

What is the Texas Turtle Watch?

Texas Turtle Watch is a citizen science program developed to collect data on three native turtle species whose population numbers are poorly understood. After collecting numbers and trends over time, these data will directly contribute to an understanding of these native turtle species.

In efforts to learn more about turtles, the information collected by citizens is critical. Assessing basking turtle populations through trained citizen watch groups of all ages and interests will help scientists create a knowledge base about turtles populations in Texas, which will lead to better conservation efforts and strategies. Additionally, citizens involved in monitoring turtles are provided a unique opportunity to get outside while contributing to science and conservation research. The three turtle groups of focus are sliders (genus *Trachemys*), cooters (genus *Pseudemys*) and softshells (genus *Apalone*) because these species are frequent baskers. Their basking and nesting behaviors make them more visible than other turtle species.

What Can You Do?

1. **Go through a Turtle Watch Training Class.**
2. **Participate.** Involve your family, friends, scout troops, schools, etc. Make this a fun activity for all.
3. **Submit your data.** Information is critical to turtle research and conservation.
4. **Repeat the event.** Additional observations at a location provide valuable information.

Texas Turtle Watching TIPS

1. Your data should focus particularly on sliders, cooters, and softshell turtles. Provide digital pictures if possible, and a quick summary of each turtle using the data sheet.
2. Turtles are most active in warm weather (not extreme temperatures, such as freezing.) May through July is considered peak basking season, however turtles can be spotted basking throughout most of the year in many parts of Texas.
3. Peak activity for most basking turtles occurs mid morning and mid afternoon.
4. You may want to bring a camera, binoculars, guide books and your Turtle FAQ sheet.
5. If possible, visit a sight three times. Repeat observations strengthen the data. Single observations are still helpful.
6. Turtles are naturally shy animals and will retreat into water if they are not used to people, so remember to be quiet and patient when making your observations
7. This data survey project encourages participants to use visual observation only. Please do not handle turtles without the proper permit and training. Turtles have sharp beaks with a powerful bite and strong claws which they use to escape. They also carry *Salmonella*. You or the turtle could easily be harmed if you try to pick up the animal.



Texas Turtle Watch
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1989 Colonial Parkway
Fort Worth, TX 76110

www.fortworthzoo.org/conservetxturtlewatch.html



Texas Turtle Watch



A citizen science
program
for tomorrow's
turtles

Quick Guide to Sliders, Cooters and Softshell Turtles

Hard Shells

Sliders (*Trachemys*)

Cooters (*Pseudemys*)



Softshells (*Apalone*)



Description:

- Red stripe behind eye, yellow stripes on skin (absent in old males).
- Adult shell length between 5-12 inches, females are larger than males; shell hard.
- Shell pattern mostly vertical (when present).
- Young have brighter colors than adults; adult males may darken completely and lose the striped pattern.

Reproduction:

- Females lay eggs from April to August.

Habitat:

Sliders are often seen basking on rock or logs. They are found in slow moving water with muddy bottoms and they are widely distributed throughout the state of Texas.

*Pictured above are the red-eared sliders (*Trachemys scripta*), female at top, old male at bottom.

Description:

- Yellow to light orange stripes on the skin; some cooters have spots behind the eyes and around the jaws (no red stripe as in sliders).
- Adult shell length 8-16 inches, females larger than males; shell hard.
- Shell pattern mostly reticulated or whorled.
- Longer front claws on males than females.
- Young have brighter color and sharper patterns than adults, which darken with age.

Reproduction:

- Females lay eggs between May and June.

Habitat:

Cooters are found basking on rocks or logs. They prefer habitats with slow moving fresh water and muddy bottoms. Sometimes they can be found in brackish water.

*Pictured above is the river cooter (*Pseudemys concinna*) at top, the Texas cooter (*Pseudemys texana*) at bottom.

Description:

- The shell color will blend in with the muddy water and pond bottoms, being olive, brown or gray. The shell is smooth, leathery and very shiny when dry.
- Young have more contrasting colors and patterns than adults.
- They have a snorkel-like nose and a long neck.
- Adult soft shells range from 5-21 inches in shell length and males are generally smaller.

Reproduction:

- Females will lay eggs from May until August on sandy banks.

Habitat:

Softshells are found in fresh water and some brackish waters. This turtle rarely leaves water except when a female ventures from shore to nest.

*Pictured above is a female spiny softshell (*Apalone spinifera*),