

Red-eared Slider (*Trachemys scripta elegans*)

By: Leyna Stemle

Background:

Two subspecies of *Trachemys scripta* sliders occur naturally throughout the Southeastern U.S.^{1,2}, however, another subspecies, the red-eared slider (*Trachemys scripta elegans*), has also become established in numerous Southeastern states. This sub-species is only native to the south-central U.S., covering the Midwestern states and extending east to West Virginia and west to New Mexico (see orange on the above map). This subspecies lives in a variety of habitats such as ponds, canals, brackish water, urban backyards, and parks. The current nonnative range of red-eared sliders is almost global, given that they are often released by pet owners who can no longer care for them and are often unaware of the harm this poses to other wildlife^{3,4}. In the Southeastern U.S., they have established nonnative ranges in FL⁵, NC, SC, and VA⁶ (see points on the above USGS map⁶). It is quite possible the nonnative turtles can outcompete native turtles in this range.

Identifying characters:

Red-eared sliders can be relatively easily distinguished from native turtle species/subspecies (Figure 1,2). Adult red-eared sliders typically range from 8–13 inches (20–33 cm) in length with carapace (upper portion of the shell) coloration ranging from green to black². Like other slider turtles, they have a yellow plastron (lower portion of the shell) with eye-like dark markings present (Figure 3). Some turtles, especially young turtles, may also have yellow stripes along the head and neck, which may be confused with similar stripes on native turtles. Unlike native species (*Pseudemys* spp. and other *Trachemys scripta* sub-species),

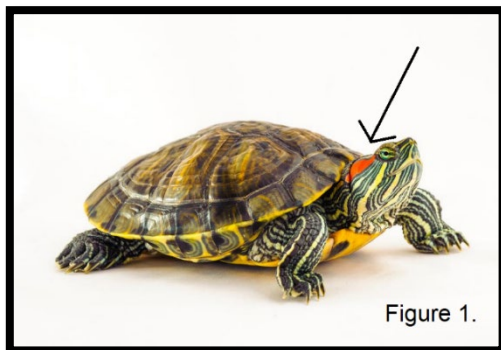


Figure 1.

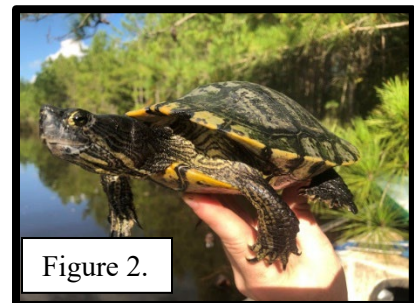


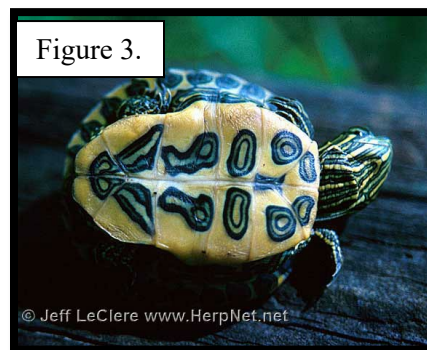
Figure 2.

red-eared sliders usually have a red marking just behind each eye which attributes to their common name (Figure 1)^{2,5}. However, this marking can be lost due to old age or may be missing in melanistic individuals (Figure 2). Yellow-bellied sliders (*Trachemys scripta scripta*), a native species to the Southeast, will have a large yellow patch in the cheek area in place of a red ear marking.

Hatchling red-eared sliders typically have a yellow plastron with eye-like dark markings (Figure 3), a green carapace, as well as the characteristic red ear mark. This is the size many turtles are sold, though they can grow to be almost a foot long^{1,2}. It is illegal for turtles under four inches to be sold in most states, but loopholes do exist.

Impacts to native wildlife:

Once released turtles become established in an area, they are often observed at higher densities than in their native range³. These large populations of red-eared sliders typically exert a strong negative pressure on native turtle populations because red-eared sliders ultimately outcompete the native species for limited resources¹. Additionally, these introductions of red-eared sliders can also introduce and spread diseases, even if they do not become established³.



What to do if you find one or no longer want to keep one as a pet:

If you can no longer care for a pet red-eared slider, please take the animal to a Wildlife Center that accepts turtles or contact your local state wildlife agency to see if your state's wildlife amnesty program accepts them (please note that the state of Florida does not accept them as part of their amnesty program). If you are unable to find a facility accepting red-eared sliders, then those turtles should be euthanized by a licensed veterinarian or local state wildlife agency. This can be cost-prohibitive, but there are currently very limited options. **Thus, we recommend that individuals should seriously consider the amount of time, effort, and money it takes to properly care for pet turtles before purchasing one as a pet.**

Additional resources:

- 1) USGS Red-eared Slider Fact Sheet: <https://nas.er.usgs.gov/queries/factsheet.aspx?SpeciesID=1261>
- 2) Invasive species Initiative Fact Sheet: <http://www.invasivespeciesinitiative.com/redeared-slider>

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Literature cited:

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3. Pearson, S. H., Avery, H. W., and Spotila, J. R. (2015). Juvenile invasive red-eared slider turtles negatively impact the growth of native turtles: implications for global freshwater turtle populations. *Biological Conservation*, 186, 115–121.
4. Taniguchi, M., Lovich, J. E., Mine, K., Ueno, S., and Kamezaki, N. (2017). Unusual population attributes of invasive red-eared slider turtles (*Trachemys scripta elegans*) in Japan: do they have a performance advantage?. *Aquatic Invasions*, 12(1), 97-108.
5. <https://www.floridamuseum.ufl.edu/discover-herps/florida-amphibians-reptiles/turtles/>
6. <https://nas.er.usgs.gov/queries/factsheet.aspx?SpeciesID=1261>