

Name: _____

Turtles, Tortoises, and Terrapins

by Sandie Lee

Are You a Turtle, a Tortoise, or a Terrapin?

For 215 million years, our shelled friends have lived with a mistaken identity. It's understandable. We think – if it has a shell, it must be a turtle...right? Not quite. There's actually around 300 different species of turtles, tortoises and terrapins. So what's the difference?

To Be or Not To Be a Terrapin

An easy way to tell a terrapin from a turtle is from its coloring. Terrapins have bright yellow and green patterns on their shells and bodies. These animals live in fresh or brackish (partly salted) water. They are commonly found in ponds and river beds where they will bask in the sun on rocks and logs. Their feet are designed both for swimming, with webbed toes and sharp claws for climbing. This small group includes the *Slider* and *Red-Eared Slider* which has jaunty red stripes along its face and is also commonly sold in stores. Do you know someone who keeps a terrapin as a pet?



This Red-Eared Slider is a terrapin.

Built Tortoise Tough

Like a sturdy truck, tortoises are built for the rugged terrain and live strictly on land. They have thick, stumpy legs and claws that help propel them forward and dig deep holes. The Gopher Tortoise is able to dig underground tunnels over 40 feet long and 10 feet deep.



This Galapagos Giant Tortoise lives only on land.

No meat is required in a tortoise's diet, they're purely vegetarians. But that doesn't stop the Galapagos Giant Tortoise from weighing in at well over 400 pounds. Plus its shell can get to be five feet long and 3 feet high. Pass me the broccoli!

Too Many Turtles

Turtles, turtles everywhere, some even in the sea. Sea turtles live exclusively in the ocean waters. The only time they come ashore is to lay their eggs on a sandy beach. Unlike terrapins, their front legs are more like flippers. This enables them to swim and dive in the water. The *Leatherback Turtle* is the biggest sea turtle. It measures 6 feet long and 4 feet wide. Its average weight is 880 pounds, with the biggest one weighing in at 2015 pounds. How can he get so big? This turtle's diet consists mainly of jellyfish.



Sea turtles have flippers for swimming.

Not all turtles have flippers and live in the sea. Turtles can also live in lakes and ponds as well. The *Stinkpot Turtle* prefers to crawl along the bottom of ponds and rivers. It gives off a powerful skunk-like odour when it feels danger is near. So don't try to pick this guy up or you'll be a stinkpot too!



Stinkpot Turtles crawl along the bottoms of ponds.

So the next time you see an animal that wears a shell, ask yourself...is this really a turtle?

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1. Where do terrapins live?



2. Which animal comes ashore only to lay eggs?

- a. Red-Eared Slider
- b. Galapagos Tortoise
- c. Stinkpot Turtle
- d. Leatherback Turtle

3. A terrapin's feet were designed for...

- a. only swimming
- b. only climbing
- c. swimming and climbing
- d. swimming and hopping

4. How does a Stinkpot Turtle protect itself from danger?

5. What does the word *brackish* mean?

6. What is the author's purpose for writing this article?

- a. to provide information about all different types of reptiles
- b. to describe the different places turtles, terrapins, and tortoises live
- c. to show how tortoises, turtles, and terrapins are alike and different

ANSWER KEY

Turtles, Tortoises, and Terrapins

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1. Where do terrapins live?

in ponds and river beds
(also accept: brackish water)

2. Which animal comes ashore only to lay eggs? **d**

- a. Red-Eared Slider
- c. Stinkpot Turtle

- b. Galapagos Tortoise
- d. Leatherback Turtle

3. A terrapin's feet were designed for... **c**

- a. only swimming
- c. swimming and climbing

- b. only climbing
- d. swimming and hopping

4. How does a Stinkpot Turtle protect itself from danger?

It gives off a skunk-like odor.

5. What does the word brackish mean?

partly salted water

6. What is the author's purpose for writing this article?

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