

EASTERN SPINY AND MIDLAND SMOOTH SOFTSHELL TURTLES

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Everyone knows a turtle when they see one — a hard, rounded shell, four clawed legs, and a beaked head. But have you ever seen a softshell turtle? Some have compared these bizarre turtles to pancakes with legs. Softshells have no scales, and their shells are flat, flexible, and rubbery. A softshell's face may be even stranger — a sharp beak is covered with fleshy lips and the nose is extended into a snorkel! Softshells in Ohio are essentially large river turtles and can be seen swimming or basking on warm sunny days.

- Ohio is home to two species of softshell turtles: the eastern spiny softshell and midland smooth softshell. Eastern spiny softshells are much more common and are distinguished by the stubby projections along the front of their shells just behind the head (also called spines). Midland smooth softshells lack these spines and are rare. At a distance, eastern spiny softshells have a green cast, while midland smooth softshells appear brown.
- Behavior is another distinguishing feature. Eastern spiny softshells are ferocious and are not afraid to bite when provoked. Midland smooth softshells are timid and almost never bite.
- Females of both species are more than twice as large as males. Eastern spiny softshells are among Ohio's largest turtle species, second only to the common snapping turtle.
- The eastern spiny softshell can be found in almost any permanent water body in Ohio and is tolerant to habitat alterations. The midland smooth softshell, on the other hand, is commonly found in clean, sandy stretches of the Scioto, Muskingum, Great Miami, and Little Miami rivers.
- Where both species occur together, midland smooth softshells are limited to the larger sections of major rivers with sandy substrate, while eastern spiny softshells are found in major and minor streams, as well as large ponds.
- The eastern spiny softshell remains abundant throughout Ohio, while populations of the midland smooth softshell have likely declined because of habitat loss from dams, channelization, dredging, and pollution.

To support softshell turtles and other Ohio species visit wildohio.gov to purchase a **OHIO WILDLIFE LEGACY STAMP**. Proceeds help support habitat restoration, land purchases, research, and more.



MIDLAND SMOOTH SOFTSHELL TURTLE
photo by RYAN WAGNER



EASTERN SPINY SOFTSHELL TURTLE
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