

Trachemys scripta (Red-eared Slider)

Family: Emydidae (Slider Turtles)

Order: Testudines (Turtles and Tortoises)

Class: Reptilia (Reptiles)



Fig. 1. Red-eared slider, *Trachemys scripta*.

[<http://www.wbeph.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/red-eared-slider-turtle-side-view-kelly-riccetti.jpg>,
downloaded 11 February 2015]

TRAITS. Red-eared sliders, or pond sliders, are semi-aquatic turtles and the subspecies *Trachemys scripta elegans* with the red stripe is the most common reptile pet around the globe (Golden and Schwartz, 2002). They have an oval shell with a weakly keeled olive brown carapace and a hingeless yellow plastron. The carapace is the back convex part of the turtle's shell consisting of the animal's ribcage while the plastron is the nearly flat part of the turtles structure (the belly). The legs, neck and head are green with yellow stripes (Fig. 1), their lower jaw is rounded and they are identified by a wide red stripe behind the eye. As the pond sliders mature, melanism occurs i.e. darkening of the skin and shell occurs, this is seen especially in males. Males are slightly smaller than females and have longer claws on their forefeet. An adult's carapace is approximately 12-18cm long.

DISTRIBUTION. The natural distribution of *T. scripta elegans* occurs within the Mississippi valley of the USA (Ernst and Barbour, 1972) (Fig. 2). There are records of its naturalization in Africa, Europe, Asia, Australia and the West Indies. They are considered amongst the world's

100 most invasive species and have been found in Trinidad as escaped or released pets, though they are not known to form a breeding population here.

HABITAT AND ACTIVITY. Red-eared sliders are ectothermic freshwater aquatic reptiles that spend their time foraging in densely vegetated ponds or basking on logs in the sun (Bouskila, 1986). They prefer quiet waters with soft, muddy bottoms, aquatic vegetation and suitable sites for basking. Sliders remain active year round depending on their geographic location. They are active during the day and sleep during the night usually resting at the bottom. Red-eared sliders are surprisingly quick movers, allowing them to disperse between ponds.

FOOD AND FEEDING. Red-eared sliders are omnivores. Their diet constitutes of mixed greens such as dandelions as well as aquatic vegetation including hyacinth and duckweed (Behler, 1979). They consume lots of protein based foods such as earthworms, shrimp, frogs, crayfish, tadpoles and arthropods. However, young sliders are generally more carnivorous than adults, but as they age their diet switch to omnivorous. These shifts in diet are correlated with a change in habitat and as the turtles grow larger and start occupying more space in a pond. Sliders are described as opportunistic, aggressive feeders (Golden and Schwartz, 2002). They have a preference towards moving prey.

POPULATION ECOLOGY. Red-eared sliders are described as territorial species as male sliders are territorial towards other males. These turtles are found in both brackish and freshwaters and can also be found in moving waters and are most active during the day. Mortality rates are high among the young and adults are believed to survive up to 75 years (DaSilva and Blasco, 1995), they are known for their longevity, for they have a long lifespan. Female red-eared sliders are typically larger than males. Courtship occurs in the spring and fall and is described as highly stereotyped. Their nests are built along the banks above water or at a considerable distance from water. The main predator of the red-eared slider is the human. They are quite vulnerable to humans due to their high abundance in ponds and wetlands. Other predators include; raccoons, otters, fish, frogs, snakes, skunks and birds. Due to an adult slider's size, bite and thickness of its shell it has little to fear from predation.

REPRODUCTION. With respect to the sexual maturity of a red-eared slider, size of the turtle is of more importance than age. Males reach sexual maturity from 9-11cm in carapace length. During the months of May to June the female digs out her nest and lays her eggs. Oviposition of the first clutch will occur when the shells of the eggs are fully formed and the environment is suitable. After the first clutch, a female lays multiple additional clutches. A clutch consists of anything from 2-25 eggs, and a female may lay five clutches per year. About 90 days after the clutch is laid, hatchlings emerge from the egg (Fig. 3). Once they emerge they are on their own as far as parental care goes and they begin foraging almost immediately (Golden and Schwartz, 2002). Hatchlings are at most danger from predators due to their small size and their tendency to forage in shallow waters.

BEHAVIOUR. Red-eared sliders bask in groups on logs and objects near their water such as fallen trees. They get rid of their parasites by excessive sun exposure. When they are approached by humans or a predator they quickly slide off their logs back into the water. Red-eared sliders in winter regions do not hibernate but they become less active and will only surface for food or water. Sliders may exhibit aggressive behaviour against other turtles or against people.

Aggression is displayed more in captive males than females, and aggression may also be present during feeding, if there is competition (Carlton et al., 2003).

APPLIED ECOLOGY. As pets red-eared sliders can pose serious problems. Firstly, they grow to a very large size which makes it difficult for the owner to manage. Another major problem is maintaining the water quality for the sliders; dirty water serves as recipe for pests and diseases. With respect to conservation threats, the sliders are listed in the Least Concern category, as its population and distribution is quite large.

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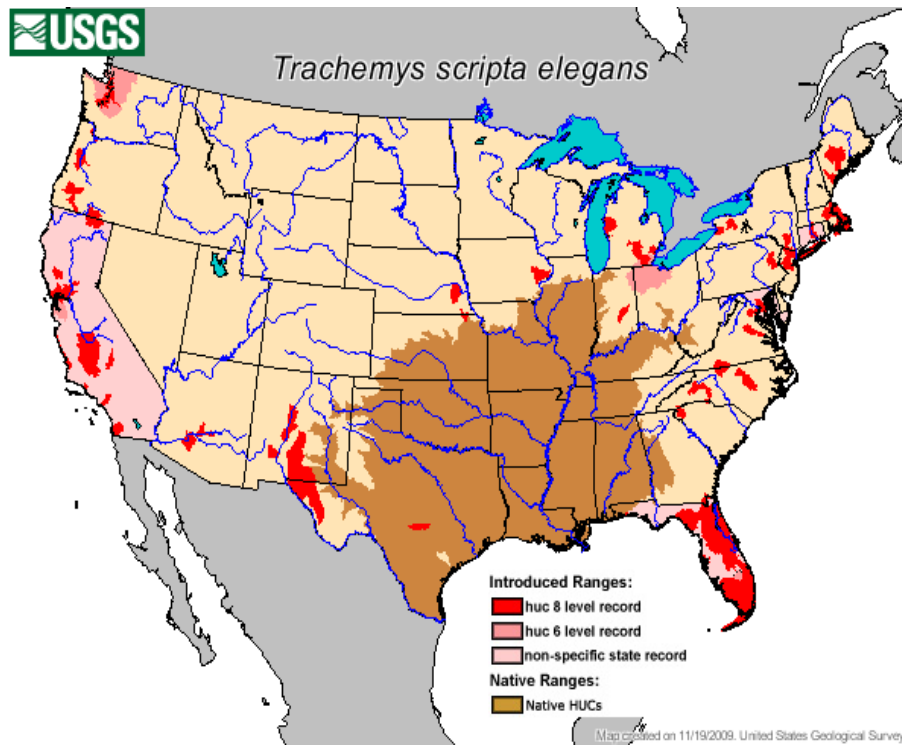


Fig. 2. Geographic distribution of the red-eared slider in the U.S.

[<http://www.nps.gov/samo/learn/nature/redearedslider.htm>, downloaded 11 February 2015]



Fig. 3. Clutch of red-eared sliders hatching.

[<https://www.flickr.com/photos/kaptainkory/6697028567/>, downloaded 11 February 2015]

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