

Featured Species

The Florida Softshell: A Unique Florida Turtle

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As a turtle biologist, people often ask me, “What is your favorite turtle?” I always answer unequivocally: “the Florida softshell.” The Florida softshell turtle (*Apalone ferox*) is a large freshwater turtle with a relatively flat, leathery shell and a distinctive tubular snout. Its eyes are positioned towards the front of the head, giving it almost binocular vision and a distinctly more intelligent look than other turtles. When people see this turtle for the first time, they usually say, “What a strange looking turtle.” I thought the same thing when I captured my first one in southern Alabama in 1995.

The Florida softshell has well-developed webbing on each foot. It is lightning fast in the water and also on land. While conducting research on turtles at Lake Jackson over the last few years, I have chased many softshells, often crashing through blackberry thickets only to come up empty handed but plenty scratched up, as they easily beat me back to the water. And forget about catching them in the open water!

Adult softshells are tan/dark brown above and white/cream colored below. Hatchlings and small juveniles are beautifully colored – dark brown/olive with large round, dark spots. They have brightly colored yellow, orange or red stripes on the head and a red/orange rim on the outer margin of the shell. Adult females can reach 24 inches in length and adult males 14 inches in length. Males have thicker and longer tails than females, though.

The softshells I have encountered are either very docile or very

aggressive. There is no in-between. Those that are aggressive can inflict a serious bite with their long neck, powerful jaws, and sharp jaw sheath. On one occasion, I was carrying a large male softshell in a cloth collecting bag and in a momentary lapse of thought, I threw the bag over my shoulder and was quickly bitten through the bag and my shirt. When the turtle finally let go after about five painful minutes, I had a bruise on the back of my arm shaped just like a pair of softshell jaws. But don't get me wrong: softshells are still my favorite turtle.

The Florida softshell ranges on the southeastern lower Coastal Plain from southern South Carolina to Mobile, Alabama. They are found in a wide variety of freshwater habitats including lakes, ponds, rivers, canals, swamps, and suburban/urban stormwater ponds. They prefer shallow, slow-moving water with a soft bottom and abundant aquatic vegetation. The Florida softshell will readily migrate over land to nearby wetter areas if their wetland dries. I have saved many from sure death on U.S. Highway 27 at Lake Jackson over the last few years. Of all the turtles I do find dead on the highway, my heart always aches a little more when I find a dead softshell.

The Florida softshell is omnivorous and feeds on snails, insects, crustaceans, amphibians, and fish (live and dead), as well as algae and aquatic plants. In June, I captured a very large softshell at Lake Jackson and kept it in a water-filled container overnight to see what it had eaten (via its excretion). The next morning I was surprised to see the container

filled with bird feathers; this turtle had eaten a coot!

Softshell turtles have been heavily harvested in some areas for their meat, and some populations in northern Florida have declined because of over-harvesting. The life history characteristics of turtles – such as late maturity (5-8 years for softshells) and high rates of egg and juvenile mortality – make some species especially vulnerable to over-harvesting. Populations can be decimated if large numbers of mature adults are taken, and recovery can be very slow.

My recent observations suggest that Florida softshells are specifically targeted at area lakes for their meat. During the recent dry-down of Lake Jackson, I found only 87 Florida softshells and they represented only 1.8 percent of 4,856 turtles that I captured in 2000. The Fla. Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission enacted a new rule in 2000 that prohibits the harvest and possession of softshells and their eggs from May 1-July 31, which corresponds with their nesting season. A long-term management strategy is essential to protect the Florida softshell and to ensure that this unique turtle remains a visible and viable part of Florida's freshwater ecosystems. The next time you see a strange tubular snout appear from the water lilies, be encouraged: it is probably a Florida softshell turtle peering out to look around.

For more information about Matthew Aresco's turtle research, visit www.lakejacksononturtles.org or e-mail aresco@bio.fsu.edu.