

Turtles and Lizards of Montana

Spiny Softshell
Apalone spinifera



Photo by Brian Tornabene

Snapping Turtle
Chelydra serpentina



Photo by MTNHP Staff

The sex of Snapping Turtles is determined by temperature of the nest during development

Painted Turtle
Chrysemys picta



Photo by Tom Bowler

Pond Slider
Trachemys scripta



Photo by Greg Schechter

Introduced Species

Northern Alligator Lizard
Elgaria coerulea



Photo by Joshua Covill

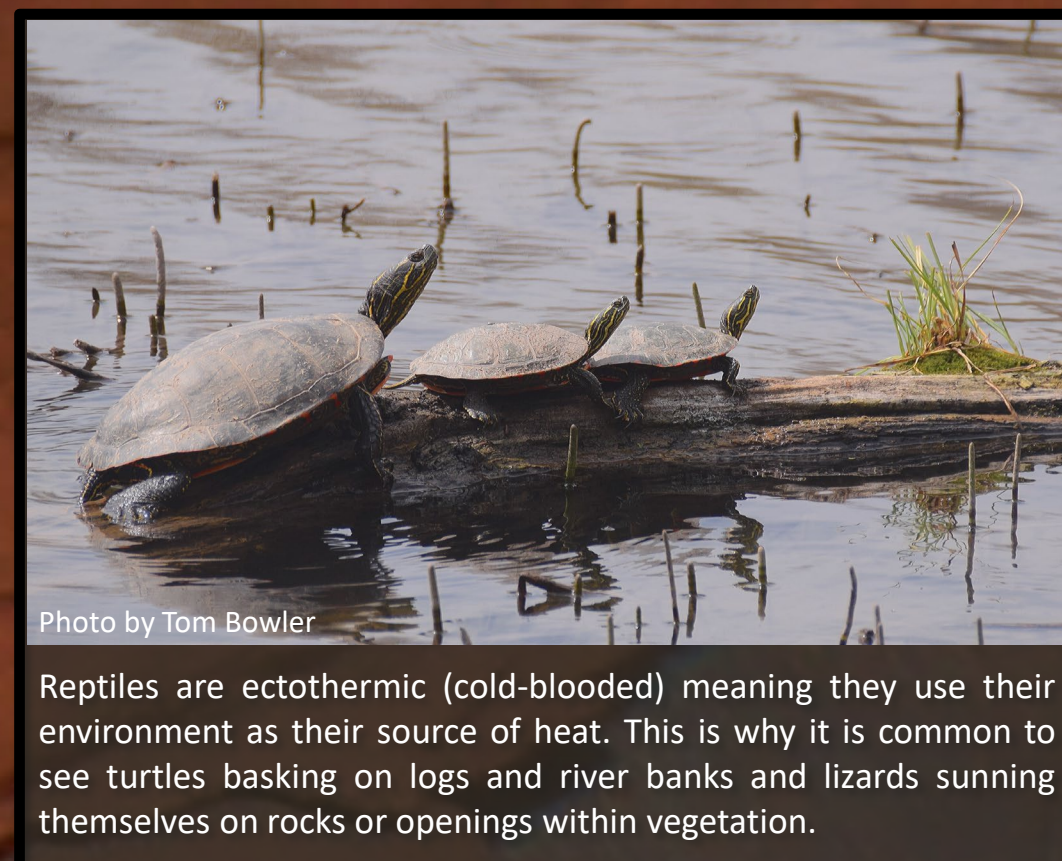


Photo by Tom Bowler

Reptiles are ectothermic (cold-blooded) meaning they use their environment as their source of heat. This is why it is common to see turtles basking on logs and river banks and lizards sunning themselves on rocks or openings within vegetation.

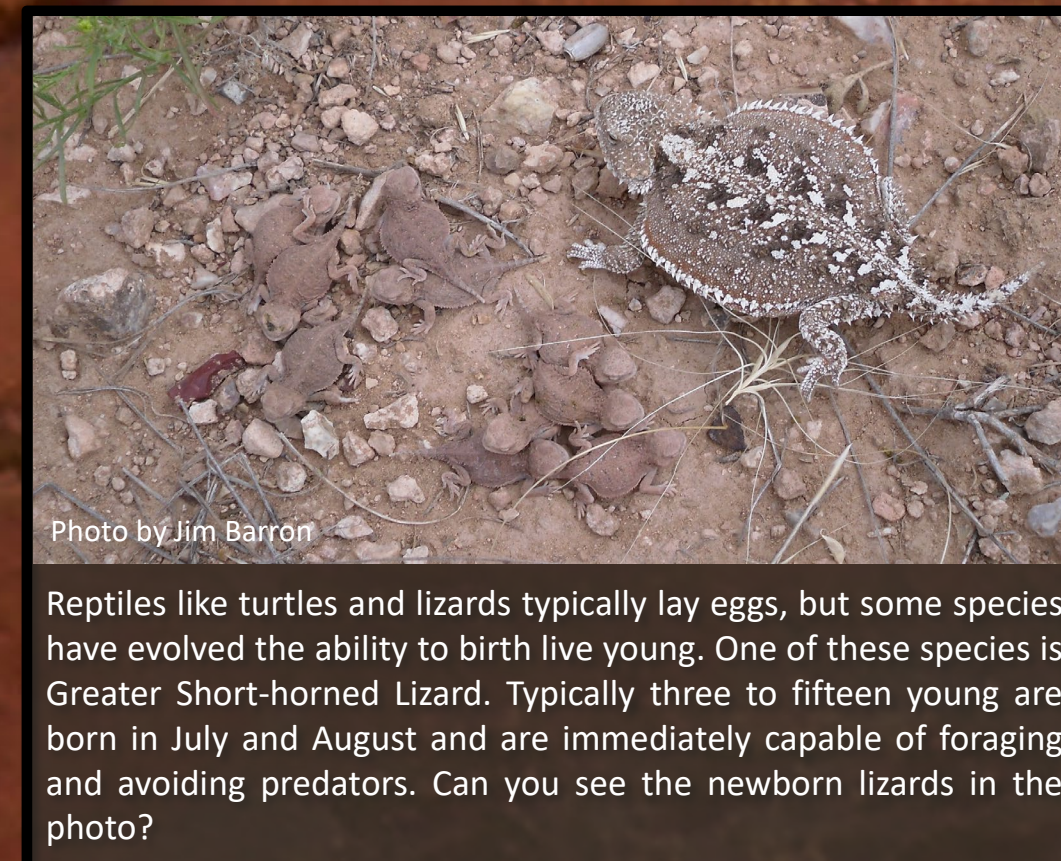


Photo by Jim Barron

Reptiles like turtles and lizards typically lay eggs, but some species have evolved the ability to birth live young. One of these species is Greater Short-horned Lizard. Typically three to fifteen young are born in July and August and are immediately capable of foraging and avoiding predators. Can you see the newborn lizards in the photo?

Western Fence Lizard
Sceloporus occidentalis



Photo by Daniel Casey

Introduced Species

Western Skink
Plestiodon skiltonianus



Photo by J. Maughn

The blue on the tail of the Western Skink is brightest on juvenile males and less pronounced on juvenile females, as animals age it fades to a grey-brown color.

Greater Short-horned Lizard
Phrynosoma hernandesi



Photo by Alexis McEwan

Pygmy Short-horned Lizard
Phrynosoma douglasii



Photo by Charles Peterson

Pygmy Short-horned Lizard is suspected to be present in southwestern Montana based on a single observation from August 1936

Common Sagebrush Lizard
Sceloporus graciosus



Photo by MTNHP Staff



Species Accounts

Native Range
 Non-native Range
 Historic Range

For more information on all of Montana's species visit

<https://fieldguide.mt.gov>

Have you observed one of these species?

We would like to hear about it! Observations can be submitted to iNaturalist:

<https://www.inaturalist.org/>

Nonnative/ Introduced Species

The introduction and establishment of nonnative species in Montana is cause for concern. These animals have the potential to not only impact native species by predation or competition for resources, but can also carry diseases into the state. Furthermore while release of pets into the wild may seem humane, most exotic species are not suited to surviving Montana's harsh winters.

If you observe any introduced species including the Pond Slider and Western Fence Lizard, we would like to know. Observations can be submitted to the Montana Natural Heritage Program:

<https://mtnhp.org/observations.asp>

Painted Turtle

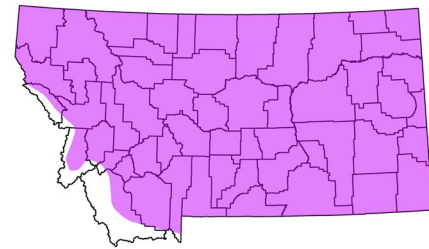
(*Chrysemys picta*)

Identification: This species can be separated from other native species by the bright yellow and orange markings on the underside of the shell and yellow markings on the legs. It can be separated from the non-native Pond Slider by this coloration and a more flattened shell and lack of a red "ear".

Status: Currently this species is common and is not a Species of Conservation Concern

Range: Found across almost all of Montana

Habitat: In Montana this species is found in all types of shallow freshwater habitat including the backwaters and slow moving portions of large rivers and creeks, ponds, and reservoirs.



Ecology: Animals become active as early as March and are active through September. Females mature at around 7 years of age. Mating occurs after emergence in the late spring or early summer. Eggs are deposited in nests up to 600 meters from water. Females may nest more than once in a season. This species forages on a diversity of aquatic organisms, primarily invertebrates and fish, but will also consume vegetation and other prey if available.

Common Sagebrush Lizard

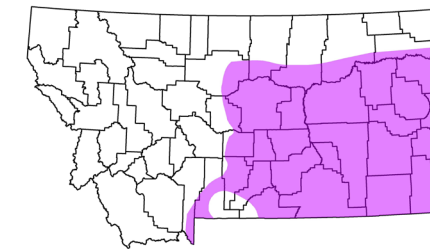
(*Sceloporus graciosus*)

Identification: Sagebrush lizards are our only native species found east of the Continental Divide that lack a flattened body and a fringe of prominent spines characteristic of the Greater Short-horned Lizard.

Status: Currently this species is not a Species of Conservation Concern

Range: Found within xeric areas south and east of the Missouri and Madison River drainages.

Habitat: Found in association with rock outcrops having good solar exposure and in open forest and shrubland where suitable cover and basking areas are found.



Ecology: Sagebrush Lizards emerge from overwintering as early as April and are active through September. Breeding occurs in the late spring or early summer. Females reach maturity in their first or second year, and produce clutches of 1-8 eggs. In Colorado and Utah up to two clutches are produced each year. The diet of this species is primarily terrestrial invertebrates including insects and arthropods. Animals primarily hunt by ambushing prey.

Snapping Turtle

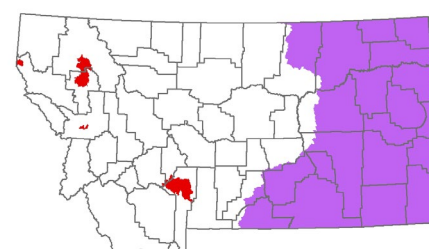
(*Chelydra serpentina*)

Identification: Snapping Turtles are large robust animals and are easily distinguished from other turtle species by their long tail and sawtoothed-shaped projections on the top of the shell

Status: Within its native range this species is a Montana Species of Conservation Concern.

Range: Native range is the eastern 1/3 of the state. Introduced populations established near Kalispell, Bozeman, and near the Idaho border; also observations near Butte and Missoula.

Habitat: In Montana this species is found in all types of shallow freshwater habitat including the backwaters of large rivers, creeks, ponds, and reservoirs in the eastern prairies and woodlands.



Ecology: Snapping turtles are active between April and September in Montana. Mating occurs in the late spring and early summer. This species is slow to mature, females average close to two decades from birth to first nesting attempt. Females deposit their eggs in a nest in open areas away from the water. Young hatch and emerge in the late summer. Animals overwinter on the bottoms of permanent waterbodies, under banks, or in muskrat or beaver dens. Snapping turtles are generalists, foraging on a diversity of vertebrates, invertebrates, and vegetation.

Greater Short-horned Lizard

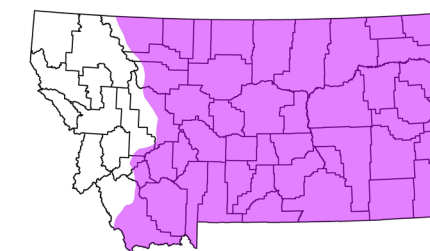
(*Phrynosoma hernandesi*)

Identification: Greater Short-horned lizard has a characteristic flattened appearance and a row of spines outlining each side of the body. Noticeably less slender and spinier in appearance than the state's other lizard species.

Status: Currently this species is a Species of Conservation Concern

Range: Found within xeric areas east of the Continental Divide except the Big Hole Valley.

Habitat: Found in association with south facing rock outcrops, bluffs, sandy areas, and in open shrubland and grasslands.



Ecology: In Montana Greater Short-horned Lizards are active from May to September. Mating occurs in the spring. Young are born later that summer. Females are mature at two years of age and litter size from surrounding areas is typically between 3 and 15 but up to 36 young have been reported. Short-horned lizards primarily feed on insects, especially ants. Animals are largely sedentary and rarely travel more than a few meters each day.

Northern Alligator Lizard

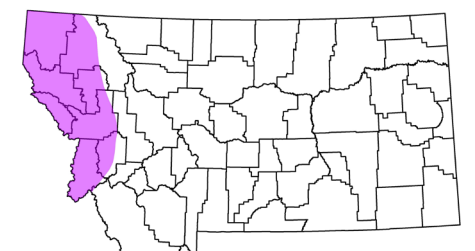
(*Elgaria coerulea*)

Identification: Northern Alligator Lizard is found in western Montana. It can be distinguished from Western Skink and Western Fence Lizard by the elongated body and presence of a lateral fold of skin on each side of the body.

Status: Currently this species is a Species of Conservation Concern

Range: West of the Continental Divide

Habitat: South facing rock outcrops and roadcuts within or adjacent to forested areas and within forested areas with sufficient cover such as woody debris, rocks, and duff.



Ecology: In Montana the species is active between April and October. Breeding occurs in spring. In the Pacific Northwest, females become mature in their third year. Gestation is approximately 3 months and any young are born at the end of the summer or early fall. The species primarily feeds on arthropods, but also eats slugs and worms.

Spiny Softshell

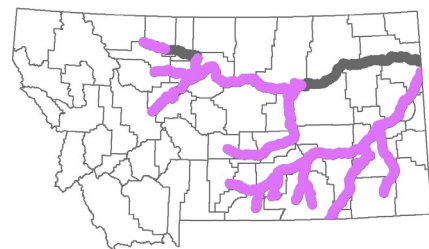
(*Apalone spinifera*)

Identification: The Spiny Softshell differs from other Montana turtles by having a flattened and leathery shell that is soft and lacks horny plates, and a pointed snout with tubular nostrils.

Status: Currently this species is a Montana Species of Conservation Concern

Range: Missouri River drainage above Fort Peck Reservoir to Great Falls. Maybe introduced above Great Falls. Believed to be extirpated from the Missouri River below Fort Peck in Montana. Musselshell River to Harlowton. Yellowstone River drainage upstream to Big Timber.

Habitat: In Montana this species occupies prairie rivers and tributaries. Animals are often observed basking on partially submerged logs and sandy or muddy riverbanks.



Ecology: Animals are active from May to September in Montana. Breeding occurs soon after emergence from overwintering sites. Females then nest in sandy or gravelly areas adjacent to rivers. The eggs hatch in 2-3 months. While active animals forage on a broad range of aquatic prey including invertebrates like crayfish and insects, and fish; will also scavenge carrion and eat vegetation. Individuals burrow into soft substrates of permanent waterbodies to overwinter and remain under water for up to 8 months.

Pygmy Short-horned Lizard

(*Phrynosoma douglasii*)

Identification: Pygmy Short-horned Lizard is similar in appearance to the Greater Short-horned Lizard, but is smaller in size with small horns on the back of the head projecting almost vertically rather than horizontally. It has only been observed once in southwest Montana.

Status: Currently this species is a Potential Species of Conservation Concern

Range: Unknown. Species has only been detected one time in the Centennial Valley in 1936.



Habitat: Pygmy Short-horned Lizards can tolerate relatively cold climates which allows them to use higher elevations. The species is found in open shrublands and grasslands and woodlands with friable soils and good solar exposure. Habitat used in Montana has not been documented.

Ecology: The ecology of this species in Montana is unknown. Elsewhere the species is active during the spring, summer, and fall. Diet is primarily ants and other insects.

Western Skink

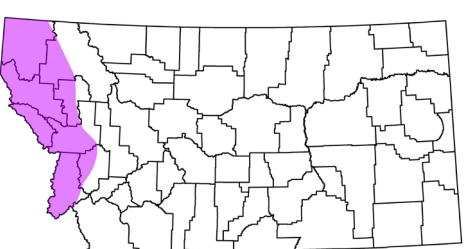
(*Plestiodon skiltonianus*)

Identification: Western Skink can be distinguished from other Montana species by its contrasting dark and light lateral stripes. Young animals may have a blue tail which is more brightly colored in males.

Status: Currently this species is a Species of Conservation Concern

Range: West of the Continental Divide

Habitat: Habitat associations are uncertain in Montana due to relatively few observations of the species. The species has been documented in open Ponderosa Pine woodland and grasslands and is sometimes associated with rock outcrops including talus.



Ecology: Western Skink are generally active between April and October. Breeding occurs in spring or early summer. In Utah females lay 2-5 eggs, which hatch in 40-60 days. Both sexes are thought to reach maturity in their second year. Both adults and juveniles actively hunt by stalking prey. Diet is comprised of arthropods including insects, spiders, centipedes and sow bugs.