

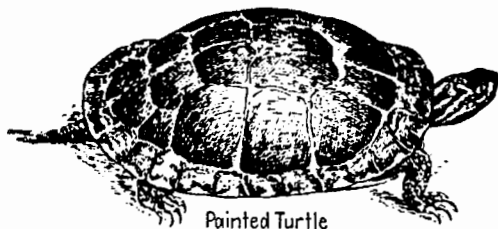
8/17/83



Natural History Notes

MIKE DOMBECK grew up in the Moose Lake area, graduated from Hayward High School, and attended the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and the University of Minnesota. He has a B.S. degree in Biology and an M.S. degree in Aquatic Biology and Zoology. Mike has taught Zoology at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and is now a fisheries biologist with the U.S. Forest Service, living in Park Falls, Wisconsin.

THE PAINTED TURTLE



Painted Turtle

Painted turtle is an appropriate name for one of the most colorful of all water turtles. This small reptile is the commonest and most widely distributed turtle in North America. An adult painted turtle is four to nine inches long, the average being about six inches. The smooth carapace, or top shell, is deep olive to black in color, trimmed with bright yellow markings along the edges. The plastron, or lower shell, is yellow or orange, sometimes with dark markings on it. The connecting plates between the two shells are often brightly marked. The legs and tail of this turtle are red-striped and the head and neck are yellow-striped. The shell markings tend to become less conspicuous as the animal ages. Males have longer tails and longer claws on their forefeet than do the females.

The painted turtle spends most of its time in the water. It rarely comes on land except to lay eggs. This turtle prefers ponds, shallow parts of lakes and sluggish parts of streams that are well vegetated. The home range of a painted turtle is about 100 square yards when food is plentiful. When the food supply is low, the painted turtle migrates to a more suitable area. Painted turtles are frequently observed sunning themselves on trees or rocks projecting from the water. One reason for this is the absorption of heat used to regulate body temperature. Another possible reason is to dry the skin, causing parasitic leeches to drop off.

Painted turtles feed mainly on tender water plants. The remainder of their diet consists of small fish, snails, tadpoles, aquatic insects, and occasionally carrion. In turn, this animal becomes food for skunks, weasels, crows, and birds of prey. Eggs and newly hatched turtles are the most vulnerable

to predators. This turtle's flesh is edible to humans but rarely utilized because of its small size.

Painted turtles have a rather elaborate courtship ritual. A part of it involves the male swimming backward in front of the female so they are face to face. He then strokes the side of her face with his long front claws. If she's interested she sinks to the bottom of the pond or stream. He follows and mating takes place. The female will then find a spot 100 yards or more from the water's edge for a nest. Using her hind legs she will dig a hole about two inches deep, sometimes moistening the dirt with urine. She then lays from four to fifteen oval, soft-shelled eggs. She positions the individual eggs with her hind legs and then covers the nest with dirt, leaves and grass. The egg-laying process takes about one hour, after which she returns to the water. The eggs, which are laid in late spring, will hatch by autumn in the southern part of their range, while eggs in the northern part of the range may not hatch till the next spring. The one-inch long hatchlings will immediately make their way to the water. The young painted turtles will mature in about four years when they will be about 3-1/2 inches long.

In this part of the painted turtles' range they hibernate over the winter. Generally they dig themselves into the mud or use an old muskrat hole. In the warmer part of their range they do not hibernate. Next time you see a group of turtles sunning on a log, try to get as close to them as you can. If you are lucky you will be able to distinguish their colorful markings. What will probably happen is they will detect your approach and plop into the water, not to emerge until the coast is clear.