

# Florida Softshell Turtle

*Apalone ferox*

The Florida Softshell Turtle is a species of softshell turtle native to the eastern United States, primarily in the state of Florida, but it also ranges to southern sections of South Carolina, Georgia, and west to Mobile Bay in Alabama .

Individual specimens have been found released to the wild well outside of their range, but they are not known to be established outside of their native area.

The adult Florida Softshell Turtles typically have dark brownish-green to tan shells with blotches on their skins and sometimes the shells. The shells are covered with skin and are soft around the edges.

Juveniles are olive-yellow with grey spots and a yellow lined carapace. Juveniles also have yellow and orange markings on the head and a gray plastron. The shell darkens with age, so markings generally disappear although adult shells sometimes show traces of the markings.

The edges of the shell are soft because the actual hard shell beneath the skin does not go all the way to the edge.

Florida Softshell Turtles have long necks and elongated heads with long snorkel-like noses. When they swim, they stay under water and stick their noses up to breathe, like a snorkel. The necks are very long and can reach around to the sides of the shell.

They grow to a large size, females to 24 inches and males to around 12 inches. Males have thicker and longer tails than females. The female's tail barely extends beyond the edge of the shell while the male's is clearly visible.

The bite rivals a Snapping Turtle's; the scientific name includes *ferox*, which is Latin for wild and ferocious



Florida Softshell Turtles are almost entirely aquatic, generally only emerging from the water to bask or to lay eggs. They prefer still waters and can be found in ponds, streams, rivers, lakes and swamps. There, they spend much time buried in the soft bottom in either shallow or deep water, with only the head protruding.



They can burrow into and tunnel through mud with amazing speed and can tolerate long submergence times in water, especially when they are inactive. Gas exchange can occur through their skin, allowing them to stay submerged longer than other turtles.

Florida Softshell Turtles are carnivorous, eating fish, snails, insects, frogs, and even small waterfowl. They burrow into the mud near a bank or shore, extending the snout to the surface for air and wait for frogs, fish, and small crustaceans to swim by.

Florida Softshells nest from mid-March to July, digging nests in the morning on sandy or soft ground exposed to sunlight.

The female uses her rear legs to dig a cavity around five inches deep, lays from 4-38 (average 17-22) thin-shelled spherical eggs, each about 1-1/8" in diameter. Incubation takes 60-70 days.

Clutch size increases with an increase in female body size. Five or six clutches might be laid a year, but not all mature females reproduce every year.

Hatching occurs in August and September. Sex determination is genetic with no influence from nest temperature.

The turtles are usually shy around humans, but when they feel threatened they will bite with their strong jaws. Like all soft-shells, they are very fast in water and on land. Softshells are either very docile or highly aggressive; there is no in-between.

Florida softshells readily migrate over land to nearby wetter areas if their wetland dries up. If seen crossing roads, good samaritans should use a net or other implement to help the turtle across. If none is available, hold it by the rear edge of the shell with both hands and keep arms extended to avoid a nasty bite.

In captivity, softshells can live up to 30 years, although in the wild their life spans are shorter, closer to 5-7 years. Juvenile mortality rates are high.

