

Turtles by Carol Ellis



A Yellow-bellied slider emerges from the pond for a gulp of air. They are excellent swimmers and can hold their breath for up to 30 minutes.

One of the first close-up wildlife experiences for typical suburban kids may have come in the form of a "turtle oasis" purchased at the local pet store.

I had turtles. They lived in our Florida room in a round plastic container filled with fresh water. The habitat had a raised center area, filled with sand and adorned with a plastic palm tree. The turtles, who were always named "Tommy," would swim in circles around the ring, and climb out to dry off in the center.

The turtles were of the slider variety, so designated because they slide into the water when approached. I fed them



A baby Red-footed tortoise was found in a backyard and now lives at the nature center at Ocean Reef.

hamburger meat and turtle food. Though they can live 20-40 years with proper care, my turtles died.

Red-eared sliders and Yellow-bellied sliders are the typical species of turtle you will find at the pet store. The yellow-bellied variety is native to North Florida. Yellow-bellied sliders are recognized by the yellow markings on their belly and neck. The non-native Red-eared slider gets its name from the red stripe around its ears, and is included in the list of the world's 100 most invasive species.



This Red-footed tortoise is native to South America.

Well-meaning folks who have out-grown their need for a pet turtle, have released their pets into the wild, only to have let loose a non-native turtle that can out-compete native species. Don't do that.

On the other hand, in a world of disappearing natural spaces there is a lot of competition for a place to live. That is why it is great to create home landscapes that have natural habitat where wildlife can live.

My neighbor Penny Dinsmore's home is dominated by a water feature that naturally incorporates plantings, rocks and ledges to be as close to resembling a natural occurring pond as possible. The building contractor excavated the length of the property between the house and the street, creating a tidal pond 8-10 ft. deep. There is a raised rocky area in the center, and sloping walls that meet a ledge just above the water level. A foot bridge leads up to the house; shades of Monet's Giverny in Key Largo.

The sound of moving water and lush foliage cascading down the sloping banks completes the tropical oasis, or



Though turtles live near the water, they lay their eggs on land.



A Yellow-bellied slider turtle showed up in a water feature at Ocean Reef. The homeowner named the turtle "Mystery." A total of four adult turtles live in the pond, and babies have been spotted this year.

Turtles... CONTINUED - Photos by Carol Ellis



A box turtle is rescued from the middle of the road and placed in the brush near Crocodile Lake.

They prefer damp environments such as wetlands and swamps, but they do not enter water deep enough to swim.

Box turtles live on land, and often wander into residential neighborhoods.

shall we say "turtle oasis," after the pond caretaker brought a turtle named "Tiggles" to live in the pond. A second turtle appeared, so Penny named it "Mystery." Two more of the same species "Ginny" and "Raptor" were purchased. The turtles are Yellow-bellied sliders (*Trachemys scripta scripta*). Penny is a true turtle mom; she provides a great turtle habitat, with lots of hidey holes where turtles can be out of sight, or protected from the weather, as well as regular feedings. Small turtles have been spotted recently, so the turtle family is becoming established in a very special place.

In 1513 Ponce de Leon encountered the seven coral reef islands 70 miles off Key West, and named them "Las Tortugas" (The Turtles) for the bounty of turtles found there. Subsequent explorers found the islands lacking fresh drinking water, and they changed the name to "Dry Tortugas."

The earliest maps of Key West show that people kept turtles along the shores of Key West. The early settlers



A young Spur-thighed tortoise retreats inside its protective hard shell.



An 86-year-old Male Spur thighed tortoise and 16-year-old female "playing" around. These tortoises are from Africa, and despite the female producing eggs, they do not hatch due to unsuitable conditions in South Florida.



Turtle shells are made of bone that develops from ribs that grow sideways, and form plates that join to protect the body. The shells are covered in scales made of keratin.

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captured green sea turtles and stored them in "kraals" until needed for meat, eggs or soup. Krall comes from the Dutch word for "corral," and were shallow water enclosures with wooden poles spaced close enough to keep the turtles in, yet allow water to flow through.

A turtle is a reptile which has a bony shell. Turtles live in the water, but lay their eggs on land. Tortoises live on land. All tortoises are in fact turtles, but not all turtles are tortoises.

Florida has a native tortoise called the Gopher tortoise, and it lives in northern Florida. They create burrows in the ground which provide homes to a range of other creatures in addition to the tortoise. Though the native Florida Box Turtle lives on land, and often wanders into residential neighborhoods, it is not considered a tortoise. They prefer damp environments such as wetlands and swamps, but they do not enter water deep enough to swim.

You can encounter non-native tortoises such as the Spur-thighed tortoises from Africa and Red-footed Tortoises from South America at wildlife centers and zoos. The Everglades Outpost located in Homestead, used to be a place to encounter reptiles, including tortoises, however the growing sprawl of new housing developments creeping closer to the Everglades has forced its closure.

Spur-thighed tortoises can live to more than 100 years old. In fact, one was donated to the nature center at Ocean Reef after consideration by family members who decided it should not be included in a man's last will.

Maybe a turtle trust?