Stinkpots, or musk turtles, don't leave the water very often

Did you know that there is a turtle called a stinkpot? The real name of this reptile is the musk turtle and it has the ability to produce an unpleasant scent as a defense mechanism. The odorous, yellowish, musky fluid is created from two pairs of glands under the shell. Even though it has a large smell, the turtle is quite small, usually measuring from about three to five and a half inches in length. These tiny creatures are native to Florida and have some interesting attributes.

The carapace, or shell, of the musk turtle is highly domed and appears somewhat oblong. The bottom shell, which is called a plastron, is hinged allowing the turtle to hide inside. When it is not in its shell, it is easy to identify by its pointy nose, sharp beak, large triangular shaped head, dark colored shell and yellow lines that are located above and below the eyes. These lines fade and may completely disappear with age. Musk turtles have long necks and short legs.

Musk turtles don't leave the water very often. Their tiny little tongues are covered in nipple like structures called papillae, which allow them to breathe underwater. They enjoy shallow, slow moving, heavily vegetated waters with muddy bottoms such as ponds, lakes, streams, creeks and swamps. About the only time they journey onto land is when the female is ready to lay her eggs. They will bask, but usually it is in shallow water with only the top of the shell exposed to the sun. At times, they will find a log and bask with other turtles. They can climb and have been found on limbs at heights of over six feet above the water. Sometimes a passing boat may get a surprise when a musk turtle drops from the high hanging branch into the vessel!

Common musk turtles are nocturnal creatures and do most of their hunting at night. During the day, they are generally inactive and remain buried in the mud at the bottom of the water body. They feed mostly on small aquatic insects, algae and carrion when they are small. However, once they get a bit bigger, they will eat just about anything that moves including minnows, crabs, snails, leeches, worms, fish eggs, tadpoles, frogs, algae, plants, clams and crayfish.

Breeding generally takes place in the spring and females lay from two to nine oval, hard-shelled eggs. They may share a nest with other musk turtles, which may be located in a shallow burrow, under debris, or on open ground. These turtles will dig a nest if needed; they use their hind limbs to dig about four inches deep and then deposit the eggs. Incubation is usually from 65 to 86 days. The eggs hatch in the late summer or early fall and a large percentage of the newborns will not survive. The hatchlings are less than one inch long and predators are always on the prowl for these tasty morsels. Those fortunate enough to survive through the early years, may live a very long life. In fact, specimens in captivity have been recorded to live over 50 years.

Where temperatures are colder, the musk turtle will hibernate for the winter. It finds a cozy place at the bottom of a pond, lake or stream and burrows in for the duration.

Although common musk turtles are not on any endangered status in the United States, their populations have declined noticeably over the years. When wetlands are destroyed or degraded, this turtle may suffer even more than other species due to its dependence on the water and mud. In Iowa it is

considered a threatened species and Canada has deemed it a species at risk. Ontario protects the musk turtle under the endangered species act. Most of the disappearance of the species is credited to habitat degradation or destruction; however, some females have been killed by vehicles while searching for a nest site.

Musk turtle facts: (Department of Energy and Environmental Protection)

- The barbels on this turtle's chin and throat are sensory organs which allow the turtle to feel for prey resting on the bottom of the water body.
- Musk turtles are often found walking along the bottom of a water body rather than swimming.
- They camouflage themselves by burrowing slightly into the muck.
- The algae frequently found growing on their shells help the animals blend in among the plants and similar-looking algae-covered stones.
- Several characteristics can be used to distinguish males from females: 1) males have patches of rough scales on the inside of the hind legs that are used to grasp the female's carapace during mating; 2) more skin is in between the seams of the scutes on the male's plastron; 3) the tails of males are longer, thicker, and equipped with a spike at the tip; and 4) males have larger heads than females.
- The musk turtle's feet are heavily webbed and clawed.