

Spiny Softshell Turtle

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Apalone spinifera*. From the Greek *apalos* meaning soft or tender (referring to the turtle's shell) and the Latin *spinifera* referring to the row of tubercles on the front edge of the carapace (the top half of a turtle shell).

DESCRIPTION: The spiny softshell turtle can best be described as looking like a pancake. Softshell turtles are a specialized group of highly aquatic turtles that adapted to this lifestyle by losing all the outer bony scutes that comprise a typical turtle's shell. In spiny softshells, the carapace is flattened and covered by leathery skin. The skin is an olive to tan color, and covered by a series of small dark blotches. A row of soft, fleshy protuberances is present along the front edge of the carapace. The plastron (the bottom half of a turtle shell) is reduced in size and covered by an almost translucent white skin. Another adaptation these turtles have developed for aquatic life is a long, tubular snout, which allows the turtle to breathe without exposing its body to predators. Males reach a length of 22 centimeters (10 inches) and females twice that (54 centimeters, or 21 inches).

DISTRIBUTION: The spiny softshell is an introduced species in Arizona. This turtle is native to the central and southeastern

United States and northeastern Mexico. It has been introduced into the Colorado and Gila river systems, and now also occurs in California, Utah, Nevada and New Mexico.

HABITAT: Spiny softshells are primarily a riverine species, but can also be found in marshy creeks, ponds and lakes. They prefer soft lake beds and riverbeds with some aquatic vegetation, choosing habitats that offer sand bars or mud flats as nesting and basking sites. Softshell turtles also will bask in fallen trees, using the submerged sections as cover and foraging sites.

BIOLOGY: Spiny softshells employ both active foraging and sit-and-wait ambush techniques to secure food. When ambushing prey, softshell turtles will suck up passing insects or fish, expelling excess water back out of the mouth after the prey has been swallowed. Softshells also spend considerable time poking under rocks and through aquatic vegetation in pursuit

of food. Their diet is almost exclusively invertebrates (insect larvae and crayfish), with some fish.

Mating occurs in April or May, and nesting in May through August. Nests are generally dug on sand or gravel bars. Spiny softshells lay two clutches of eggs a year, ranging in size from 4 to 39 eggs, with clutches in the 12–20 range being most common.

This turtle is highly aquatic and may spend large amounts of time buried in the soft bottom of a river with only its head and neck protruding. This is generally done in shallower water, where the turtle can reach the surface to breathe without moving from its hiding spot. The author has captured softshells buried in shallow sand and gravel bars in Kansas by hand and by seining.

STATUS: An invasive species in Arizona, spiny softshell turtles do not have special management status.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: As an introduced invasive, spiny softshell turtles are subject to a year-round open season and an unlimited bag limit. For more information, see Commission Order 43 in the 2005 and 2006 Fishing Regulations. Softshell turtles can be taken with a fishing or combination hunting-fishing license.

All softshell turtles are considered edible, and are the turtle of choice (along with snapping turtles) for many turtle soup recipes. Try the Internet or the new book "The Culinary Herpetologist" by Ernest A. Liner for ideas. 🐢

■ Formerly a turtle biologist for the Arizona Game and Fish Department, Daren Riedle is now back East starting his doctoral work on aquatic turtles, including softshells.

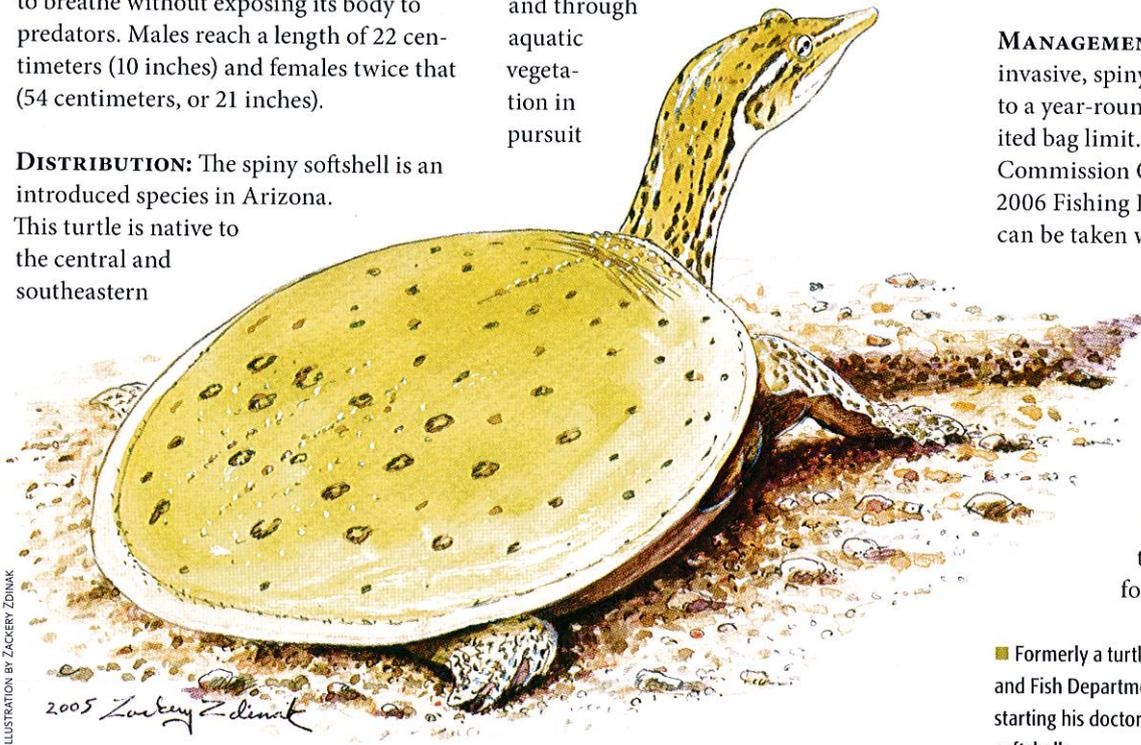


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