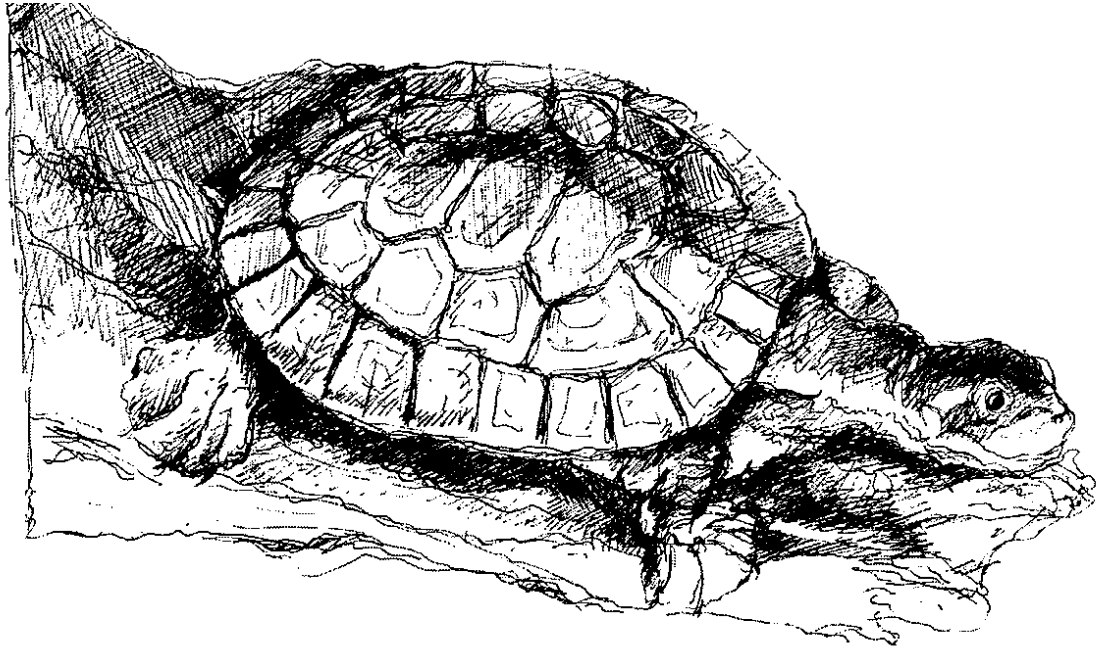


FRESHWATER TORTOISES



notes

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There are 250 species of turtles and tortoises worldwide and 18 of them are found in Australia. Two species of freshwater tortoise found in South Australia are commonly kept as pets. These are the Murray River short-neck tortoise or Macquarie tortoise and the Common long-neck tortoise.

Turtle or tortoise? There is actually no technical difference defining turtles and tortoises. Commonly, marine species with flippers are referred to as turtles whereas the species with feet and claws are referred to as tortoises. Freshwater species with webbed feet and claws are referred to as Tortoises in Australia to save confusion with the marine animals.

The adult Murray River short-neck tortoise has a

carapace, or upper shell length of about 30 cm. Its neck when fully extended is nearly half this length. Young short-necked tortoises have a yellow spot behind the eye, which soon disappears. A yellow chin stripe is retained until old age.

As their full name implies these animals are found in the Murray River system in Victoria, Southern Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia. Several other types of short-neck freshwater tortoise are found throughout northern and Eastern Australia. Of these, the Krefft's tortoise is sometimes kept as a pet in South Australia.

An adult Common long-neck tortoise has a carapace length of about 15 cm and a neck almost as long. Young long-neck tortoises are usually

black and orange on their plastron or under-shell. The orange colour fades with age. This species is found throughout Victoria, New South Wales, south east South Australia and southern and coastal Queensland. Various types of long-neck freshwater tortoise inhabit much of Australia except the arid interior. Most rivers, lakes, lagoons and swamps in Australia are inhabited with freshwater tortoises.

Freshwater tortoises are reptiles and therefore obtain their body heat from the environment. In the wild they bask on logs and rocks and retreat into the water to avoid over-heating.

The water is also an excellent place for them to hide from predators such as eels, snakes, birds, fish, large tortoises and introduced animals like foxes, cats and dogs. The rocks and reeds surrounding freshwater provide many hiding places. Nevertheless, many are still eaten by their predators.

Freshwater tortoises actively search for food usually during early morning and late afternoon. They eat a variety of foods including insect larvae, water insects, shellfish, shrimp, frogs, tadpoles, small fish and water plants. Dead animals may also be eaten. Young tortoises feed largely on insects and water plants. Freshwater tortoises will only eat when under the water.

A female tortoise will leave the water to lay eggs in a hole dug in the ground. The brittle-shelled eggs are then covered carefully. Depending on the species and the soil temperature the eggs can take up to almost two years to hatch. Young tortoises live almost exclusively in the water for the first 2 to 3 years of their lives, however they must be able to come to the surface for breaths of air.

The short-neck and Common long-neck tortoises hibernate during the cooler months. Some individuals will settle in the mud on the river bottom

while others prefer to hide on land under dead leaves, a bush or some other ground cover. Sometimes a tortoise will reduce its activity level during the warmer months, due to lower water levels and higher water temperatures. This summer dormancy is called aestivation. Tortoises, like all reptiles, can go without food for many months. Tortoises being kept as pets inside may not hibernate.

Along with the Short-neck and Common Long-neck Tortoises the Adelaide Zoo also exhibits Australia's smallest freshwater tortoise, the Western swamp tortoise. This small reptile was once common in the swamps and rivers surrounding the city of Perth, Western Australia. Due to the destruction of their habitat and the introduction of feral predators the number of Western swamp tortoises in the wild plummeted to a dangerously low number. Members of a recovery team, involving the Perth Zoo, collected a number of Western swamp tortoises for urgent study purposes. In 1987 new technology such as Ultra sound resulted in a successful breeding program. In 2001, two Western swamp tortoises were sent to the Adelaide Zoo for further research and breeding. These two animals were the first of their kind to ever leave Western Australia. In 2004 another two Western swamp tortoises arrived at the Adelaide Zoo. Together, Zoo's and conservation organisations hope to save this species from extinction.

All freshwater tortoises are protected species and they are NOT to be collected from the wild. The National Parks and Wildlife Services of each state can be contacted about permit requirements.

