseydents fkirudaba oebubsykarus*). This reptile is one of the larger of the turtles and can grow to lengths of up to 16 inches. You will generally see these cold blooded creatures basking on a log or rock near the water in an effort to soak up the sun.

Another easily recognizable turtle that you may spot is the Florida Redbelly turtle (*Pseudemys nelsonii*). With a very dark, almost black back (carapace) and bright red scales that circle around its edge and bottom portion of the shell, it is clear where this turtle gets its name. The best places to see this turtle are along slow moving rivers with plenty of aquatic vegetation.

Other types of turtles that may not be as easily spotted include the Common Snapping turtle, (*Chelydra serpentine*). They prefer ponds, lakes and drainage ditches as well as slow moving tributaries. These creatures are noted for their belligerent temperament when they are out of the water, thus the name snapper. They have very powerful beak-like jaws, and a highly mobile head and neck. They appear rugged with muscular builds with ridged carapaces. They may lie beneath the muddy bottom and expose only their heads, stretching their long necks to the surface to take a breath from the nostrils positioned at the tip of their nose. Snapping turtles eat vegetation and animals and serve as important aquatic scavengers; but they are also active hunters and will prey on snakes, smaller turtles, fish, frogs, reptiles, birds and even small mammals.

Also inhabiting slow moving waters are the softshell turtles. They enjoy marshes, ponds, tributaries and drainage ditches. The Florida Softshell, (*Apalone ferox*), can grow to about 20 inches. They swim just below the surface and may also bask on a nearby log. They can be identified by their dark brown skin, leathery carapace and a white or cream colored underside. This coloration provides the creature with excellent camouflage from predators. Softshells have a long snorkel-like nose. They are almost entirely aquatic, generally only leaving their watery habitat to lay eggs or bask in the sun. They are shy around people, but when they are frightened and feel threatened, they will bite with their strong jaws. They are extremely fast both in water and on land. The Florida softshell is highly carnivorous, consuming fish, frogs and other amphibians, insects, duck hatchlings and crustaceans.

Mud and Musk turtles are another species found in Florida. They inhabit cypress swamps and drainage ditches. They are also called stinkpot due to their ability to release a foul musky odor to ward off predators. The Common Musk turtle, (*Sternotherus odoratus*), can climb to amazing heights up near vertical surfaces. They can also hang off branches above the water and dive or fall with a loud splash into the water. These small creatures are generally black, grey or brown with high domed shells. They only grow to a length of about 3 to 5 inches. They have long necks and short legs. The head is vaguely triangular in shape, with a pointed snout and sharp beak, and

yellow-green striping from the tip of the nose to the neck. Barbels are present on the chin and the throat and their tongues are covered in bud-like nipples that allow them to breathe underwater.

The abovementioned are only a few of the many varieties of turtles that live in Florida. There are a number of other species that live in different habitats such as the sea turtles and tortoises. But one thing is for sure; no matter where you may travel in Florida, you are sure to see some type of turtle whether in a pond, river, ditch or even the ocean.

Interesting turtle facts:

- * The first known turtles existed 200 million years ago.
- * There are approximately 300 species of turtles.
- * Turtles live on every continent except Antarctica.
- * The blood of hibernating turtles acts somewhat like antifreeze, allowing it to tolerate cold temperatures.
- * Some female turtles produce eggs four years after mating.
- * Many species make sound, especially while mating.
- * Incubation temperature determines the sex of the hatchling.
- * All turtles lay their eggs on land.
- * Hatching turtles have an egg tooth at the end of their beak to help open the egg.
- * Some land turtles can out run a human.
- * The smallest turtle, the Speckled Padloper is 4". The largest is the Leatherback sea turtle that can reach up to 10' in length.
- * Turtle shells are built into their skeleton.
- * The top shell, the carapace, is made up of approximately 50 bones.
- * Turtles cannot protrude their tongues from their mouths.
- * Aquatic turtles must be in water to eat.
- * Land turtles ears are sensitive to ground vibration.
- * A group of turtles is classically called a bale.
- * Turtles have good eyesight, seeing in full color and a strong sense of smell. They have excellent hearing and sense of touch. Their shells have feeling due to nerve endings.
- * Instead of teeth, turtles have a sharp beak for eating. Depending on species, the beak may be scissor-like, hook-like, or serrated. The earliest turtles did have teeth and could not retract their head.
- * Some turtles can live up to a year without food.