

**T**HE Oblong Turtle is our local long-necked freshwater turtle found only in the South-west of Western Australia, but is particularly seen in the wetlands throughout Perth. Toodyay is about the outer limit of its distribution inland. It is so named the Oblong Turtle, because its carapace or shell is an oblong shape, but it is also known as the Western Long-necked Tortoise.

You will often hear these freshwater turtles being called 'tortoises'. There are actually no strictly land-based tortoises in Australia. Probably it was their little legs that confused the early explorers, and tortoises they were called. While they do use their legs as 'walking legs' as they need to leave the water periodically for nesting and also to migrate between wetlands at various stages, it is due to their largely aquatic lifestyles, the international nomenclature classifies these animals as 'turtles'.

Like most reptiles, they lay eggs. This occurs during the spring and summer months. In fact, the first wave of females leave the water around 'Show week'. Unfortunately, in suburban wetlands, turtles are injured or killed when attempting to cross roads when they are seeking nesting sites or returning to the waterbody. The closer urban development creeps towards a wetland, less and less terrestrial buffer is available for the native wildlife utilising these areas and less is available for these turtles to nest in. Many females will nest within a short distance of the waters edge, but some have been known to walk a staggering 500m just for that 'perfect spot' to nest in. How can those little legs walk that far !! Like marine turtles, it is thought they may even return to the same site each year to nest in. So if you are lucky enough to have a turtle nesting in your garden, if she makes it, chances are she will be the same turtle returning next year to that very same spot. How do they do it? No one knows for sure. This is just another one of those incredible things that occurs in nature that we have no answers to, just speculation.

The eggs take over 200 days to incubate !! That's a long time to remain in the ground. Further north, where it's warmer, incubation time for other fresh-water turtle species is much shorter. Unfortunately, ground-nesting is recognised as being an extremely vulnerable life habit. As habitat patches become smaller and smaller, this makes it very easy for predators to forage throughout these patches which are essentially all 'edge' with no interior. In particular, because we now have some highly successful, voracious and unselective predators in this country - the European Fox and feral cats; much of our wildlife is severely threatened. I have found at my urban

## FAUNA



Turtle egg and a newly emerged hatchling.  
Photo: Jacqueline Giles

# THE OBLONG TURTLE

(*Chelodina oblonga*)

Jacqueline Giles

climb over this vertical kerbing, but for others, it presents as an absolute barrier.

These animals are then forced to remain on the roads for longer periods than necessary as they track along the kerbing hoping to find their way back. Some are deliberately run-over, others are preyed upon by the terrestrial birds such as Magpies or Ravens. Once in the wetlands, the gauntlet to adulthood is not over. Hatchlings provide a seasonal food source for many of the native aquatic birdlife eg Cormorants. Once they reach adulthood, they have few predators, but Pelicans have been known to take adult turtles. But each has its turn. Turtles are carnivorous and are the top of the food chain underwater. They eat the various water bugs, mosquito fish and crustaceans that inhabit these wetlands and they can take ducklings and will also consume carrion. So they are a natural and essential part of the balance within a wetland ecosystem.

These turtles do not hibernate completely like the northern hemisphere species do, but only partially hibernate. In summer, when their water body dries up they can burrow down into the mud and aestivate, which is summer hibernation. So farmers digging out the soft sediment in their dams may find aestivating turtles in the mud. Unless these turtles are decomposing and obviously dead, chances are they are still alive, so please put these turtles back into the river or another dam if possible. A neighbour may be happy to have turtles in their dams if you are not.

Thankyou for looking after our wildlife !

*Jacqueline Giles is a consultant on the oblong turtle and is currently doing a PhD at Murdoch University looking at ambient sound in wetlands and the use of sound by these turtles. She can be contacted on 0408 95 70 53, email jacqgiles@netunltd.com.au*