



## **Eastern Musk Turtle (*Sternotherus odoratus*)**

*Ster-noth-er-iss odor-aht-iss*



**Description:** 2 to 5 ½ inches shell length. The eastern, or formerly common musk turtle is a relatively small, semi aquatic turtle with a smooth, highly domed carapace ranging in color from mostly blackish, brown, olive brown, or grayish. The plastron is reduced significantly, and is pale yellow to brown. The skin can range from black, gray, to brownish gray, and the fairly broad, triangular head usually has 4 narrow white to yellowish stripes from the tip of the pointed snout to the end of the jawline, although these stripes may be absent or obscured in older specimens.

### **Taxonomy and Classification:**

**Life:** All living, physical, and animate entities

**Domain:** Eukaryota

**Kingdom:** Animalia

**Phylum:** Chordata/Vertebrata

**Class:** Reptilia

**Order:** Testudines

**Suborder:** Cryptodira

**Family:** Kinosternidae

**Genus:** Sternotherus

**Species:** *Sternotherus odoratus*\*

*\*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

**Similar/Confusing Species:** Common snapping turtles (*Chelydra serpentina*) are much larger as adults,

<http://www.madisonherps.org>

have serrated rear marginal scutes, and have longer tails with jagged, serrated dorsal scutes.

**Etymology:** Sternotherus-Sterno (chest, breast, or therion) or beast, wild animal, or thairos (hinge).  
odoratus-having a smell.

**Subspecies:** None.

**Range & Habitat:** Probably ranges throughout most of the southern third of Wisconsin, and as far north as Waupaca County in the east central portion of the state. Common musk turtles are generally found in shallow river backwaters, marshes, oxbow sloughs, clear springs and streams.

**Habits & Natural History:** The eastern musk turtle, or stinkpot, is a small, largely aquatic turtle that oftentimes may be locally common, but often is a fairly secretive and inconspicuous species. An infrequently observed basker, musk turtles typically do so in shallow water, but may also occasionally bask on emergent logs and overhanging vegetation as well. They are also fairly poor swimmers, and are sometimes observed simply foraging along the bottom in clear waters. Musk turtles are primarily carnivorous, feeding on small fish, frogs, carrion, aquatic insects, crustaceans, mollusks, and other aquatic invertebrates. Musk turtles can be pugnacious when captured or handled, and may hiss and attempt to nip a careless finger while sometime emitting a pungent musk, leading to their alternate common name, "stinkpot" that has been abandoned taxonomically.

**Phenology:** Eastern musk turtles will begin emerging from overwintering and mating as early as early April through May, and remain active throughout the year through September or October (or sometimes even later in the year if warmer temperatures persist or otherwise permit). Many Wisconsin turtles begin moving over land and are often encountered during May through early July as they search for sandy nesting sites.

**Conservation Status:** WI Locally Common. Regulated by WI DNR. IUCN Red List Least Concern (LC).

### **Contact**

Authored by Eric Roscoe. For any additional questions, comments, and/or concerns regarding this species, group of species, or this informational sheet, please email and contact the Madison Area Herpetological Society at [info@madisonherps.org](mailto:info@madisonherps.org)

*Disclaimer: Note that the information provided in these, or any native species information sheets, are not intended to be all-exhaustive, and further research should always be sought if one is interested in learning more about any of Wisconsin's reptile and/or amphibian species. MAHS cannot make any claims or guarantees regarding any information in this information sheet therein. This information sheet may be reprinted or redistributed only in its entirety, including any and all MAHS logos and disclaimers.*

\*Copyright Madison Area Herpetological Society, 2017

<http://www.madisonherps.org>