



California Wildlife Center

Patient of the Week

March 22, 2024

Western Pond Turtle

In late 2023, the US Fish and Wildlife Service suggested that the Western Pond Turtle (WPT) be listed as Threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). As such, this species would have special protection that would help preserve the dwindling numbers of these native reptiles.

We do not receive many WPTs each year—though we did get one on March 17th. A finder brought them to us after the turtle had been hit by a car in Thousand Oaks. This is just the 11th WPT in care since 2013. While males and females are largely identical, the concave shell of the underside (plastron) indicate that this patient is a male.

Upon arrival his top shell (carapace) was very badly cracked. Turtles' shells are their skeletons, and his entire lower carapace was cracked, making him vulnerable to infection, further shell damage and death. It is also likely extremely painful for the WPT—much as having every bone broken from your waist down might be. He also has a broken claw and has lost some scales.

RVT and Senior Wildlife Technician Brittany Moser quickly went into action and gave the turtle subcutaneous fluids, pain medication and antibiotics. She flushed and cleaned the wounds then placed waterproof bandages (see photo) to stabilize the carapace before applying another layer of waterproof dressings to hold the bandages in place and protect the turtle. This fast response helped to keep the turtle as safe and comfortable as possible.

Caring for the turtle will likely be a lengthy process, as complete healing of the carapace may take as long as six months. During this time, he will need to be dry docked but his enclosure is kept humid without exposing his injury to water. Staff is regularly misting paper towels with distilled water and using evaporating pools that are raised above his head to keep him comfortable. Unfortunately, due to the extent of his injuries, he will need to stay in a small space as he heals.

Western Pond Turtles can be found near bodies of fresh water including streams, rivers, ponds, and marshes. They also navigate on land. They are omnivorous and will eat snails, fish, algae, and plant roots. They cannot swallow air and must eat under water.

As it takes 10-15 years until WPTs are sexually mature, each individual is crucial for the species' survival. They face a variety of threats. Habitat encroachment and human interference in the form of dams that change traditional waterways combine with disease to create difficult challenges to the species. Another problem are invasive species such as the Red-eared Slider, a common sight in Southern California. These introduced animals compete for food and habitat and have displaced the native WPT. If you have a pet turtle, do not simply release them into the wild. Instead, rehome the turtle or take it to a shelter where they may be adopted.



Injuries to the WPT were extensive



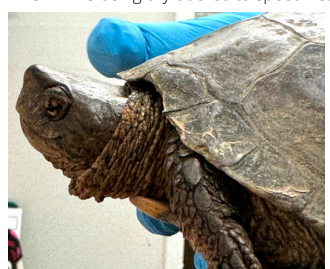
Radiograph of WPT



Initial bandages to stabilize the shell fracture



The WPT is being dry docked to speed healing



Closeup of WPT