



Spiny Softshell (*Apalone spinifera*)

A-pal-lone spin-iff-er-ah



**Sam Fellows*



**Mike Day*

Description: Carapace length ranges from 5 to 10 inches for males, 7 to 19 inches for females. Spiny Softshell turtles are a large turtle species, most notably lacking a hardened, bony carapace with scutes. The carapace is instead characterized as flattened, soft and cartilaginous, ranging in color from olive, olive brown, to tan or light brown with dark irregular flecks and ocelli. Carapaces of large, adult females may be a much darker, uniform, or nearly uniform brown or olive brown. Spiny tubercles, or projections on the front margins of the carapace distinguish the spiny softshell from the smooth softshell. The skin on the head, neck, and limbs is of a similar color, and is usually mottled. A narrow yellowish post ocular stripe may also be present. The usually pale colored plastron is quite reduced. Both softshells in Wisconsin can be characterized by their tubular snouts and highly webbed feet.

Taxonomy and Classification:

Life: All living, physical, and animate entities

Domain: Eukaryota

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata/Vertebrata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Testudines

Suborder: Cryptodira

Family: Trionychidae

Subfamily: Trionychinae

Genus: *Apalone*

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Species: *Apalone spinifera**

**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

Similar/Confusing Species: The Midland smooth softshell (*Apalone mutica*) has smooth, or blunt tubercles on the anterior margins of the carapace behind the head and neck, more distinctive pale ocular stripes, a more limited range in Wisconsin, and lacks a lateral projection on the nasal septum.

Etymology: Apalone- Apo (separate, solitary, or alone) or Apalos (soft or tender). spinifera-spina (thorn); fero (carry or to bear).

Subspecies: Eastern spiny softshell (*Apalone spinifera spinifera*).

Range & Habitat: Occurs throughout most of Wisconsin excluding apparently the northeastern portion of the state. Spiny softshells prefer permanent bodies of water with sandy or muddy bottoms including lakes, large ponds, rivers, impoundments, and reservoirs.

Habits & Natural History: Spiny softshell turtles are large, primarily aquatic to semi aquatic species, and the more widely distributed of the two softshell species in Wisconsin. Seldom venturing far from permanent water, spiny softshells are fast and powerful swimmers, where they can even outswim some fish, and are primarily carnivorous (feeding on small fish, frogs, aquatic insects, invertebrates, and carrion). Following emergence in March or April, spiny softshells construct nesting sites in sandy areas near the water in May and June, and may be encountered nesting or moving overland. Softshell turtles are also capable of moving quickly on land as well, and have long necks and powerful jaws that they readily use when cornered or restrained.

Phenology: Spiny softshell 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 Common, but 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

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