

UC SANTA CRUZ CAMPUS NATURAL RESERVE

# SOUTHWESTERN POND TURTLE



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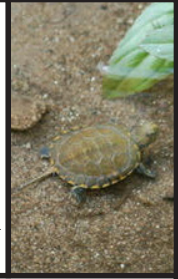
**Scientific Name:** *Actinemys pallida* (*Emys marmorata*)  
by CDFW and others that don't accept taxonomic splitting of Western Pond Turtle)

**Common Name:** Southwestern Pond Turtle

**Global Rarity:** Vulnerable/Apparently Secure

**State listing:** Vulnerable; Species of Special Concern

**UCSC Rarity:** Likely extirpated



## General Description

The Southwestern Pond Turtle, also known as the Southern Western Pond Turtle, is a medium sized turtle and was formerly (and sometimes still) considered one of two subspecies of the Western Pond Turtle. The Southwestern Pond Turtle is generally found in areas south of San Francisco, while the Northwestern Pond Turtle is found north of the American river in California. The Southwestern Pond Turtle is a secondary consumer in the ecological web, and acts as prey for many other species and host for several parasitic organisms.



## Identification

**General Color:** Dark green-brown, olive, yellow, orange

**Size:** 9-21.5 cm in length

**Legs:** Speckled with black and may be cream-yellow in color

**Underbelly:** Adult turtles have yellowish belly, sometimes with dark blotches; no hinges on plastron

**Face:** Male has lighter throat than females; turtle has black spots or lines on top of their heads, which may also show a cream-yellow color

## Geographic Range

The Southwestern Pond Turtle ranges from northern Mexico to the San Francisco peninsula along the coast and portions of the San Joaquin Valley, with one relict population along a section of the Mojave River.



## Life History

**Habitat:** Ponds, marshes, rivers, streams, and irrigation ditches, usually with aquatic vegetation, below 6,000 feet elevation; need basking sites and suitable (sandy banks or grassy open fields) upland habitat up to 0.3 mile from water for egg laying.

**Reproduction:** mating occurs in late April or early May but may occur year round. Females leave their aquatic habitat to go to an upland location around 0.3 miles away and deposit between 1 and 13 eggs in one clutch. Females may lay two clutches per year or only lay every other year. Eggs are most commonly deposited between May and August. The eggs are usually buried in sandy banks near water or in grassy, sunny spots near water. Hatchlings emerge from nest in fall or spring.

**Gestation:** 90-130 days

**Sexual Dimorphism:** Females are larger, and their shell is more domed than the male. Males also tend to have yellow, lighter throats and thicker tail bases.

**Behavior:** Shy, known to retreat to the water if danger is sensed. For protection, they can retract their head and legs into their hard shell. Generally solitary, but sometimes bask in groups on logs, fallen trees, or other objects near water to get exposure to the sun, which helps them get rid of parasites. In several areas, these turtles hibernate during winter by burrowing into mud.

**Diet:** Dietary generalists that consume whatever they are able to capture. They exclusively hunt and feed in the water. Their prey includes aquatic vegetation, insects, tadpoles, frog eggs, snails, leeches, aquatic beetles, and fish. They will also occasionally scavenge.

**Predators:** Birds, fish, and the American Bullfrog

### Conservation Status

#### Species of Special Concern

The Southwestern Pond turtle has suffered an overall reduction in their population sizes, with much of this loss irreversible. For this reason, the turtle is listed as a Species of Special Concern in California.

### UCSC Distribution

The Southwestern Pond Turtle has been detected once, several years past, at the Arboretum pond.



## Research Highlights and Fun Facts

- For a period of time in the early 20th century, humans overharvested these turtles for the San Francisco restaurant industry; the species never fully recovered
- The Southwestern Pond Turtle can potentially have a 50 year lifespan
- During the summer or times of dryness, the species can reduce their activity and need for more oxygen and aestivate, absorbing oxygen from the mud through cloacal respiration, allowing to survive in oxygen-poor environments

## Ways You Can Help

1. Oppose construction projects or development if it takes place within a 0.3 mile radius from ponds, streams, and other aquatic habitats suitable for the Southwestern Pond Turtle
2. Do not support or participate in hunting or harvesting turtles
3. Do not support dam construction
4. Do not support corporations that improperly dispose of chemicals

## Threats

### Statewide

1. Development and wetland loss; particularly ground disturbance, vegetation removal in areas adjacent and up to 0.3 miles from the Southwestern Pond Turtle's habitat
2. Dam construction
3. Ulcerative shell disease and upper respiratory disease
4. Introduced plant and animal species
5. Human disturbance; hunting and harvesting turtles, and chemical contaminants in turtle's food supply

### UCSC campus

1. Construction projects; however, the 2021 Draft Long Range Development Plan for Santa Cruz did not indicate any development would occur within 0.3 miles of the Southwestern Pond Turtle's habitat. Though habitat occurs in and around the UCSC Arboretum pond, only a single record exists for the species on campus, from several years ago.

## References and Photo Credits

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