

## Softshell Turtles of Texas

By Celeste Silling

Not long ago, I came across a turtle trying to cross a road. I always try to help turtles cross the street (traffic and road safety permitting) since they're determined little creatures that often get run over cars. But this turtle was different from any other I had seen before. When I picked it up, a nearby pedestrian remarked "I didn't know what that thing was. I thought it was a plastic bag or something." That should give you an idea of how odd it looked.

The turtle had a long nose, a little like a stubby elephant's trunk, and a wide, soft and slippery shell. The shell didn't have any scutes and was relatively light in color. I knew enough about turtles to determine that this was a softshell turtle. Later, I decided to do some research about softshell turtles and try to determine the exact species.

Softshell turtles lack the scutes (scales) that are seen on other turtles. This means that their carapaces (shells) are leathery and slightly pliable, though the center of the shell has a layer of solid bone beneath it. This soft shell has advantages and disadvantages. Softshell turtles can move more quickly on land, but are less protected than their hard-shelled cousins.

For this reason, softshell turtles like to stay hidden. Their carapaces are often the exact shade as the sediment of their habitat, allowing them to remain camouflaged in the water and mud. This is also why they have long noses, so that they can extend their neck and face up to the surface of shallow water to breath without coming out hiding.

There are five types of softshell turtles that reside naturally in Texas: the Pallid Spiny Softshell, Western Spiny Softshell, Guadalupe Spiny Softshell, Texas Spiny Softshell and Smooth Softshell. These different turtles are difficult to tell apart based on appearance, especially because four of them are subspecies of Spiny Softshell turtles.

Fortunately, the ranges of these species and subspecies are well documented and relatively distinct. I saw mine in the San Jacinto-Brazos river system, so I can be fairly certain that it was a Pallid Spiny Softshell Turtle (*Apalone spinifera pallida*.)

Female Pallid Spiny Softshell Turtles lay their eggs in late spring and throughout summer. They will dig a hole in soil near water, and lay an average of 12 – 18 eggs at a time. Female Pallid Spiny Softshells can grow up to 48 centimeters while males only grow to up to about 24. The females are some of the largest land turtles we have in this area, so they're easily spotted when they're out and about.

Softshell turtles face a few dangers from humans. They've been historically hunted for food, and are even considered a delicacy in some parts of the world. As well, turtles are frequently run over as they cross the road, especially during nesting season. To help protect the Pallid Spiny Softshell Turtle and other local wildlife, keep an eye on the road and be careful! You never know who could be crossing.

Photo: A Pallid Spiny Softshell Turtle

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