

# Painted Turtles

Author: Roman Muryn

*Chrysemis picta*

Painted Turtles are found east of the Rockies, their ranges being roughly described by their names. They are a very widespread species that has been bred in millions in the USA. They are also one of the most northern ranging American turtles with a range extending well into Canada.

There are four subspecies of Painted Turtle

## *C.p.picta* - Eastern Painted Turtle

The Eastern has aligned seams of the rear lateral and central laminae and have a bright yellow spot behind the eye. This is usually quite prominent. A wild animal will have vivid reds on shell and skin. The plastron is clear yellow.



Eastern Painted Turtle New Jersey - Note scute alignment.

## *C.p.marginata* - Midland Painted Turtle

The Midland are very similar to the Eastern but have a central figure/shadow on the plastron, they sometimes have a faint red stripe like the Southern. A wild animal will have vivid reds on shell and skin.





Midland Painted Turtle New York - Note shadow and faint red line. It's a male, note position of vent and tail size. Front claws are also long sometimes longer than in this picture.

### **C.p.dorsalis - Southern Painted Turtle**

Southern are smaller/slighter and have a more pronounced red stripe with a clear plastron. Reds are usually not as bright as the Eastern.



A hatchling and the same animal 6 years later.

## C.p.belli - Western Painted Turtle

The Westerns seem bulkier than the other sub-species with very pronounced patterns on the plastron. They may also have a green tinge with lacework on shell.



Not a great picture but it does show the figure on the plastron.

Because of range overlaps and introduction of captive animals into the wild is not unusual to find animals with mixed characteristics, particularly the Eastern/Midland mix.

The biggest animals are the Western subspecies with females having carapace lengths over 25cms. Males are much smaller than the females. Males have long front claws and have tails that are longer and bulkier than those of the females. One of the first sexing clues when rearing youngsters is speed of growth. The other signs come later.

The adult animals demand ponds or enclosure compatible with comfort and well-being. They are good swimmers and surprisingly good climbers they should be active - they need the space to do so. Whilst slightly smaller than the Sliders and Map turtles their requirements in captivity are essentially the same. Water cleanliness is vital for good health. This means good filtration and regular water exchange. Having a good volume of water is an important part of the achieving good water quality. I am not an advocate of fast water movement generated by massive filter systems. I would also not recommend introducing decorations, rocks etc that could trap food. Part of water hygiene is also how you feed and what. There are no easy prescriptive rules. Turtles have a great sense of smell and will be aware of food if its there. If its not eaten in half an hour then its best taken out of the enclosure and binned.

Young animals require different diets to adults. Thin slices of shrimp, salmon or trout are loved (not too often as they are fatty). Low protein pond pellets are liked too. If you can, add pondweed, watercress and duckweed, if it includes insects and snails then all the better. Don't have masses just enough to give them the option. When young they are active little hunters and love to chase so I also feed small live additions, little worms, slugs, woodlice and the smallest crickets. As they grow they will turn toward a more a vegetarian diet. Give them variety. Reptomin is excellent and whilst it is OK as a standby staple it provides little natural stimulus.

The maxim for food quantity generally stated is that the volume food should equal the volume of the animals' head - this is about right. That rule goes to the wall when they see a tasty worm!

The young need water temperatures say above 25C, it keeps their metabolism high and keeps them feeding. With maturity lower water temperatures will be satisfactory.

These are turtles that must bask to stay healthy. They need a spot light that gets comfortably warm to the hand when held in place on the basking platform. In addition, for healthy growth a UVb light source is required, many kinds are available in pet shops and other articles in this site already cover useful specifications and recommendations in detail. For young hatchlings I have a small tank (50l), with just water and a brick for a basking spot. The water is brick deep, there is nowhere for mess to accumulate and is easy to arrange for light and heat. Heat is via a mat under the tank and is controlled by a thermostat on the side of the tank. In the first few weeks it is important to monitor and learn what they eat and how they behave - each will be different. As they grow, bigger tanks should be provided to give proportionately more and more room. In the meantime feeding and behaviour patterns will have been learned and understood. From that position of understanding moving to more aesthetically pleasing long term conditions can be done.

Adults are hardy and I keep mine outside all year round in a big pond. The pond is deep enough not to freeze at the bottom. The pond has masses of plant material. It is effectively a wild pond and I am certain there is enough natural food in the pond for them. They are hand tame and come when the fish are fed (normal goldfish pond pellets) in competition with the fish. I throw pellets on the water lily leaves and this keeps them stimulated for ages. As treats I still give worm, slug, shrimp, salmon etc. Having them hand tame makes it easier to monitor health and weight.

The ability to sunbathe in a sheltered spot without interruption is vital. Without proper amounts of sun time they will fare poorly. Even in the poor summer of 2008 my animals were able to get enough sun to be happy. They had very little disturbance.

These animals are great climbers and the greatest risk to keeping them outside is escape.

The more common approach to husbandry in the UK is to keep these animals indoors all year round in some sort of aquarium. The care sheets covering Sliders and Map Turtles describe set ups that would be suitable. An enclosure holding 400litres would work for 2 or 3 adults.

Breeding is also similar to other North American turtles and is adequately covered by the Slider and Map Turtle sections.

My animals hibernate over winter. Water in the SW of England can get surprisingly warm and quickly. In early April when they come out of hibernation my water can be 16c and in their sheltered spots air temps will hit 70+. By June the water will be in the low 20s in the pond. They go down to hibernate (November in 2008) when the water drops to 15ish. However if the sun is strong they will come up to sunbathe even in December.

If they are healthy they will sort themselves out for the winter and give much pleasure over the years.