



No.37

Oblong turtle and exotic red-eared slider turtle

The oblong turtle

The oblong turtle *Chelodina oblonga*, is also known as the western long-necked turtle. It occurs in the Perth metropolitan area and throughout the south-west of Western Australia. It sometimes causes a traffic hazard when crossing roads and can affect productivity in marron dams.

The oblong turtle has an oval shaped black shell (carapace) that can reach a length of 26cm in adults. The long neck is almost as long as the carapace, so that fully grown adults may total around 50cm in length. The carapace of hatchlings is about the size of a 20 cent piece.

Distribution and habitat

The Oblong Turtle is endemic to the south-west of Western Australia and it occurs in the Perth area, extending north to Hill River, inland to Toodyay, Pingelly and Katanning and east along the south coast to the Fitzgerald River National Park. It occurs in permanent and seasonal freshwater habitats including rivers, lakes, farm dams, swamps, damplands and natural and constructed wetlands.

Biology and ecology

Despite being fairly common and widely distributed, very little is known about the biology and ecology of the oblong turtle.

The turtles are most often seen in spring and summer. Between September and January each year, the females leave the water in search of suitable sandy soils in which to lay their eggs. The female lays 2-16 leathery eggs in a hole that she digs with her back feet. The eggs hatch in 26-41 weeks (depending on weather conditions and temperature) and the hatchlings prey on small crustaceans. Oblong turtles are carnivorous, preying on fish, frogs and invertebrates.

Freshwater turtles have the ability to go into a state which is similar to hibernation to survive extreme environmental conditions. Like all other reptiles, they are not able to internally regulate their body temperature. However, to survive hot, dry conditions and cold winter waters, they drop their body temperature, slow their pulse rate, and begin using stored body fat instead of eating. They may bury themselves in mud or under leaves or logs, conserving body fluids until conditions improve.

This strategy is known as aestivation, which is similar to hibernation, but is not as deep. At this time, the turtles may be vulnerable to predators and human activity such as landscaping and ground works.

Road hazard

Ideal nesting sites for oblong turtles include native vegetation remnants and parks and gardens of recreational, residential and business premises. When searching for suitable nesting locations, female turtles often cross busy roadways, causing a hazard to vehicles and risking injury or death.

After the hatchlings emerge, they then have to make their way across the same busy road back to the water body. This occurs from June to August each year and locations where this seasonal activity occurs include Lake Monger, Herdsman Lake, North Lake, Bibra Lake, Hyde Lake and Shenton Park Lake.



Figure 1 An oblong turtle moving through a garden bed (Photo T. Chapman / DEC).

How can we help?

To help reduce the number of oblong Turtles that are injured or killed on local roads, the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) and Main Roads need your assistance to protect this species by observing the following steps:

- Protect nests and egg laying turtles from disturbance.
- Move turtles if they have become trapped in your yard and place them in a position where they can make their own way back to the wetland unimpeded.

- Observe wildlife road signs and drive carefully to avoid turtles on the road.

Never go onto or near the edge of any road to rescue a turtle.

Handling oblong turtles

When handling a turtle, grasp the animal around the middle of the carapace and hold the animal away from your body (Figure 2). This method has two advantages. First, you will avoid the hind legs that have small claws that can cause minor scratching. Second, it is often at this point that the turtle will squirt liquid urine and faeces from its cloaca.

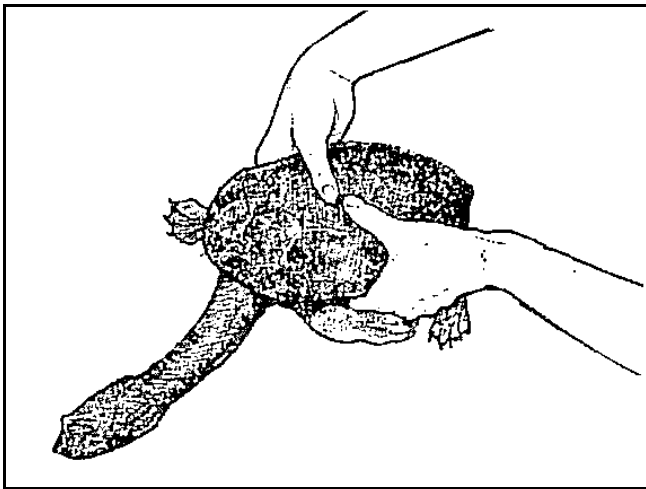


Figure 2 Correct way to hold a turtle.

If you find an injured or orphaned native turtle, call this 24-hour / 7 day per week WildCare helpline number:

WildCare (08) 9474 9055

Damage

Freshwater turtles, such as the oblong turtle, are not known to cause environmental damage as such. However, turtles that are in danger from earth works, may have to be removed from that location before the works can proceed.

In extreme cases, oblong turtle may make an impact on the productivity of some commercial operations, such as marron and fish ponds. Reducing the population of turtles may be time consuming, expensive and may not be effective for increasing productivity in the

long term. It is important to assess the costs and benefits of taking action before proceeding, because the costs of turtle control may exceed the gains in productivity.

Status and damage reduction

As a native species, the oblong turtle is protected under the provisions of the *Wildlife Conservation Act 1950*, administered by DEC. In a situation where the turtles are causing significant damage to a commercial operation, business owners should contact DEC's Nature Protection Branch for advice on 08 9334 0292.

Damage control

Oblong turtles can be captured by hand or by trapping, to remove them from danger or to reduce the loss of productivity in the case of aquaculture. This work must be carried out by a DEC authorised operator, licensed to capture, disturb or relocate the turtles to an approved site as part of a management plan. Anyone taking, disturbing or attempting to relocate them without a licence may incur a penalty of up to \$4,000 under the provisions of the *Wildlife Conservation Act 1950*.

Turtle or tortoise?

Although sometimes called a tortoise, the oblong turtle and all other Australian turtles are actually true turtles. Turtles have flippers or webbed feet adapted for swimming, whereas tortoises, such as the giant Galapagos tortoise, have stumpy, solid feet that are adapted to walking on land.

Pet oblong turtles

Oblong turtles are one of a number of native Western Australia reptiles and amphibians (herpetofauna) that have been approved to be kept as pets. A licence is required from DEC to keep them as pets and related information is available on the DEC website Reptiles as Pets. Oblong turtles must never be taken from the wild and kept in captivity. Pet turtles must be purchased from a licensed, reputable dealer.

Similarly, unwanted pet turtles must never be released back into the wild. Releasing unwanted captive animals, even those that appear perfectly healthy, carries a very real danger of introducing diseases or parasites into wild populations. Instead, they should be sold (or given) to a licensed dealer.

Comparison of the features of the oblong turtle and the exotic red-eared slider turtle

Feature	Native oblong turtle	Exotic red-eared slider turtle
Head retraction	Head and neck fold sideways under the shell	Head pulls straight back into shell
Head markings	No distinctive facial markings	Yellow stripes on face and red stripe behind each eye
Claws	Short claws	Very long claws on front feet (male)
Upper shell	Brown or olive without distinct markings	May be pale, with patterns of dark lines, but less obvious in some, older animals
Under shell	Plain, not coloured, but may be coloured by algae	Coloured with rings and line markings
Shell profile	Flat	Heavy and domed

A note on the exotic pest red-eared slider turtle

The red-eared slider turtle *trachemys scripta elegans*, shown in Figure 3, is not native to Australia. It poses an extreme risk to Western Australia's natural environment. It may carry pathogens and diseases that can kill native turtles and other aquatic wildlife and it aggressively competes with native species for food and space in waterways.

The features of the red-eared slider turtle, compared to the Oblong Turtle, are shown in the table below. If you see a Red-eared Slider Turtle, report it to DEC on 08 9334 0292, providing details as to when you saw it and a good description of the location.

Red-eared slider turtles have been found in the waterways of the Perth metropolitan area. These turtles were probably unwanted illegal pets that were released into the wild. It is illegal to keep the Red-eared slider turtle as a pet in Western Australia. If you have one, or you know of someone who keeps this turtle, report it to DEC on 08 9334 0292 and we will arrange for a DEC officers to collect it.

Always dispose of aquarium water, plants and animals responsibly.



Figure 3 Red-eared slider turtle *trachemys scripta elegans* (Photo P. Lambert / DEC).

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Further Information

Contact your local office of the Department of Environment and Conservation.

See the Department's website for the latest information: www.dec.wa.gov.au.

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