

Florida Red-bellied Turtle

Pseudemys nelsoni

The Florida Red-bellied Turtle is the most commonly seen turtle from the boardwalk. It is found throughout peninsular Florida in fresh water lakes, ponds, streams, marshes, and swamps. Mainly herbivorous, it is active year-round and spends a large portion of the day basking on logs.

A Red-bellied Turtle can grow to a maximum length of about 15 inches. The top of the shell usually has one large dark red splotch on each scute, although in older turtles, the red coloration on top darkens and may often be hidden by mosses and algae. Its plastron is yellow with a faint red to orange to dark pink marking in the center. Young turtles' shells are brightly colored and rounder.

It is closely related to the Peninsula Cooter (*Pseudemys floridana*) and the two can often be found basking on logs together. The Red-bellied Turtle can be distinguished in several ways.

The Red-bellied's plastron is distinctive with its red-tinged center. But since boardwalk observers rarely see a turtle's belly, other clues must be used.

The most concrete distinction is the markings on the tops of the heads. The top of a Red-bellied head is all dark with a single, wide, yellow band running from the nose back to between the eyes. The Cooter has a wide yellow stripe that runs from the nose all the way to the neck; PLUS, it has thin pin-stripes on the top of the head that go over each eye.

The shells are also slightly different, although head markings are the more reliable way to distinguish between the two. The Red-bellied shell is evenly domed with the highest point in the middle; the Cooter shell has the high point about one-third the way back from the head and then the shell slopes gradually toward the tail.

Finally, there is the beak. The Red-bellied's beak is noticeably notched,

with two teeth-like cusps on its upper beak. The Cooter's beak is straight across.

Male Red-bellied Turtles can be distinguished by the claws and tails. Males have long claws and long, stout tails while females have very short front claws and short tails. Adult females are slightly larger than adult males.

Males mature in three to four years; females mature in five to seven years. Courtship and mating usually occur from October through March, but they can occur throughout the year.

When courting, the male trails the female. If she flees, he follows with head and neck extended, nuzzling her hind-quarters. He may swim around to her side, stretching his neck fully then bending it to bring his head close to her face and touching her with his nose. Then he rapidly strokes the sides of her face with his long foreclaws. Following this, he may nip her neck. If she accepts him, he moves backward, grasps her carapace with his foreclaws, and mates.

Three to six separate clutches of from 6-31 eggs may be laid each year. A favorite nesting site is an Alligator's nest of decaying vegetation. The female turtle approaches the nest while the female gator is swimming nearby guarding the nest. If the turtle can get to the nest, she digs down four to six inches, lays her eggs, and leaves, letting the gator guard her eggs too. Eggs hatch in late August and September.

The nest is generally just above the water line. The development of the embryo is actually aided if the water rises and eggs are submerged for only a short period; however, if they are submerged too long, hatching success can be drastically diminished. The eggs are elliptical, (about 1.5-1.75 inches x .75-1.0 inches) and hatch in about eight to ten weeks.



The Cooter at the left has multiple stripes on its head; the Red-bellied at the right has a single stripe down the center of its head.



The top two and the bottom one are Red-bellies; second from the bottom is a Cooter. The highest point on the Red-bellied is half way back; the high point on the Cooter is only one-third the way back. The Red-belly's shell is more domed while the Cooter's is flatter and more elongated.



The Florida Red-bellied Turtle has a notched beak, appearing almost tooth-like. The Cooter's beak is straight.



The male Red-bellied Turtle has very long front claws which are used during courtship.

GLOSSARY

carapace: top of the shell

plastron: bottom of the shell, or belly

beak: mouth

scute: segment on the top of the shell