



Wyoming might not have alligators.

But it has...TU

On the mud at the bottom of the pond, hidden between the swaying stems of submergent weed beds, lies a reptile whose lineage evolved over 200 million years ago. It's not an alligator, but a different ancient reptile—a turtle!

Thanks to their characteristic hard shells, turtles are an easily recognizable group of animals. The top part of a turtle's shell is called the carapace and consists of the turtle's spine and ribs. The bottom part of their shell, made up of their abdominal ribs, is called the plastron.

Contrary to cartoon depictions, turtles cannot leave their shells. However, turtle shells have nerve endings so sensitive that a turtle can tell when its shell is being touched.

What kinds of turtles might you encounter on your property? Wyoming has four types of native turtles: three primarily aquatic species and one primarily terrestrial species.

Aquatic turtles

Western painted turtles (*Chrysemys picta bellii*) are named for their bright, beautiful markings. They have yellow stripes on their necks, heads, tails, and legs as well as red or orange colorations on their shells. Females are larger than males and can grow to about 10 inches in length; males grow to about 6 inches. Males also have flatter shells than females.

Western painted turtles can be found in the eastern third of the state at elevations below 6,000 feet. They are often found in swampy areas, ponds, small lakes, and muddy streams. They thrive in slow-moving shallow water with soft bottoms. Like most turtles, they need aquatic vegetation for food and habitat cover as well as basking sites like rocks or logs to warm up in the sun.

Eastern spiny softshell turtles (*Apalone spinifera spinifera*) are one of the larger turtle species in



Western painted turtle (*Chrysemys picta bellii*)



Eastern spiny softshell turtle (*Apalone spinifera spinifera*)

TURTLES!

Wyoming by length. Females are larger than males and can grow to about 20 inches in length, while males reach lengths of about 10 inches. Unlike most turtles, which have hard shells, softshell turtles have flat, soft shells with a leathery appearance.

When they're not sunbathing on sandbars, these turtles spend almost all of their time underwater. Often, only their eyes and long, pig-like noses can be seen sticking out above the water.

Eastern spiny softshells are found in the Bighorn Basin and in the northeastern part of the state at elevations below 6,000 feet. They are more closely associated with rivers and larger streams but can also be found in permanent lakes.

Common snapping turtles (*Chelydra serpentina*) are another large turtle species, with shell lengths ranging from 8 to 15 inches. Although they do not get quite as long in shell length as eastern spiny softshell



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Common snapping turtle (*Chelydra serpentina*)

Have you seen a turtle in Wyoming that doesn't quite fit any of these descriptions? It may have been a non-native pet that was, unfortunately, dumped by its owner.

Released pets spotted in Wyoming include red-eared sliders, yellow-belly sliders, and alligator snapping turtles. If you encounter a turtle that you suspect is a non-native former pet, contact the Wyoming Game and Fish Department.

Red-eared sliders have a distinctive red line on their face just behind their eyes. Their plastron (belly side of shell), is yellow with dark blotches. Native painted turtles do not have any red markings on their face.



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Yellow-bellied sliders have a large yellow blotch behind the eye, while painted turtles just have thin, nearly uniform yellow lines on their faces. Yellow-bellied sliders, much like the red-eared sliders, have yellow plastrons with dark blotches.



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Alligator snapping turtles have three spiked ridges running down their shell from their head to tail. They also have a proportionally larger head with a hooked beak as compared to common snapping turtles.



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turtles, common snapping turtles are heavy bodied, and can weigh between 10 and 35 pounds. They have a prehistoric appearance, with saw-toothed tails that are nearly as long as their shells.

Their name comes from their powerful jaws, which can exert 50 pounds of bite force. While snapping turtles are predators, a large percentage of their diet consists of dead plant and animal matter, so they play an important role in keeping their aquatic ecosystems clean.

Common snapping turtles are highly aquatic, typically only coming out onto land to move between ponds or to lay eggs. They're very confident and comfortable in the water, but they are uncomfortable on land and that is when they're most defensive.

If you encounter a snapping turtle crossing the road, you can safely move it to the other side by lifting under the shell by its back feet. Never hold snapping turtles by their long tails, as this can break their spines. Be careful to avoid the front third of their bodies—they're capable of extending their necks far enough to give you an unpleasant nip!

The unicorn of turtles

Unlike most turtles, the **plains box turtle** (*Terrapene ornata ornata*) is primarily terrestrial. The name "box" comes from their ability to completely close themselves up in their shells like a box, also unlike most turtles! They are able to do this because of a hinge on their plastron that allows their shells to close up around their heads, legs, and tails. Their carapace is domed or round but flattened on top, and



Plains box turtle (*Terrapene ornata ornata*)

often has a yellow stripe running down the center and through each plate of the shell.

In Wyoming, the range of these terrestrial turtles, also known as ornate box turtles, is restricted to vegetated sandhills in portions of Goshen and Platte Counties. Because this species has very specific habitat requirements and much of their habitat is on private land, there is debate about whether they are still found in Wyoming. If you find one, contact the Wyoming Game and Fish Department.

Protecting turtle habitat

Native turtles are an important part of a healthy, functioning ecosystem. Although they spend most of their lives in water, turtles also need land habitat, especially to lay their eggs. Thus, turtles are sensitive to the loss, alteration, and connectivity of water and terrestrial habitats.

Protection of turtles' overwinter habitat is just as important as protecting the land and water habitats they use during the rest of the year. Aquatic turtles overwinter underwater, often buried into the mud at the bottom. Water levels in ponds and wetlands where turtles are present should not be drained in the winter or in periods of fluctuating temperatures.

Turtles can live 30 to 40 years. Protecting their habitat helps to ensure that your property will be home to healthy, happy turtles for generations to come.

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In a race between the tortoise and the jackalope, **Mason Lee** would root for the tortoise. She is the senior project coordinator for the UW Biodiversity Institute and can be reached at mlee37@uwyo.edu or (307) 766-6240.