

Help protect turtles: build a nest cage, report road crossings and keep wild turtles wild

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) encourages Wisconsin citizens to give turtle mothers and the next generation of turtles a helping hand throughout nesting season.

This time of year, turtles begin to emerge from rivers, lakes and wetlands to lay eggs. Wisconsin's 11 turtle species lay eggs in nests from late May through June in sunny areas and well-draining uplands. This annual nesting migration often puts turtles on roadways and in residential areas. Many females are run over by vehicles during this period, a leading cause of turtle decline in Wisconsin.

Turtle nests are also exposed to high levels of predation as populations of nest-raiding animals such as raccoons, skunks and coyotes grow to historical numbers. The current demand for pet turtles is also a significant issue, leading to the illegal removal of our native, North American turtles from our wild places.

"The nesting season is a tough time for wild female turtles. Many are removed from populations through road mortality, while others are collected, often illegally, for the global pet, food, and medicine

industry," said Andrew Badje, DNR Conservation Biologist. "Protecting female turtles and their nests in the wild and learning how pet turtle demand influences an unsustainable illegal turtle trade are great ways to conserve turtles in Wisconsin and the world."

Additionally, some Wisconsin turtles must reach old ages and participate in many nesting seasons to reproduce successfully. Blanding's turtles and wood turtles cannot reproduce until they're 12 to 20 years old, while others, like ornate box turtles, lay only a few eggs a year. Therefore, removing even one female turtle per year can quickly lead to population declines or the elimination of local populations.

The DNR encourages those interested in helping turtles to consider following these protective actions from now until the end of summer:

Protect turtle eggs in yards and other private property by building and securing a nest cage over any documented nests. Follow these instructions and watch a step-by-step video to build a nest cage that keeps predators away from the nest and allows

hatchlings to exit on their own.

Drive with caution on roads that are near wetlands, lakes and rivers. Slow down and be alert.

Report turtle observations, road crossings and nest sites using the Turtle Reporting Form for the DNR's Wisconsin Turtle Conservation Program. DNR conservation biologists use these reports to manage and conserve turtles.

Report suspicious or illegal activity associated with turtles to DNR's Violation Hotline by calling or texting 1-800-847-9367.

Help protect Wisconsin's native turtles by keeping wild turtles in the wild and not releasing pet turtles into the wild.

Turtles don't make great pets. For those desiring to own one, #BuyInformed, and take steps to lessen the impact on the illegal turtle trade.

Learn additional ways to help protect Wisconsin's turtles and spread the word about Wild Turtle Week.

To learn more about turtles in Wisconsin and submit turtle reports, visit the DNR's online Turtle Conservation Program form.

How to build a turtle nest cage

Four of Wisconsin's 11 turtles are endangered, threatened or have declining populations, and keeping turtle eggs and hatchlings safe is important to keep them from vanishing from Wisconsin.

If you find a turtle nesting on your property, leave the nest where it is and protect it from predators by putting a "nest cage" over it.

Using a few supplies and following some easy steps, you can build a nest cage with an open bottom that protects turtle eggs and hatchlings from raccoons and other predators while letting young turtles crawl out after they've hatched.



Photo by Ryan Brady

Supplies

Roll of mesh wire fencing with 1 in. x 2 in. or 3 in. mesh

Package of wire cage clips

Wire cutter or needle nose pliers

4 stakes (forestry, tent stakes, etc.)

Galvanized wire, twine, or some other sturdy line

Hammer

Hand held garden spade



Directions

Cut.

Use wire cutter to cut 1 top piece and four side pieces from your roll of wire mesh fencing.

Dimensions for top piece: 12 in. x 12 in.

Dimensions for 4 side pieces: 7 in. (h) x 12 in. (w)

Assemble.

Use wire cutter or needle nose pliers to attach each side cage piece to the top.

Use 3 evenly spaced clips per side.

Place the cage and stake it down.

Use hammer claw or spade to outline where cage will go and dig down about 4 inches.

Place completed nest cage over nest and bury lower half in soil.

Pack sand or soil around sides of cage.

Stake down cage to prevent raccoons and other predators from trying to pull up nest cage.

The openings will allow nest to get necessary sun exposure and will be large enough that the hatchlings can crawl out.



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Turtle Ecology & Life History

All turtles, tortoises, terrapins, and sea turtles (animals with a backbone and a shell consisting of bone) are classified under the Order Testudines. Out of roughly 330 turtle species worldwide, North America has 56 different species. The Eastern United States claims the highest level of diversity. Turtles are found in all of the world's oceans and on all continents except for Antarctica. Habitat ranges from oceans to rivers, marshes, rainforests, deserts, and even mountains. Turtles in Wisconsin are associated with lakes, rivers, streams, ponds, and bogs; however, they are also found commonly foraging for food on land. Even though turtles reside in all corners of the world, they are considered the most threatened of vertebrate species. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) 2011 Red List claims 45.2% of all turtle species

to be threatened and 29.9% to be endangered or critically endangered. Of the 11 species of turtles in Wisconsin, one is endangered (Ornate Box Turtle), one is threatened (Wood Turtle), and three are of Special Concern (Blanding's Turtle, Smooth Softshell and False Map Turtle).

Turtles are active primarily from April to October. Their daily activities generally include sleeping, basking, and foraging for food. Depending on the species, turtles can be omnivores, herbivores, or carnivores. Algae, fruit, stems, leaves, and invertebrates are consistent turtle food sources. For mobile prey, turtles use methods such as ambushing or stalking. In many cultures, turtles have been associated with age and wisdom. Some species have been documented to live 100+ years, while a few Giant Tortoises are thought to

have lived up to 150 years.

Turtles have slow maturation rates. Sexual maturation in certain species can take as long as 20 years. Mating primarily takes place in late spring and involves males courting females. Once fertilization takes place, females usually instinctively migrate to upland nesting sites in June and July, excavate a nest, lay eggs, and cover the nest with soil. From August to September, hatchlings begin to emerge and head for water and cover. Turtles do not display parental care once the eggs are laid. The sex of hatchlings is dependent on incubation temperature, with females being produced in warmer soil and males resulting from cooler soil. Prior to the onset of winter, turtles begin to hibernate beneath soil and plant debris of woodlands and prairies or in the soft muck at the bottom of waterways.



Photo credit: Wisconsin DNR

Ornate box turtles are often found in the pet trade, however, they are endangered in Wisconsin and are illegal to take from the wild and own as pets.