

Conservation Corner

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We trust everyone had a fun and safe 4th of July remembering and celebrating our nation's 240th birthday. Did firefly fireworks light up your weekend?

Our tasty tidbit of summer for this week is the wood turtle. Here in Iowa, snapping turtles, soft-shell turtles, and painted turtles may be harvested across the state while map turtles may be taken from the Mississippi River. All other turtles are protected. One species, the ornate box turtle, is classified as threatened and two species, the yellow mud turtle and the wood turtle, are endangered.

Wood turtles, *Clemmys insculpta*, are endemic to North America. Today small, isolated populations are scattered across Nova Scotia and the upper eastern United States. Iowa's only population is located in the upper limits of the Cedar River watershed north of Cedar Falls and Waterloo.

Wood turtles are considered land turtles. Although they feed and hibernate in water, they are more often seen basking on a fallen log or wandering through a forest than in a river or pond. Wood turtles are omnivores, eating land and water plants along with insects, earthworms, and snails.

Wood turtles are somewhat strange-looking. Their scales take on a pyramidal appearance as each year's growth adds another layer under the previous year's growth of unshed scales. As a result, their shell resembles coarse-grained wood that has been sandblasted. Their plastron is unhinged with bright yellow and black blotches. Wood turtles grow up to 7 1/2 inches in length and may live up to 40 years in the wild.

Wood turtles are smart. Their maze-learning abilities are nearly equal to that of rats, and their high intelligence and pleasant personality make them highly prized as pets.

Wood turtles have also been in the news lately. A recent AP release by John Molseed highlighted Iowa's rarest reptile and the UNI students currently researching isolated wood turtle populations in Black Hawk and Butler Counties. The students, under the direction of biology professor Jeff Tamplin, have spent the past 12 years measuring, recording, and tracking the movement of wood turtles. To date, they have found, named, and tracked 118 turtles.

Loss of habitat is one of the biggest threats facing wood turtles. Encroaching development also brings predators such as feral cats and raccoons. Nesting occurs in May, June, and July, which is also prime flooding season, and turtle embryos will drown if the eggs are submerged for more than 24 hours.

Between habitat loss, flooding, predators, and the illegal pet trade, these small, isolated populations need help if they are to survive. Working with County Conservation and Iowa DNR staff, known turtle habitat areas were cleared of trees in 2015. One year later, female wood turtles are already nesting in the cleared areas. The Iowa DNR also gave the UNI team permission to retrieve eggs. Tamplin and his students collected 62 eggs last summer and released 59 hatchlings in the wild this spring. Sounds like they found their connection to nature and listened.

