

## Western Pond Turtle *Clemmys marmorata* (also called Pacific or Mud Turtle)



Pond turtles locate their food by sight and smell, and are often seen "cruising" along the bottom or banks of a wetland. They are "omnivorous", eating a variety of insects, tadpoles, frog eggs, snails, aquatic beetles, dragonfly larvae, small fish and dead meat. They eat underwater because they are unable to swallow air. Pond turtles are very shy and will dive into the water at the first sign of danger. They can remain under water 60 minutes or more, but usually rise to the surface every few minutes to breathe. For protection on land, they can quickly retract their legs and head into their hard shell.

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### Resources:

Open Space Parks & Preserves  
Santa Clara County Parks & Recreation  
[www.parkhere.org](http://www.parkhere.org)  
SCC Open Space Authority  
[www.openspaceauthority.org](http://www.openspaceauthority.org)  
Mid Peninsula Open Space District  
[www.openspace.org](http://www.openspace.org)

### For additional information:

Western Reptiles and Amphibians, Peterson Field Guide,  
Robert C. Stebbins, Houghton Mifflin Publishers  
California Herps,  
[www.californiaherps.com/turtles/pages/a.marmorata.html](http://www.californiaherps.com/turtles/pages/a.marmorata.html)

## The Secret Lives of Western Pond Turtles

An interpretive introduction to  
Western Pond Turtles,  
their life cycle, habitat, and  
threats to their survival.



## Western Pond Turtle *Clemmys marmorata* (also called Pacific or Mud Turtle)

Native to the Pacific Coastal States from Washington to Baja California. A thoroughly aquatic turtle that lives in streams, ponds, lakes, reservoirs, permanent and ephemeral wetlands. Pond Turtles spend their lives in water, but also require terrestrial habitats for nesting. Lifespan can be 40-50 years in ideal conditions.

### Description

Coloration ranges from olive brown to black on the carapace (upper shell), with lighter marbling visible close up. The plastron (lower shell) is black and yellow. The head and legs usually dark with spots or a network of markings with possible some yellow (but not stripes like the painted turtle). Adult pond turtles range from 6-8 inches in length and weigh between 1-2 pounds.

**Male:** Throat is lighter, often white to yellow without flecking, tail is long and shell usually flatter on top, concave on the underside and less heavily marked than the female.

### Reproduction

Female pond turtles usually reach sexual maturity around 10-15 years of age. Males mature quicker at 8-12 years. Nesting occurs from late May until the middle of July. Females find a suitable site, usually with dry soil, sparse vegetation and southern exposure. The female digs a hole for the nest - first by softening the soil with urine and then scooping out the soil using her hind feet, one after the other.

Once the site is prepared, she deposits a clutch of 3-13 eggs. After laying the eggs, the hole is filled with a mixture of vegetation and dirt to provide an air space, then covered with wet soil to keep the eggs in a humid environment. This slow process can take from two to four hours. The eggs incubate naturally underground for 90-130 days, depending on summer temperatures.

### Hatchlings

They emerge from the nest in the fall or spend winter in the nest and come out in the spring. Independent at birth, hatchlings rely on their natural instinct for survival including finding food.

### Behavior

Pond turtles use both land and water during their life cycle. They spend much of their year in water, but also spend a part of each year in grassy, sunny areas for nesting, and in wooded, brushy thickets for winter hibernation where they bury themselves underground until spring.

In spring pond turtles emerge from winter hibernation and travel to wetlands in search of food. Pond turtles locate their food by sight and smell, and are often seen "cruising" along the bottom or banks of a wetland. They are "omnivorous", eating a variety of insects, tadpoles, frog eggs, snails, aquatic beetles, dragonfly larvae, small fish and dead meat. They eat underwater because they are unable to swallow air.

Pond turtles are very shy and will dive into the water at the first sign of danger. They can remain under water 60 minutes or more, but usually rise to the surface every few minutes to breathe. For protection on land, they can quickly retract their legs and head into their hard shell.

Because the environment controls their body temperature, pond turtles often "haul out" to bask in the sun on logs, rocks, banks or floating vegetation, especially in spring when temperatures are cool. They can be seen stacking on top of each other or in a line if basking sites are limited. If there are too few basking sites, turtles will exhibit aggressive behavior that may include an open-mouth gesture, hissing, lunging or biting. The "alpha male" in the pond turtle community commands the highest spot on the log or bank and defends it when other turtles edge near.

### Threats

Populations of western pond turtles are in decline due to: disease, upland and aquatic habitat alterations and destruction, in addition to the introduction of predators. The biggest threat to the species is the bullfrog and introduced warm fresh water fish, such as bass. Both prey on small juvenile turtles. The western pond turtle is listed as an Endangered Species. It is illegal to interfere or take (capture) western pond turtles. In some areas, survival of the species depends on less than 10 turtles.

