

WOOD TURTLE

updated August 2017



Range	Nova Scotia south to northern Virginia and discontinuously west through southern Quebec and the Great Lakes region to eastern Minnesota and northeastern Iowa
Habitat	Cool stream in deciduous woodlands, red maple swamps, marshy meadows and farm country
Diet (wild)	Omnivores: eggs, carrion, insects, terrestrial non-insect arthropods, mollusks, terrestrial worms aquatic crustaceans, leaves roots and tubers, fruit, flowers, fungus
Diet (captivity)	Greens, turtle pellets, super worms, earthworms
Description	Length: 6 to 9 inches. Formed by concentric growth ridges, each large carapace scute looks like an irregular pyramid. Upper shell is brown; plastron is yellow with black blotches. Skin usually reddish orange.
Lifespan	Wild: 12 years. Captivity: 60 years
Reproduction	Females lays one clutch of 6–8 eggs between May and June. Eggs hatch between September and October. Wood turtles do not have temperature-dependent sex determination. Courtship may include a mating “dance” in which the male and female face each other and swing their heads back and forth; more frequently, the male simply pursues the female while nipping at her and then mounts her carapace. Male wood turtles form dominance hierarchies in the wild and will often aggressively attack other males; females also exhibit aggressive behavior, which can be directed both toward males and other females. Older, larger males tend to be dominant over smaller individuals and have better success in fertilizing eggs. Usually reach sexual maturity between 14–20 years of age.
Behavior	Wood turtles are diurnal animals and spend much of their active time basking, whether on emergent logs and other debris along or over waterways, or on land, while hidden in grass or shrub thickets. They are well adapted for the cool-temperate climate found throughout much of their range, and individual turtles can obtain body temperatures well above the air temperature by carefully orienting their shells towards the sun while maintaining a low profile out of the wind. Basking not only facilitates thermoregulation, but also allows vitamin D synthesis, and helps dislodge external parasites such as leeches. Wood turtles hibernate in winter (October through April in northern Michigan), generally on the bottom in the shallows of streams and rivers where the water will not freeze.
Our animals	1 female. Donated to the zoo by MUCC; she is approximately 15 years old, possibly older
Cool stuff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wood turtles were once harvested extensively for human food (in the east) and for the biological supply trade (especially in the Great Lakes area), and in the last few decades they have been mercilessly exploited for the pet trade. Wood turtles are listed as vulnerable by the IUCN and special concern in the state of Michigan, and they are in CITES appendix II. The population in Michigan is essentially a “ghost population.” This means there is an adult population but there are few to no offspring being born. When the adult population eventually dies, there are no young wood turtles to replace them. Wood turtles are known to capture earthworms by thumping the ground with their forefeet or the front of their plastron. The worms probably mistake the thumping vibrations for the approach of a mole, or perhaps the advent of a hard rain, and thus come to the surface, only to be grabbed by the hungry turtle. Wood turtles are reportedly quite intelligent. One report found that wood turtles in the laboratory were able to learn mazes about as well as rats under similar conditions. Counting the scute “growth rings” (annuli) can offer a reasonable estimate of age in a juvenile animal, but this method becomes increasingly unreliable as the wood turtle matures. In older animals, growth, and thus the formation of growth rings, may essentially cease; however, counting scute annuli will usually provide a reliable minimum age.