

# 2011 “YEAR OF THE TURTLE”

## Chicken Turtles



*Eastern Chicken Turtle (Deirochelys reticularia)*  
Roy Hyatt Environmental Center, Cantonment, FL  
Photo: Molly O'Connor

Chicken turtles are a species that are probably encountered frequently by Floridians but misidentified. At first they resemble their cousins the cooters by having a dark carapace with a few yellow markings, a dark head with a few yellow markings, and the bright yellow-orange plastron with no dark markings. It can be distinguished from that group in a couple of ways: one, the shape of the carapace is more oval; two, the markings on the carapace form a “net” like appearance, but the markings fade with age and older individuals can have a completely black carapace; three, they have an extremely long neck that can extend their head (and their bite ☺) to a larger range; four, their choice of habitat, chicken turtles prefer borrow pits, ephemeral ponds, and other low flowing bodies of water generally no deeper than 50-cm.

There are three subspecies found in the Southeast United States, two of these are found in Florida. The Eastern Chicken Turtle (*Deirochelys reticularia reticularia*) is found in the panhandle of Florida south to about the Suwannee River, southern Mississippi, southern Alabama, southern Georgia, and coastal areas of the Carolinas. South of the Suwannee is the Florida Chicken Turtle (*Deirochelys reticularia chrysea*). The difference exists in the dark spots on the margins of the carapace; found in the Eastern Chicken but not on the Florida. Chicken turtles do not get as large as cooters; carapace length = 25-cm.

Their habitats and habits differ greatly from their cousins the cooters and sliders. They prefer low flowing bodies of water that are less than 50-cm deep. Other species of turtles could be found here but Chicken Turtles do not seem to venture into large lakes, springs, or even into river flood plains. Roadside ditches, backyard ponds, golf course water hazards, and other shallow bodies of water seem to be their choice. They are seen more in the winter when their habitats have lower water. These turtles will move across large areas of land looking for suitable habitat, nesting locations – which is typically in late fall, and they are known to spend the winter in *forms* of leaf litter in a nearby forest. 80% of the records of this species in our state have been made during the months of December, January, and February – suggesting more activity this time of year. They do appear to stop all movement once the air temperatures reach 10°C. Their diet consists of animals with crayfish, dragonflies, and dragonfly larva being their favorites. They seem to be more solitary animals and population densities are low (3-5 turtles / hectare). They are also known to be aggressive (particularly the males) to other turtles (their species as well as others) when in captivity. This turtle should be kept by themselves in aquaria.

Molly found an Eastern Chicken Turtle (photo above) near an ephemeral pond on the property of the Roy Hyatt Environmental Center. This turtle was missing one rear leg, but seemed to be quite healthy otherwise. Washington High School students were clearing a trail in this area (which we now call the “Chicken Turtle Trail”) and found the empty carapaces of two chicken turtles. These animals do seem to have numerous terrestrial predators as they make their way over land. This pond completely dries several times during the year (particularly in the winter) and numerous searches for more animals have been fruitless. This could be due to their fantastic ability to blend in beneath the leaf litter, or the fact that their population densities are very low and therefore you would have infrequent encounters. We continue to search this area for more chicken turtles as often as possible.

This turtle has similar threats as other species in the state; fire ants, raccoons, and snakes feeding on eggs. There is a list of predators that could feed on the hatchlings that would include reptilian, avian, and mammalian predators. But they probably have more problems with dogs than most species due to their habitat preference. There are large numbers of road kills in this group due to their land movements from one pond to another or searching for good nesting habitat. There is some evidence of human predation as a source of food (possibly a link to their common name – “chicken”) but the practice is greatly reduced now. There is no evidence at the moment that their populations in our state are in decline and they are not currently listed by the FWC.



*Eastern Chicken Turtle; notice loss of hind limb (probable mammal attack) and the clean yellow plastron  
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