

Basking on a Log

by Sandy Goldman

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Saturday, April 9, was a sunny day at Lake Lagunitas and several western pond turtles (*Emys marmorata*) could be seen basking on logs near the dam. Western pond turtles are usually brown or olive, without dramatic markings. These are the only turtles native to the Pacific Coast, where they range from Washington to Baja California. Like many native wildlife species, their populations are declining.

In our watershed, they must compete with more aggressive non-native turtles for food and basking sites. To make their prospects worse, hatchlings are eaten by other introduced wildlife, like bullfrogs and largemouth bass. Wading birds also like hatchlings. Skunks and raccoons, well adapted to suburbia, are among the natural predators of adults, hatchlings, and nests, while encounters with people and their dogs are stressful to turtles. It's not surprising that western pond turtles are struggling.



Western pond turtles bask on a redwood log boom at Lake Lagunitas. Photo by Hans Roenau

Because turtles can live upwards of 40 years and often get quite large, those kept as pets, usually non-native species, often outgrow their welcome and are thoughtlessly released into the wild. In Marin County, red-eared sliders (*Trachemys scripta elegans*) from the lower Mississippi River Valley and the Gulf Coast, are the most common pet turtles. They are found in all of MMWD's reservoirs, but are most abundant in the dumping grounds of Phoenix Lake (which gets many visitors and is close to urbanized eastern Marin) and Alpine Lake (with its adjacent road).

Eric Ettlinger, MMWD's Aquatic Ecologist, met with a group of us at Lake Lagunitas to introduce us to western pond turtles and explain what MMWD is doing to help them. He also brought along a redeared slider with its distinctive splash of red down each side of its head. Last year, MMWD trapped 66 red-eared sliders from Phoenix Lake and an additional 13 from Alpine Lake and, working with a turtle rescue group, found human(e) foster homes for them. During the trapping program, Eric found nine western pond turtles at Phoenix Lake, where they now have a better chance of flourishing with less competition from introduced turtles.

Western pond turtles are omnivores. Hatchlings need a diet rich in protein to grow rapidly, and adults eat more vegetation. Relatively stable water levels that encourage lakeside vegetation are good for turtles. Turtles bask while they are digesting recent meals, and they need the sun for vitamin D to keep their shells healthy. They prefer to bask on floating logs or mats of vegetation, to be, in effect, protected from predation by a moat. MMWD has wrapped wire around some of the smooth plastic booms near the dam at Phoenix Lake to enable turtles to climb onto the booms and bask in safety. MMWD has even placed three decoy turtles on the boom to encourage turtles to investigate the wrapped boom and start basking there. Booms at Lake Lagunitas are made of redwood logs, and turtles have no difficulty climbing them.

Western pond turtles nest up to several hundred feet from shore, where females lay eggs on dry, shelter from extremes of temperature in both winter and summer in upland areas. MMWD's program to remove non-native vegetation benefits western pond turtles by improving natural habitat for them.

Next time you take a walk at Phoenix Lake or Lake Lagunitas, look for western pond turtles and admire these long-lived animals. Please, never release a domestic animal into the wild; either the pet will meet a quick and nasty end or will survive to put pressure on native wildlife. This is one place where keeping natives and exotics separate but equal is the best policy.

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