

Wildlife experts see increase in abandoned pet turtles

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Dead turtles are often found among the black willows, sunflowers and dried grass in Torrance's Madrona Marsh Preserve.

The reptiles are picked off by raccoons or they dehydrate after their former owners - who learn that the long-living, semi-aquatic animals are needy pets - abandon them there.

Tracy Drake, the preserve's manager, is usually the one to find them, either dead or sickly and wandering in search of shade and water.

"In the last couple of weeks I've found three dead ones," Drake said. "We have people that go up to the gate at night and push them through."

Nearly all the turtles Drake encounters are red-eared sliders, which are the most commonly traded turtles and also the most often

abandoned.

Rescuers found 50 red-eared slider turtles when they drained the Wilson Park pond in Torrance two years ago.

In an effort to quell the spread of salmonella to children, federal law has prohibited the sale of any turtle under 4 inches since 1975. But authorities say that hasn't slowed black-market sales of the ever-popular red-eared sliders.

In California, where the U.S. Geological Survey declares them a "clearly invasive" species, the turtles have long been a popular pet sale - and a thorn in the side of authorities and animal rights advocates.

Typically bought when miniature size, the animals are routinely abandoned when they start to reach even half of their full-size capacity of 12 to 13

inches, authorities say.

When a Los Angeles County sheriff's task force followed a tip about illegal fireworks in San Pedro on the Fourth of July, deputies unexpectedly found a stash of 10,000 live baby turtles.

"There were about 500 turtles in each box - and they literally exploded out of the boxes," said Linda Crawford, the adoption chairwoman of the California Turtle and Tortoise Club's Foothill chapter.

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Along with other members, Crawford took in thousands of the "filthy" and sick animals - red-eared slider turtles reportedly smuggled cross-country from their native Louisiana. Despite antibiotics, more than half died. The rest were adopted out, Crawford said.

Sharon Paquette, president of the Orange County chapter of the CTTC, cared for about 4,000 of the babies until they found a home for them in Texas.

She urged people to resist the temptation to buy the turtles at flea markets or in Chinatown because it only encourages the sellers to acquire more of them.

"There are 268 farms in Louisiana that farm red-eared sliders for the pet and food trade," Paquette said. "People buy them, take them home and then dump them when they get to 4 to 5 inches."

The turtles are web-footed and named for the red marks around their ears. They can live to be 50 years old and need access to a pond to be comfortable, Paquette said.

In addition to settling in urban ponds, the turtles are showing up in natural waterways and habitats, where they pose a threat to the western pond turtle, California's one native species.

For the local turtle population, this is bad news,

says Tim Hovey, an assistant fisheries biologist with the California Department of Fish and Game.

"We do see a lot of people buying them as pets, getting tired of them and just releasing them into the wild - and that is illegal."

Hovey says the red-eared sliders are "so aggressive" in food and reproductive strategies that they overpopulate and overwhelm the western pond turtles.

Drake and others who see the negative effects of the red-eared sliders' popularity as pets regularly see heartbreaking situations.

Drake and other Madrona March preserve employees and volunteers recently nursed two adult red-eared sliders back to health. But they haven't been able to save a Hawaiian soft-shell turtle who was abandoned there and is near death.

"The animal trade business is a little scary and we see the dark side of it here," Drake said. "They have their lives and personalities. When they get abandoned, I don't know if they think like we do but they know they've been abandoned."

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