



Red-eared Slider

Scientific name: *Trachemys scripta*

Red-eared Sliders are an introduced species in B.C. Their red “ear” patch, located just behind the eye, distinguishes them from other similarly sized turtles such as the Western Painted Turtle, and the Western Pond Turtle. In addition to its red “ear”, the face and neck are marked with yellow stripes. The smooth, dark carapace (upper shell) of the Red-eared Slider commonly is decorated with darker lines and swirls, and patches of white, yellow or red. The plastron (shell covering the belly) is yellow, and can be marked with dark blotches. In addition to their splashes and stripes of colour, males also sport long, curved claws, which they use to woo females during courtship. A medium-sized turtle, Sliders reach a maximum length of 28 cm.

Baby Sliders (hatchlings) are quarter-sized (2 to 3.5 cm long), bright green and round. Yellow patterns decorate the carapace, and the skin of the legs, head, and neck is lined with fine yellow-green to dark green markings.

Making a living

Red-eared Sliders spend the winter hibernating in hollow logs, muskrat burrows, or in the mud at the bottom of ponds. When the water warms up, so do the Sliders – in more ways than one. In the spring, male Sliders spend much of their time chasing and wooing females. To win over his female of choice, a male will stroke the female with his curvy claws, or swim in front of her on his back, forelegs stretched out in front of him like a champion back stroker. When the female is agreeable, the pair will together sink to the bottom of the pond to breed.

Female Sliders lay their eggs in carefully selected nesting sites during April or May. Using their strong hind feet, females dig nests close to water in damp soil with little vegetation. After laying between 4 and 23 leathery eggs, the female will pile dirt over the eggs until the nest resembles a large mud ball. After between 60 and 70 days, one of two things happen. The hatchlings may emerge from the nest and head almost immediately for the water. Or, if they hatch later in the fall, the hatchlings may stay in the nest over winter, emerging the following spring. Either way, the tiny hatchlings are easy pickings for a variety of predators, and most hatchlings don't make it to their first birthday.

Female Sliders may lay up to 4 clutches in a single year! As Sliders are long-lived (usually living 20 to 40 years), they can produce many offspring during the course of their lives. While this helps them succeed in their natural habitat, it also makes them a difficult invader to keep under control.

Sliders spend most of the summer feeding, and basking on rocks and logs. When they find a really good basking site, Sliders will stack one on top of the other to compete for the "hot spot". Red-eared sliders rarely leave the water entirely, and enjoy quiet, freshwater ecosystems such as sluggish rivers, shallow streams, swamps, ponds and lakes with muddy bottoms and abundant aquatic vegetation.

Despite the turtle's outer armour, Sliders must remain vigilant. A Slider makes a good meal for mink, otters, raccoons, skunks, snakes, larger turtles, and wading birds. This explains why Sliders are so quick to slip underwater at the slightest disturbance.

What's for dinner?

As youngsters, Sliders are carnivorous (juvenile animals need protein for proper growth). Most of their hunting occurs around sunrise, at a depth of 1 to 3 metres. Young Sliders prey on tiny fish, tadpoles, small frogs, and other invertebrates. As they reach adult size, Sliders become more omnivorous. On any given morning, an adult Slider may skim the pond for algae, nibble on an aquatic plant, scare up a crayfish, snail, frog, or fish, or munch on some dead or decaying matter.

In fact, Sliders skim for algae in a manner similar to that of baleen whales! They swim about the pond with their lower jaw open, their mouth acting as a catch basin for microscopic plants and animals. To swallow their catch, they close their mouth, squirt the water out through their nostrils, and gulp down the tasty skimmings left behind.

Because Sliders eat many of the same foods as native turtles, biologists are concerned that these hungry newcomers could out-compete existing wetland inhabitants. In addition, Sliders could have a negative effect on already decreasing populations of amphibians - just two more reasons not to release your pet Slider to the local pond.

Places and spaces

The Red-eared Slider is native to southeastern United States, Mexico, Central America and Brazil. So why are Sliders found in the ponds, streams, and marshes of Australia, Canada and Europe, amongst other places? Young Sliders are popular pets. However, when they reach their adult size, and care and housing become much more difficult, they quickly lose their appeal. Many pet owners, either through lack of knowledge or thoughtlessness, release Sliders to the nearest wetland. This can disrupt the natural balance of the aquatic ecosystem, and can damage native turtle and amphibian populations.

Past, present, and...future?

While Red-eared Sliders are fascinating animals, and an important part of their native ecosystems, they do not belong in B.C.'s wetlands. They are an introduced species, and one that could cause problems for many beloved local critters. If you have a pet turtle, remember, turtles are not trash! Before buying a pet Slider, think seriously about how you will care for it over the next 20 to 40 years – that's how long it could live!

To help keep track of the spread of Sliders in B.C., report any sightings of Sliders to your local branch of the Ministry of Water, Land, and Air Protection.