



How to Tell a Turtle from a Tortoise

By Liz Langley



Turtle or tortoise?

Sheila Madrak, a San Diego-based wildlife biologist who specializes in sea turtles, has a simple answer. “All of them are turtles”, she says. Okay, there’s more to the story but that part is true. “Turtle” is the umbrella term for all 200 species of the testudine group, which includes turtles, tortoises, and terrapins. All turtles have two distinct features: A shell to which their ribs and vertebrae are fused, and a pelvic girdle that sits inside their rib cage. This “compressed anatomical structure,” says Madrak, is what gives turtles their signature lumbering walk.

Turtles can be aquatic, semi-aquatic, or mostly terrestrial. Tortoises are turtles that live on land and aren't equipped for water. One easy way to tell a tortoise from a turtle is to look at its feet, which are “designed for trucking around on land,” says Madrak. Or even underneath it, since some tortoises are burrowers, like the gopher tortoises of the southeastern United States. “They look like tiny elephant feet,” whereas semi-aquatic and aquatic turtle feet are webbed. Only sea turtles have true flippers. Most turtles have streamlined shells but there are some exceptions. Box turtles, for example, have a domed shell, as do Sonoran mud turtles and all tortoises. All turtles also have a gular scute, an extension of the lower shell that sticks out under the chin. Gular scutes are more pronounced in males, who use them as weapons to flip an opponent over in a fight, Madrak says.

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Length

SHORT

ACADEMIC DIVISION:

Side-necks and terrapins

For some extra complication, there are two suborders of turtle whose classifications are based entirely on how they move their necks. Cryptodira, which includes the desert mud turtle, can pull their heads straight back inside their shells, but Pleurodira, or side-necked turtles, like South America's Mata Mata, cannot. They turn their heads to the side and hide them under the rim of their shells for protection. And finally, there's the terrapin, which is a turtle but not a tortoise.

Vocabulary:

How to Tell a Turtle from a Tortoise

Shell: caparazón

Fused: fusionados

Lumbering: torpe

Burrowers: madrigueras

Gular scutes: escamas gulares