

Softshell Turtle

Apalone spinifera

A more appropriate name for softshell turtles might be pancake or flapjack turtles. The softshell turtles' flattened, streamlined bodies and flexible shells make them unlike any other turtle species. Their huge oval shells are impeccably camouflaged to match the bottom of a pond, canal, stream, or other wetland. Although these turtles are large and impressive, they remain hidden much of the time. Softshell turtles have a habit of burying themselves in the sand or mud, on the bottom of the wetland, with just their head or snout exposed. The turtles' long necks and odd-looking snorkels on their noses allow them to stretch up to the water surface, to breathe without having to leave their hiding place. By remaining mostly hidden in pond sediments or streambed sand, softshells are able to capture crayfish, fish, and other small animals by firing their long necks out and grabbing the prey. Softshell turtles also have the ability to absorb oxygen from the water through vessels in the lining of the throat and other parts of the body. This adaptation allows them to remain under water for hours at a time. Softshell turtles reach massive sizes, with adult females sometimes measuring two feet across the carapace (top of the shell); males are usually much smaller than females. Female turtles lay 10-30 eggs in neatly excavated holes in sandy areas near the water's edge. Occasionally, the turtles may even lay their eggs in a nearby alligator nest! Raccoons, foxes, skunks, and other predators commonly raid softshell nests and eat the eggs, so many eggs never get a chance to incubate and hatch. If a nest survives predation, the eggs hatch after 2-

3 months, and small brightly patterned hatchlings emerge. These tiny softshell turtles must remain hidden as much as possible, because hatchling turtles are an ideal meal for a variety of predators, including bullfrogs, wading birds, fish, and even small alligators.

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