

# Native Vermont Reptiles

## Part 2 Turtles



The plastron is the underside of the shell.



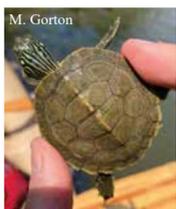
The carapace is the top part of the shell.

Vermont has seven known breeding species of turtles and at least two additional species that may breed here. Their exact distributions within the state are still being determined. The best time to see turtles is on a sunny day in the spring along the margins of ponds, streams, and wetlands. In the early spring the water is cold and the air is often warmer encouraging the turtles to bask or enter shallow water. In addition, the vegetation has not begun to grow, leaving the turtles quite visible. Binoculars are often helpful when looking for and watching turtles. In the late spring and early summer, female turtles are often seen on land while traveling to and from egg-laying sites. In order for these species to survive and flourish, they need our help. One way that you can help is to report the turtles that you come across in the state. Include in your report as much detail as you can on the appearance and location of the animal, also include the date of the sighting, your name, and how to contact you. Photographs are ideal, but not necessary. When attempting to identify a particular species, check at least three different field markings so that you can be sure of what it is. To contribute a report, you may use our website ([vtherpatlas.org](http://vtherpatlas.org)) or contact Jim Andrews directly at [jandrews@vtherpatlas.org](mailto:jandrews@vtherpatlas.org).

### Northern Map Turtle (*Graptemys geographica*)



The map turtle has a slightly domed, smooth carapace that may have a strong central keel. A close look at their gray-green carapace reveals curved off-white lines that resemble topographic lines on a map. The posterior margin of their carapace is both toothed and flared. The plastron is wide and usually pale yellow. They are 6-11 inches long. Their skin is dark green to black with pale yellow stripes. They are almost entirely aquatic although they often bask. Their population in Vermont is limited to Lake Champlain and its major tributaries. They are a species of special concern in Vermont.



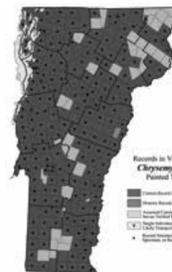
M. Gorton



K. Goulette

### Painted Turtle (*Chrysemys picta*)

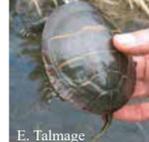
The Painted Turtle has a slightly domed shell that is solid green to black and smooth all over with no keel. The scutes on the carapace are outlined in a lighter green or off-white. The plastron is wide and either solid yellow or yellow with a dark irregular central blotch. They are 5-7 inches long. Their skin is green with yellow spots and stripes. They have two distinctive yellow spots on each side of their neck. At the base of their neck, and on their legs, the yellow stripes are replaced with red stripes. The underside of the outer scutes of the carapace are very colorful with yellow, red, and green markings. Painted Turtles are mostly aquatic but bask often. The females leave the water to lay eggs and both sexes occasionally travel to new ponds. They like soft-bottomed ponds and lakes with emergent vegetation and logs and rocks to bask on.



J. Andrews



S. Morse



E. Talmage

### Snapping Turtle (*Chelydra serpentina*)



The Snapping Turtle is probably the most common turtle in Vermont. The carapace is shallowly domed with a strongly toothed posterior margin. The plastron is narrow, leaving the turtle always partially exposed to predators. It is uniformly grayish brown with no colorful markings, spots, or stripes. The Snapping Turtle can get quite large. The shells of adults range from 10-18 inches long. The young have three keels that disappear with age and wear. They have a long tail that has spines along the top. They also have a long neck. They live in still or slow-moving bodies of water, particularly those with soft bottoms and emergent vegetation, such as cattails. The females leave the water in May and June to lay their eggs on land. When out of the water they are defensive and to prevent injury to yourself, you should stay out of reach of their long necks and strong jaws.



NWF



E. Talmage

### Spiny Softshell (*Apalone spinifer*)

Softshells have a flat smooth leathery carapace that does not have scutes. The carapace is gray-brown with dark spots or rings. They get their name from the tiny soft spines on the anterior margin of their carapace. The plastron is narrow and pale yellow or white. The females are 10-19 inches long, while the males are only 5-10 inches. They have a very long neck and a thin tubular snout. Their skin is tan or olive with black markings. They have two light stripes on the side of their face. Softshells are entirely aquatic and are very fast in the water. They also bask often. In Vermont they are found only in the Northeast corner of Lake Champlain near the Lamoille and Missisquoi River deltas. The Spiny Softshell is threatened in Vermont.



J. Andrews



E. Talmage



### Spotted Turtle (*Clemmys guttata*)



Spotted have a moderately domed carapace that is smooth all over. The carapace is black with yellow spots. The plastron is yellow or orange with black on the outer edges of the scutes. They are relatively small, measuring only 4-5 inches. Their skin is also dark with yellow spots. They are found both on land and in water as they travel within a mosaic of wetlands and uplands. The Spotted Turtle is endangered in Vermont.



E. Talmage



C. Fichtel

### Eastern Musk Turtle (*Sternotherus odoratus*)

The carapace of the musk turtle is moderately domed, smooth, and a solid grayish green. The plastron is small and hinged. There is also skin exposed between the scutes on the plastron. They are 3-5 inches long. Their skin is grayish green and they have two white stripes on each side of their head and neck. They have a few fleshy hair-like projections under their chin. Musk turtles are almost entirely aquatic, preferring shallow, weedy, still water. They lay their eggs very near the water's edge. The musk turtle is limited to scattered locations in the Champlain Basin. The musk turtle is a species of special concern in Vermont.



J. Andrews



S. Smith



J. Andrews



A smooth posterior margin of the carapace.



A toothed posterior margin of the carapace.



Each of these plates or scales are called scutes.

### Wood Turtle (*Glyptemys insculpta*)

The Wood Turtle has a moderately domed shell. Each scute is covered by a pyramidal stack of older and smaller scutes that form clear concentric rings. The brown or gray carapace has a weakly toothed posterior margin. The plastron is wide and yellow with black on the outer edges of the scutes. Wood Turtles have black heads and their legs and neck are yellow, orange, or red. They are 6-10 inches long. They are primarily river turtles that prefer streams with a moderate slope and speed. They feed in uplands and fields that are adjacent to the streams. They will venture some distance from the stream (sometimes 1000 feet or more) but they rely on the stream for refuge and overwintering. Illegal collection has been a problem. They are a species of special concern in Vermont.



A. Alfieri



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Anterior means towards the front, or towards the head.



Posterior means towards the back, or towards the tail.

All measurements given are a straight-line carapace length. They do not include the head, neck, or tail.

### Blanding's Turtle (*Emydoidea blandingii*)

No populations of the Blanding's Turtle have been located in Vermont, but they exist to the south and northwest of us. Blanding's have a highly domed carapace and grow to 7-9 inches long. The carapace is dark with light flecking. The plastron is yellow with black on the outer edges of the scutes. The posterior margin of the carapace is smooth. The plastron is hinged, which enables it to bend and partially close the shell. The throat of a Blanding's Turtle is a bright yellow. Blanding's live primarily in wetlands but they also travel overland between wetlands.



E. Talmage



E. Talmage



E. Talmage



### Eastern Box Turtle (*Terrapene carolina*)

Box turtles in Vermont are generally assumed to be released pets, however a cluster of reports from the southern Connecticut River Valley suggest the possibility of a native population. No young or eggs have been reported. The Eastern Box Turtle has a highly domed carapace that is usually 4.5-6 inches long. The carapace is smooth on the posterior margin, but it does have a slight mid-dorsal keel. They are highly variable in pattern, but generally the shell has yellow and orange markings on a darker background and the head and the legs are mostly dark and mottled with yellow and orange. The males have orange or red eyes. Native box turtles have four toes on their hind feet, distinguishing them from many of the released box turtles that have three toes on their hind feet. The plastron is hinged on the anterior side of the bridge, which enables the plastron to bend and the turtle to completely enclose itself in its shell. They are entirely terrestrial and are often found in open woods and brushy fields.



D. McGraw



E. Talmage