



Image: Jules Farquhar

Murray short-necked turtle

Emydura macquarii

Status: Vulnerable in South Australia

The Murray short-necked turtle is one of the three species of turtle found in the Murraylands and Riverland region. Turtles play a crucial role in the River Murray ecosystem and are culturally significant to the region's First Nations. Turtles are under threat from a range of issues but there are a number of ways the community can support their conservation.

Description

The shell is olive green or bronze on top (carapace) and cream coloured below (plastron). The bottom shell is narrow and does not cover the legs when pulled in.

The skin is greyish with a distinctive creamy-yellow stripe running back along the side of the head from the corner of the mouth. The eyes are small and yellow with a round black pupil. The neck is very short relative to the other South Australian freshwater turtle species. Females have smaller tails than males.

Size

The Murray short-necked turtle is larger than the eastern long-necked turtle. The shells of adult Murray short-necked turtles are generally around 30 cm in length. Males can grow to about 2.2 kilograms. Females are bigger than males and can weigh over 4 kilograms.



Image: Jules Farquhar.



Underside of female (left) and male (right). Image: Jules Farquhar.

Habitat

Murray short-necked turtles can be found in open water, including lagoons and the main channel of the river. They prefer permanent areas of slow moving water.

Murray short-necked turtles rarely come out of the water, but they can sometimes be seen basking on logs (or the splash can be heard as they jump off to hide).

Other than to bask, the only times they leave the water is to travel over land to reach other waterbodies or for nesting.



Turtle nest destroyed by a fox.

Diet

Murray short-necked turtles find their food mostly by prowling along the bottom of the waterbody.

They are omnivores, which means they eat both plants and animals. The animals they eat are mainly invertebrates (eg crustaceans and molluscs) and fish.

Their diet changes over time and as they get bigger, so does their food.

They also eat carrion (dead animals), cleaning up dead fish and other animals in the water and helping to maintain water quality.

Breeding

Murray short-necked turtles are very slow growing and do not become adults until about 10 years of age, which is when they start to breed.

They nest during or just after spring and early summer storms, usually from late October through to Christmas. The rain softens the ground making nest excavation easier and faster. Spending less time on land reduces the time the turtles are exposed to predators.

Nest sites are usually in the open and between 2 and 40 metres from the water's edge. Their nests are approximately 15 to 20 centimetres deep. They are boot shaped, with a narrow neck opening out to a chamber at the bottom.

Up to 30 eggs can be laid in each nest. After laying the eggs the female fills in the hole with dirt and stamps it down using her shell. The eggs usually take 6 to 8 weeks to hatch.



Baby Murray short-necked turtles.



Murray short-necked turtle nesting. Image: Toolunka Creek Olives

Threats

Many issues threaten turtle numbers in the River Murray. Some of the greatest threats are:

- Foxes digging up nests to eat the eggs and killing adult turtles on land, usually nesting females
- Hatchlings being eaten by fish, birds and water rats
- Reduced river flows and altered hydrology in wetlands
- Changing habitat including loss of aquatic vegetation, growth of water couch or landuse changes on the river banks
- Water quality issues, including salinity, turbidity and chemical run-off (from farms and towns).

How can you help?

You can play a role in helping your local turtles in a number of ways including:

- Recording sightings and nesting locations using TurtleSAT
- Protecting nests from predators
- Volunteering with a local wetland group
- Keeping our water ways healthy by reducing soil and chemical run off
- Helping plant native habitat in and along creek lines.
- Using turtle safe fish traps (ie not funnel traps) and leaving an air pocket for them to breathe.

For more information

landscape.sa.gov.au/mr

TurtleSat
turtlesat.org.au/turtlesat/

1 Million Turtles
1millionturtles.com/



Creative Commons Attribution 4.0
© Crown in right of the State of South Australia,
Murraylands and Riverland Landscape Board.



Follow us on social media @MRLandscapeSA