

FLORIDA'S SOFTSHELL TURTLES[©]

by Dan Pemble, Kissimmee, Florida – December 12, 2024

The Kissimmee Bay Country Club (KBCC) residential golf course community is located in a relatively flat area of Central Florida with an average elevation of just 75 feet above sea level. Like most all similar areas of Florida, there are numerous “retention ponds” that have been built for the purpose of minimizing flooding during inclement weather events. So let’s now explore some facts about the softshell turtles that reside in the KBCC community ponds. I have gleaned much of what is offered here from information gained from various web sources because I am no “turtle expert”, only a curious on-looker!

Softshell turtles can be found throughout Africa, Asia, and in numerous North American locations. Certainly, most all residents in the KBCC community have seen them in various sizes and numbers in and around all of the ponds here.

It’s probably not widely known that these turtles are mostly crustaceans (non-vegetarians) with diets that include: fish, aquatic crustaceans, snails, amphibians, and sometimes even birds and small mammals, all of which are quite plentiful in the KBCC ponds; thus, these ponds offer a very favorable habitat for the turtles.

The following photo, as taken by my wife Sadhana, shows a couple softshells basking in the warm KBCC sun.



Primarily in China, but possibly to a lesser degree in other areas of the world, various dietary concoctions made from softshell turtles are quite widely consumed by humans. Consequently, this has led to widespread hunting, capture, and export of the turtles to China. To preclude the possibility of these turtles actually becoming extinct, at least in the US, limitations and restrictions on capturing and exporting these turtles have been imposed.

As to be expected, Floridians are mostly interested in matters related to softshell turtles here in Florida, so the following link to a Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission web site provides some additional information:

<https://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/profiles/reptiles/freshwater-turtles/florida-softshell-turtle/>

A few highlights from this site are:

- On August 26, 2021, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) issued executive order #21-19 that states the take or transport of all freshwater softshell turtle species is currently prohibited until the order is repealed.
- Commercial harvesting & sale of wild softshell turtles is prohibited in Florida.
- In helping a softshell across a road, BE CAREFUL because they can deliver a powerful bite.
- Turtle predation: Birds, bears, raccoons and red foxes eat softshell turtle eggs, large fish, other turtles, and mammals (such as the skunk and armadillo) eat young turtles. Alligators are the primary predators of adults.

Regarding turtle predation, I have personally seen a softshell emerge from a nearby pond, dig a very shallow nest, excrete its eggs in the nest, lightly cover the eggs, and then return to the pond. All the time this was occurring, several fish crows were circling overhead and within minutes of the turtle departing its nest site, the crows had landed and devoured all the eggs!



***Now you know something about one of my cousins!
I hope you have a nice day!***