



# DOWN BY THE MARSH, PAINTED TURTLES HATCH

The Yak had some excellent adventures in reporting this special issue on Michigan's state symbols.

But his favorite was visiting the University of Michigan's Edwin S. George Reserve, near Pinckney, to watch a turtle researcher dig up four painted turtle hatchlings from their nest.

They looked like Milk Duds! Their tiny heads and legs were pulled inside their shells — and stayed that way for more than an hour until they warmed up. They had spent the winter huddled together like football players, with their shells

upright and their heads covered by several inches of soil.

"They can and do sometimes freeze," said Justin Congdon, director of a 49-year-old study on the preserve's three turtle species: painted, snapping and Blanding's.

Only the painted hatchlings spend the winter underground.

"If you get a temperature of minus 20 for four days with no snow on the ground, they die," said Congdon, an expert on how long turtles live and how they age.

"If there's snow on the ground, it insulates them."

It was early April and the temperature was near freezing. A light snow fell as Congdon gently scooped dirt from a small patch of earth that had been marked with sticks and a flag.

"If you don't see the female putting her eggs in the ground, you're not going to find them," he explained. "They put their eggs in the ground, cover them, walk away and that's it."

So for 45 days each year — from about May 15 to about July 4 — Congdon and as many students as he can recruit do little else but stalk female turtles from 6 a.m. to at least 10 p.m. — seven days a week.

"You get pretty tired watching females," Congdon said, laughing. He is absolutely devoted to his research and also studies turtles in Minnesota and Arizona.

In the 26 years he's been at George, half of the preserve's painted turtle nests have been destroyed by raccoons, skunks, moles and other predators.

"Some years, you don't have any survivors — at least none that we see," he said. "One year, we observed 154 nests and predators destroyed all of them. Another year, they'll do really well — 65 percent will survive."

Last year, Congdon and his assistants marked the location of 120 painted turtle nests. Only 11 were still intact last fall, and only seven had hatchlings when Congdon dug them up in April.

The surviving nests each netted three to 12 hatchlings, for a total of 52 new painted turtles. (George has about 1,500 painted turtles altogether, including a 57-year-old female that is still breeding and is the population's oldest member.)

Congdon digs up the hatchlings so he can tag them and take genetic samples, enabling him to identify them as well as their parents, grandparents and other relatives. Otherwise, they would emerge on their own once the temperature hits 70 degrees — and take off for the nearest body of water. He keeps them covered with moist towels in a barn until it's warm enough to safely release them outdoors.

On hot, sunny days, the water-loving reptiles can be seen basking in ponds and marshes all across Michigan.

"The painted turtle is the only turtle that's common anymore," said Jim Harding, a Michigan State University herpetologist, or scientist who studies reptiles and amphibians.



PHOTOS BY KATHY KIELISZEWSKI

**Turtle researcher Justin Congdon gently digs for turtles with a spoon. Will he find any? He never knows. Most hatchlings get eaten by predators that burrow into their nests.**



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**Painted turtles are often seen sunbathing on warm days. When it's chilly, they stay underwater. In Michigan, the females are usually about six inches long from the front to the back of their shell. But some in the Upper Peninsula grow up to nine inches long. Male painted turtles tend to be smaller than the females.**



**These four painted turtle hatchlings were photographed a half-hour after being dug up from their winter nest. They were still too cold to stick their heads out into the world.**

"It's kind of like the robin in that it's common throughout the central United States — from the Great Plains to the East Coast and down into Louisiana."

There's no way to estimate how many live in Michigan, but it's probably in the tens of thousands, said Harding.

"It's not yet an endangered species. If we keep building more roads and fragmenting habitat, the population will decline. But as far as wiping them out, I don't think we'll do that anytime soon."

By Patricia Chargot

**Bonus question:** How many turtle species are native to Michigan?

**Answer:** Nine or 10, depending on whether the red-eared slider is native, as some scientists believe, or was introduced in the 1950s, when thousands were imported for the pet turtle trade. (Or the species could be part native and part introduced.) The others are: Blanding's, snapping, musk, spotted, wood, eastern box, common map, painted and eastern spiny softshell. Only the spotted is officially threatened, but the wood, eastern box and Blanding's are of special concern and are also protected by state law. Never remove any turtle or other wild animal from its habitat.