



Wildlife Window: Florida Turtles Often Overlooked. Vital To Their Environment.

By the Rivendell Ponds & Preserves Committee

[Woodlands Word – March 2022]

Aptly named, Rivendell's Turtle Pond is home to many turtles, as are other community ponds. Turtles are ancient shelled reptiles that have existed for 220 million years. Florida is among the top states in turtle species numbers, with over 30 native turtle species, many of which are freshwater turtles. Turtles are very important to their environment: as a food source for predators, as consumers of worms, snails, insects, crustaceans, algae, seeds, and plants, plus their eggs are food for other animals. Let's learn more about these wonderful turtle friends endemic (native) to Florida.

Florida Cooter Turtle (*Pseudemys floridana*)

Florida Cooters are one of the more commonly seen freshwater turtles. They are relatively large (9-13" long). Their carapace has a dark background with faint yellow markings on the shell and yellow markings on its head and feet. They can be seen in groups basking on logs, rocks, even aerator pipes, usually leaping into the water long before you reach them.

Cooters are opportunistic omnivores with females feeding mainly on aquatic vegetation, while males prey on a variety of aquatic invertebrates. Female Cooters are typically bigger than males. Males have long claws. Cooters may have gotten their name from the African word "*kuta*" which means "turtle" in their tribal dialects.



Florida Softshell Turtle (*Apalone ferox*)

The Florida softshell turtle is the largest species of softshell turtles found in North America. Males measure from 6-12", while females can measure double that at 11-24". It has a flattened, pancake-like body, a long neck, and an elongated head with a long, fleshy snorkel-like nose. It has large webbed feet, each with three claws, perfect for swimming.



While most turtles have hard shells composed of scutes, Florida softshells have cartilaginous carapaces covered in leathery skin. Their coloring ranges from olive green to dark brown; underside is white or cream-colored. This color pattern is a form of camouflage to conceal turtles from potential predators. Their diet primarily consists of snails and fish. Softshell turtles can be found in freshwater lakes, ponds, streams, canals, and roadside ditches. (Bob Frank photos)

Gopher Tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*)

Gopher tortoises are dry-land turtles that usually live in well-drained, sandy soil habitats. Their carapaces are grayish-brown and unmarked in adults, while the plastron (underside), legs, head and neck are golden-yellow. Their strong elephant-like back legs and front feet help them dig their burrows, which provide protection from predators and from the elements by maintaining a fairly constant environment inside.

Primarily herbivores, they spread seeds of many plants in their droppings, filling another important role in the ecosystem. In the wild, they can live to 80 years.

Gopher tortoises are listed as Threatened in Florida. Both the tortoise and its burrow are protected under state law and must be relocated before any land clearing takes place.



Today's threat to turtle populations include food shortages due to loss of vegetation & use of pesticides and degradation of habitat from urban development, plus invasive predators. Let's keep our ponds and preserves healthy for these and all of our favorite wildlife creatures.