

How to Help the Western Pond Turtle

John Woodrow, Council Partner

Clemmys Marmorata or, as we know them, the Western Pond Turtle is one of those species that really needs our help. Since the turn of the century, the Pond Turtles population has decreased by as much as 96% because of the introduction of other species like Bull Frogs and Bass, both of which feed on baby turtles. This, in addition to inappropriate land planning, which has reduced the turtle's habitat, has led to problems for the turtle's existence.

So, how can we help? As with any situation, the first step to resolve a problem is understanding the problem. The problem here is not just that predators eat baby turtles, but that the turtle's habitat extends beyond the quiet water in small lakes, sluggish streams, and rivers in which abundant vegetation supplies exist. In fact, the turtle's home range can be as much as 7 acres, which includes nesting and hibernating as far away from the water source as 1600 feet.

How we have helped? In the last few years Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife (ODFW), has instituted measures to replace logs and natural areas within

the rivers and streams that provide areas for turtles to bask in the sunlight and for baby turtles to hide as they grow. Now the next step is up to property owners, homeowners, developers, and those of us who recreate near the waterways.

Recognizing that turtles nest up to 1600 feet away from the water source we can all help by leaving the riparian areas undisturbed. The Pond Turtle typically nests on the southwest facing slopes. The nests, naturally, have to be above the winter flood plain and should not have too steep a slope, so that the hatchlings can traverse the slope and get to food and shelter. Property owners who wish to help can promote nesting sites by mowing grass and creating bare soils for nesting. Also by controlling the non-native fish and frog populations near the nesting area, the hatchlings stand a better chance of survival.

Once the hatchlings make it to the water they need food and shelter. Again, we can help by providing areas that accommodate turtles. Pools that are less than a foot deep and have wetland vegetation, such as reeds and sledge provide food sources and

places to hide. Tree roots near the edge also offer good hiding and basking spots for the turtles both young and old. Being about the size of a quarter when leaving their nest, safety is of prime importance for hatchlings. It takes turtles about 2 or 3 years to grow large enough that the majority of predators can't eat them. So, they need these areas where they can feed, hide, and grow in relative safety.

Growing up on the banks of a river myself, I have always had a special fondness for turtles. When I think that 5 or 10 years from now there may not be turtles for kids to watch and wonder about, I really hope that we can all do something, even if it is a little thing, to help save and provide a way for the turtles to exist. Like Alligators and Crocodiles, Turtles are one of the world's oldest creatures and have survived many devastating problems and we have it within our power to help them survive this problem. For more information, see "Living with Wildlife – Clemmys Marmorata ,Western Pond Turtle" put out by the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife.