

Keuka's Turtles

The Keuka Lake watershed (lake and hillsides feeding lake with streams) includes five species of turtles. Cold-blooded, like all reptiles, turtles cannot regulate their body heat, so are active during spring, summer and fall when temperatures allow them to move about. All hibernate in winter, usually in the mud/muck of lake, pond and stream bottoms. Their heart rates slow to almost nothing, and they absorb oxygen from the water through their skins. All except one (spiny smooth-shell turtle) have bony shells. The upper shell is called the *carapace* and is formed of bony plates (scutes) that are flattened and widened ribs. Each scute has concentric rings laid down every year: counting the rings gives an approximation of the turtle's age. The bottom shell, called the *plastron*, is also formed of individual plates. They are omnivorous, meaning they eat vegetation, insects, small mammals and birds, salamanders, crayfish, snakes, and carrion. Some can deliver a dangerous (to humans) bite if you pick them up. None bite swimmers. All have a dull brown/black/olive carapace (camouflage). All lay eggs in sandy areas and/or under rotting woody vegetation.

	<p>The snapping turtle, with a shell 8-14 inches long is the largest turtle. They live in slow-moving areas of ponds, streams, and lakes, lying on the bottom waiting for prey, including fish and small ducklings. Their carapace is bony and ridged; the plastron is so small they can't draw their head, legs, or tail inside. Their powerful jaws can bite off a finger - handle with caution and only by holding them well away from your body by the tail.</p>
	<p>The spiny soft-shell is the only one without a rigid carapace and plastron. Described as a pancake with a head and legs, soft-shells live in calm lakes and ponds and often sun themselves on logs and concrete boat slips. At a distance, they look like flattened rocks. Largest turtle, reaching a carapace length of 25 inches. Mostly eat insects, crayfish. Cannot be picked up safely, have a very long neck and can reach behind if your pick up by their tail and deliver a painful bite.</p>
	<p>The eastern painted turtle is the most common - the one you see in groups sunning on logs at the edges of lakes and ponds. Relatively small at 7-9 inches in length, they are the prettiest with red and yellow stripes on the head and a plastron with bright orange-red patterns - like they were "painted." They eat snails, slugs, crayfish, algae, and carrion.</p>
	<p>The eastern wood turtle has a high, knobby carapace about 10 inches long and is a woodland traveler, often found in woods as they move from one body of water to another. So named because the pattern of rings on their scutes looks like wood. The carapace is yellow with black blotches on each scute. They eat mushrooms, fruits, algae, snails, slugs, and worms, often stomping on the ground to bring up the worms.</p>
	<p>The eastern box turtle is the smallest at 7-9 inches. So named because they can tuck their head, legs, and tail inside their shell which is hinged to form an impenetrable "box". They have brightly colored lines of dots on the carapace/legs & head. Like the wood turtle, box turtles are terrestrial and move through the forest on their travels between bodies of water. They eat snails, slugs, salamanders, fruits and mushrooms. More southern than the others, they are rarely seen in Keuka's watershed.</p>

All turtles move from one body of water to the next, often crossing roads. If you see one crossing a road and you can stop safely on the side, get out and shoo the turtle into the woods/lake. They often are hit by cars. All are protected by law: it's illegal to keep them as pets. Some, including the spiny, box and wood turtle are fairly rare.