

Red-Eared Slider

Trachemys scripta elegans



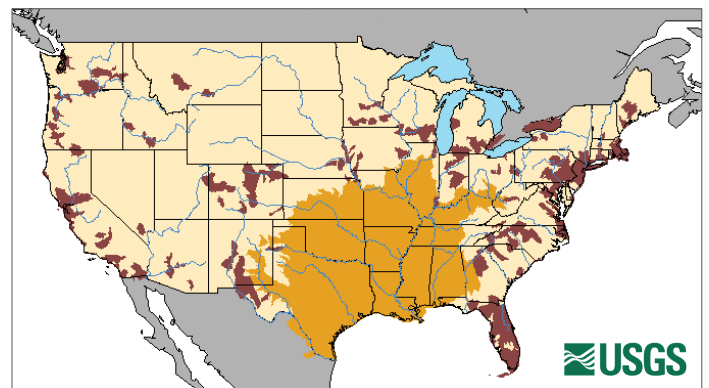
The red-eared slider is a hardy freshwater turtle that is popular as an aquarium pet in the United States. It gets its name from the broad red stripes present behind each eye. Its popularity in the pet trade has helped account for its numerous introductions worldwide; and it is now designated as one of the “100 World’s Worst Invaders”.

Species Description

The most distinguishing characteristic of the red-eared slider is the unique, broad, reddish-orange patch or “ear” found behind each of the eyes. The shell is yellowish to dark green with black or off-white stripes. The skin is olive to brown in color with yellow stripes or spots. Adults can reach up to 30 cm (12 in) in length, and female sliders are typically larger than males. This species of turtle may be confused with the invasive yellow-bellied slider, which has a yellow patch behind each eye instead of red; or the native, red-bellied turtle, which has a distinctive orange to reddish color on the underside of the shell.

Native & Introduced Ranges

The native range includes Midwestern states within the Gulf Coast basin and the Mississippi valley extending as far east as West Virginia. Since the 1970s, massive numbers of young turtles have been generated on turtle farms to be sold in the pet trade. In Pennsylvania, the first recorded occurrence of the red-eared slider was in 1996 in Lehigh County. This turtle can now be found in many counties across Pennsylvania.



Biology & Spread

Red-eared sliders are the most commonly exported turtle species and are sold as hatchlings measuring over four inches in length. Adult sliders can reach lengths of up to 30 cm (12 in), and unsuspecting owners are rarely prepared to continue maintaining them in captivity at this size. The owners then dispose of them by releasing them into local waterways and impoundments, which has led to their introduction and spread into the natural environment. Besides doing harm to the ecosystem, this practice is illegal in Pennsylvania.

Habitat

The red-eared slider is a hardy turtle that can flourish in many kinds of habitats. They can be frequently seen basking on rocks, logs, vegetation masses, and on banks. They prefer quiet or slow-moving waters such as ponds and wetlands, and can tolerate brackish and fairly polluted waters. They are also able to hibernate over the winter to survive the cold water temperatures.

Impacts

Threat to Biodiversity

Red-eared sliders are aggressive omnivores, feeding on fish, plants, insects, amphibians, and other aquatic organisms and their eggs. This puts them in direct competition with many native species of turtles for food, basking areas, and nesting sites. Particularly at risk is the Pennsylvania threatened red-bellied turtle (*Pseudemys rubriventris*), which has virtually identical foraging and nesting habitats, and food requirements.

Threat to Human Health

Red-eared sliders pose a risk to human health because their ability to survive and reproduce in polluted waters makes them prone to contracting and spreading disease. In particular, sliders have been associated with carrying harmful bacteria such as Salmonella. In 1975, the Food and Drug Administration placed a ban on the sale of red-eared sliders under four inches to prevent Salmonella outbreaks in children, who are more likely to handle the small turtles, or put them in their mouths.

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Prevention & Control

Despite this ban, small hatchling sliders are still readily available by mail order or from the Internet and are still considered a popular pet. The best way to control the spread of the red-eared slider is to prevent their introduction in the first place. Never release any non-native reptiles or amphibians into the natural environment; instead, consider one of the following alternatives:

- Contact your local pet store for advice on proper handling and return.
- Give/trade with another pet owner.
- Donate to a local aquarium society, school, or aquatic business.
- Contact your local veterinarian or pet retailer for guidance about humane disposal of animals.

References:

Urban, C. A. and Morgan, R.T. 2006. *Distribution of the Invasive Red-Eared Slider Turtle (Trachemys scripta elegans) in the Lower Delaware River Basin*. Pennsylvania Sea Grant Applied Research Program Technical Report.

Somma, L.A, Foster, A., and Fuller, P. 2009. *Trachemys scripta elegans*. USGS Nonindigenous Aquatic Species Database, Gainesville, FL.

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