

Threatened species Spotted Turtle outside our door



by Wildlife Care Specialist Jennifer L. Cipolletti

Recently we received a threatened species Spotted Turtle at our Wildlife Center. He was brought to us in early December 2009 by people who had him in captivity for a few months while being housed with their other turtles. They had received him from a friend who had taken him out of the wild because he was missing his left, rear leg. This person thought they were doing him a service by taking him out of his natural habitat and keeping him in captivity because of this apparent handicap. In fact, most turtles that are missing a leg do not appear hampered in any way by the lack of an appendage. Generally, missing limbs occur due to predator species such as snapping turtles, bald eagles, raccoons, skunks and muskrats attacking them in or out of the water, but the natural ability of a reptile to heal on its own is what allowed this particular turtle to survive and continue to thrive. It is however, illegal to take a Spotted Turtle from the wild due to their current status, regardless of good intentions.

Spotted Turtles are listed as an endangered species in Illinois and Indiana, and are listed as state threatened in Michigan and in our own state of Ohio. The distribution of the Spotted Turtle is mostly confined to just the Eastern Seaboard and the Great Lakes region. Within that area, in the Midwest, the Spotted Turtle is viewed as imperiled in all of the states in which it is found. The main cause of the significantly decreased number of Spotted Turtles in the wild is loss of habitat by human encroachment as well as the demand for the illegal pet trade. These turtles have been recorded to live over 30 years, and it is estimated that they can probably live up to 50 years in the wild! Because of their long lifespan it is extremely difficult to care for them in captivity as we do not have access to their natural environment and they do become very sick when taken out of the wild.

These attractive turtles are identified by the round, yellow spots on their smooth, black or brownish carapace; the upper part of the shell. Spots can fade as a turtle ages and some Spotted Turtles are actually born without spots. Males can be distinguished by their tan chins and brown eyes as well as a concave plastron, or bottom shell. The females have yellow chins and orange eyes as well as broader higher carapaces, and their plastron is flat or convex. Spotted Turtles are a relatively small turtle with spindly legs and only grow between 3.5 and 5.4 inches. The turtle that we received was about 4.5 inches long which is pretty big for a Spotted Turtle. It was a male and was guessed to be approximately 30-35 years old. His age was surmised based on the wear and tear of his shell, as well as the fading of his spots.



It is extremely important to note, that Spotted Turtles cannot be taken out of the wild because of their decreased number and their status as a threatened and endangered species, as well as it being illegal. In this case, the turtle that we received was taken out of the wild by a human and came to us very sick due to being taken out of his natural environment and being held in captivity for so long. He would not eat on his own, could not digest his food when force fed, and had a severe respiratory infection. After caring for him for over three weeks, the decision was made to humanely euthanize him as he was not showing any progress and it was more stressful on him to try to reverse the damage that humans had already caused.

Turtles have extremely long life spans in relation to other pets that people keep, and because of this, wild turtles are best left in their natural environment. They are not the kind of animal that you can just return to the wild once you feel as though you are done with them. The irreversible damage will have already been caused and if you return a sick turtle to the wild, it will inevitably die, and suffer in the meantime trying to find its way back to its original home. It is our responsibility to make sure that we do not make this mistake and to make sure that we inform others of the gravity of such an error as removing a wild animal from its natural environment. We cannot continue to attempt to fix these kinds of mistakes. More often than not it is too late as in the case of this 35 year old, threatened species Spotted Turtle. In the future, we hope that people will understand that it is often best to leave a wild animal alone and to let them live their lives in peace.