

# Red Eared Sliders



By: Aaron Burton

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# CASE STUDY #2



## RED EARED SLIDERS



Of the many species of turtles found across Ontario, there is only one that does not belong here. In zoology, when a species is introduced to a region that it is not naturally found, whether it escaped or was intentionally released, this species is said to be 'non-native'. This is the case of the Red Eared Slider turtle (RES) in Ontario, and even across Canada, for that matter (Canadian Wildlife Federation, 2020). It is currently inhabiting ponds, marshes, and wetland areas of southern

Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia (Canadian Wildlife Federation, 2020). This turtle is very distinctive due to the long red/orange bands that extend on both sides of their head behind their eyes. It is this visual feature that gave them their name. They are called 'sliders' due to their rapid response, going from basking on a log to slipping effortlessly back into the water (Grijalva, 2001). RES turtles have a slight ridge running down their back, and the lower side of their shells is usually cream-coloured with some dark patches (Canadian Wildlife Federation, 2020). The upper shell (carapace) can range from an olive green to various shades of brown, with an arrangement of yellow and black stripes (Toronto Zoo, 2018). The head and body of the turtles are also green or brown, with the same striped pattern (Toronto Zoo, 2018). They can grow to be up to 12 inches in length (Invasive Species Initiative, n.d.).



### WHERE SHOULD THEY BE?

Red eared sliders are naturally found in the wild. They originate in central and southern areas of the United States, spanning from West Virginia to areas of Indiana and Illinois, parts of

Georgia and Texas, as well as New Mexico (Toronto Zoo, 2018). They are also native to Mexico, Central America, and Brazil (Thompson Rivers University, 2020).



## THE RELEASE: WHEN AND WHERE

Starting in the early 1900s, red eared sliders were collected from the wild to be sold as pets (Invasive Species Initiative, n.d.). Pet owners see the cute little baby turtles in a tank at the store, and unknowingly, they commit to a long-term relationship. RES turtles can live for between 20 and 40 years (Thompson Rivers University, 2020). As lives change,

children get older, priorities are shuffled, and the now larger turtles are more work than they had originally expected. Blind to the consequences, and misguided that they are giving the turtles the best life: the pet owners released them into local ponds and creeks. By the 1950s, between five and ten million of these turtles were shipped around the world, enabling this situation to play out countless times across various states in America, a trio of Canadian provinces, as well as several Asian and African nations, plus Australia (Grijalva, 2001) (Canadian Wildlife Federation, 2020) (Invasive Species Initiative, n.d.). Furthermore, exotic pet enthusiasts have begun selectively breeding more visually appealing versions of the turtles. The most common variations are albino (a bright yellow skin and shell, with the classic red eyes), and pastel (the distinct yellow and black colours are either faded or enhanced) (Grijalva, 2001). Not surprisingly, genetic defects have been noticed in mainly the pastel variations, where the shells are asymmetrical and the eyes are unnatural sizes (Grijalva, 2001). In summary, the only reason for the existence of red eared sliders in wild Canadian wetlands is human negligence.

## INVASIVE IMPACTS

Red eared sliders have had a detrimental impact on Ontario's natural turtle species since their introduction. They compete for the same food sources and nesting locations, as well as basking and over-wintering areas (Toronto Zoo, 2018) as our native turtles. They do so aggressively, bullying our turtles off of prime locations, which can lead to delayed growth and development (Invasive Species Initiative, n.d.). RES turtles



Courtesy: <https://www.kijiji.ca/v-reptiles-amphibians/windsor-area-on/turtles-babies-now-in-stock/1363210805>

also increase the risk of introducing diseases that our native turtles are not able to overcome (Toronto Zoo, 2018). This means that native species like painted turtles and Blanding's turtles, which are similar in size, face the most devastating impacts on their populations. However, even the much larger snapping turtles are not immune to the red eared invasion. As a comparison, female snapping turtles are not ready to breed until at least 15 years of age and they only lay a single clutch of eggs each year.



Female RES turtles can breed at five years of age and lay as many as four batches of eggs annually (Grijalva, 2001) (Thompson Rivers University, 2020). Although egg predation happens to all turtles, nesting several times in a season is a great way to increase the population of a species that should not exist here. The abundance of this invasive species is a problem that must be controlled at all levels of government. Municipal by-laws must be made and enforced on the sale and release of the turtles, and the provincial and federal governments should undertake preventing their export. Ultimately, it begins with the consumers. Pet stores will not keep a stock if there is no demand.

## BE OUR TURTLES

Imagine this situation: you've lived in a small town for years. You have your routine places to buy food and supplies, and your home to relax in the evening and shelter from harsh winter weather. Now, a new neighbour moves next door. They're a similar build to you, eat the same food, and go to the same places in town. Unfortunately for you, they drive a flashy red sports car with a stellar stereo system. Your life will never be the same again. You never getting the good parking spots at the stores because the flashy red sports car always cuts in front of you. While shopping, the driver of the sports car moves your grocery cart out of their way so they can buy all of the best and freshest foods, leaving you with nearly expired bread and browning bananas every time. When you're at home, the booming sounds of music, so bad you didn't know that it even existed, and cheap cigar smoke, so pungent that it chokes you, both drift in through all of your windows from your new neighbour at seemingly all hours of the day. As the months pass, and winter arrives, you expect some peace and quiet. You were not expecting this neighbour to be religiously using their industrial strength snowblower and blowing the snow onto your driveway and against your windows. Keep in mind, this town has no police to help, you cannot afford to move, and you are a polite and levelheaded Canadian...unlike your red eared neighbour.

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**All photos are courtesy of DTW volunteers, unless otherwise stated.**