

# 2011 “YEAR OF THE TURTLE”

## Sliders



*Yellow-Bellied Slider (Trachemys scripta scripta)*  
Left: Escambia River, Florida – Right: Blue Springs, AL  
Photos: Molly O'Connor

A close relative of the Cooters, Sliders are one of the more commonly encountered turtles by Floridians exploring our great state. As mentioned in the Turtle Fact Sheet on Cooters, Sliders were once listed in the same genus – but now most biologists place them in their own, called *Trachemys*. They can be distinguished from Cooters (*Pseudemys*) by their more round plate-shaped carapace (not as oval as Cooters) and they are also smaller (sliders CL = 25cm, cooter CL = 30-35cm). They have numerous dark markings on the plastron, and a large yellow patch on the cheek behind their eye (photo above). There are two subspecies of sliders found in the United States and both are found in Florida. The Red-Eared Slider (*Trachemys scripta elegans*) has a red patch behind the eye instead of the yellow. These are common in the Mississippi Valley area until you reach the hilly piedmont range of Alabama. In the coastal plain area of the extreme southeast U.S. below the Piedmont is the range of the yellow-bellied slider (*Trachemys scripta scripta*). This turtle is found in the panhandle of Florida but does not exist south of the Suwannee River.

The Red-Eared Slider is the one most commonly sold in pet stores. Molly and I have preached for years that turtles do not make good pets. They are long-lived creatures, between 20-100 years, and most folks can not make that kind of commitment to a pet. In addition to their long life they are quite messy and need constant cleaning and care. Molly certainly knows this... though she cleans the tanks every week at RHEC these animals can still “foul” them very quickly. Because of their messiness and long life many pet owners release them into local ponds and streams (particularly in state and national parks) where they tend to do quite well. This has recently been brought to the attention of the public with the release of pet snakes in the Florida Everglades. Red-Eared Sliders are not native to Florida but are probably found in every county in Florida due to good hearted pet owners who do not want their turtles any longer and can not kill them. Whether the release of the Red-Eared in our state has become problematic is still not known, but in Florida the practice is illegal and it has certainly become a problem with boas, pythons, snake fish, and many other species of non-native wildlife; giving them the label *invasive*. Molly currently has between 50-60 turtles at RHEC, the majority of which are unwanted pets, and most are Red-Eared Sliders; suggesting we do have a problem.

Sliders can be found in most aquatic habitats where the flow is not too strong; lakes, slow streams, ponds, ditches, retention ponds, golf courses, and many other man-made water sources can be home to them. We have found them much more approachable than cooters when paddling creeks and rivers. They LOVE to bask, and we have seen several basking on a log together, sometimes on top of each other! Their diet seems more omnivorous than the cooters but the trend of carnivorous young and herbivorous adults is still the general rule for the group. Like the cooter, the males are generally smaller than the females and possess the longer claws on the front limbs for stimulating females during breeding season. The females of this group have been known to travel across land long distances to find suitable nesting areas; some have been known to travel as far as 500 meters (almost 2000 feet) from their water habitat! Unlike cooters they do not dig three separate holes at the nest but a single one, as most turtles do. It has been found that the older males of this species become more melanistic (darker) with age and the yellow markings can completely fade away, making identification

difficult. Molly and I recently ran into a few of these from a local golf course, it was almost impossible to tell if they were yellow-bellied or red-eared sliders.

Threats to slider populations in Florida include harvesting for the pet trade. The native Yellow-Bellied is illegal in the pet trade (unless raised in a turtle farm) while sale of the Red-Eared is limited for “educational” purposes (unfortunately some who sell these turtles ask parents if they will be teaching their children about the care of these turtles and then justify that as an “educational” sale. As stated previously, the release of Red-Eared is illegal. Because of their high numbers in some local ponds and their tendency to travel long distances for nesting, a large number of sliders have been found along road sides killed by cars. Another problem that is facing not only sliders but all species of turtles in Florida is the presence of the invasive Fire Ant (*Solenopsis invicta*). These insects have been known to destroy the nest of many different species of turtles (and other animals) as well as the hatchlings themselves.

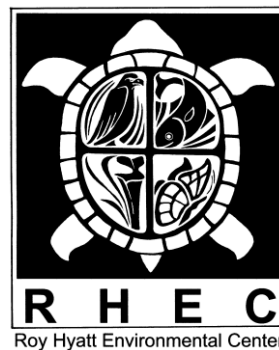
The Red-Eared Slider is certainly listed as an *exotic* species (non-native) in the state of Florida but whether it is an *invasive* species (causes ecological or economic problem), as with so many others in this state, is still unknown.



*Yellow-Bellied Slider (Trachemys scripta scripta)*  
Rainbow Springs State Park, FL  
Photo: Molly O'Connor



*Red-Eared Slider (Trachemys scripta elegans)*  
Roy Hyatt Environmental Center, Cantonment, FL  
Photo: Molly O'Connor



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