



PHOTOS BY WADE VANDERVOORT

Red-eared slider turtles, a non-indigenous species in Southern Nevada, bask in the sun near a pond at Craig Ranch Regional Park in North Las Vegas. These turtles have proliferated at the park because their main natural predators, such as raccoons, aren't present in large numbers in the area. The turtles are thought to mostly be abandoned pets that have thrived at the park.

NORTH LAS VEGAS

These turtles aren't native to Nevada, but they're thriving at Craig Ranch Regional Park

By HILLARY DAVIS
This story was posted on lasvegassun.com at 2a.m. today.

The turtles are easily spotted at the Craig Ranch Regional Park ponds in North Las Vegas.

On these warm late-spring days, enough convex shells poke from the water to make the ponds look like colossal bowls of sentient cereal puffs.

How many turtles — predominantly red-eared sliders, from a quick visual check — are gliding and basking around at one of the valley's largest parks is unclear, but attentive regulars might think there are more than usual even for this prolific native species.

Cass Palmer, director of the North Las Vegas parks system, said his department kept a loose eye on the urban wildlife in the city's parks, but neither the parks nor animal control departments have surveyed or actively managed the resident critters. Neither does the Nevada Department of Wildlife, an agency spokeswoman said, because the turtles are domestic animals — displaced pets or their progeny.

Turtles aren't supposed to be in the wild in North Las Vegas by nature or design. Red-eared sliders in particular are indigenous to the humid subtropics of the southeastern United States, where they dwell in warm, calm water. The roughly 750,000 gallons of water features at Craig Ranch, which also draw flocks of



The turtles at Craig Ranch Regional Park eat algae and other plant matter, along with insects and larvae. They also eat food that visitors bring for ducks and geese, although those feedings are prohibited by city ordinance and are not good for the animals.

Canada geese and mallards, are human-made irrigation ponds, but those are good enough for the resilient, tough-as-keratin turtle.

"We do not stock the pond," Palmer said. "They're all either native (born) and find their way there — or predominantly people release their pets in the pond."

With their alert expressions, striking markings, and long necks and cocked

heads cutting a classic profile, red-eared sliders are the most commonly traded turtles in the world.

But even turned loose by their keepers, the animals are clearly thriving, said Nevada State College biology professor Kayla Bieser, a herpetologist by specialty who has done extensive research on red-

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WADE VANDERVORT

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TURTLES FIND PARK'S PONDS MAKE FOR HOSPITABLE HOME

eared sliders.

Red-eared sliders are hardy, opportunistic omnivores and have few natural predators here. Females lay up to 20 eggs at a time, three to four times a season. (Raccoons may dig up nests, but raccoons are uncommon in the Las Vegas Valley.) And they don't require pristine environments — a hallmark of an invasive species, as red-eared sliders are considered in Nevada and worldwide.

Result: lots of turtles in the desert — a whole lot.

"I was surprised, too," said Bieser, whose doctoral research focused on environmental influences on sex determination in turtles. "And then I was like, well, there's water, there's food, there's warmth. That's all these guys need."

Turtles will eat algae and other plant matter, along with insects and larvae, plus whatever food people bring for the ducks and geese, although they shouldn't. And as turtles aren't a solitary animal, a large bale suits them fine. Bieser said she knows of no situation where there have been too many red-eared sliders for a population to thrive.

A conscientious pet owner will keep them in a large tank with a UV heat lamp and basking rocks and keep up with their varied diet and copious excrement. A large specimen can be up to about 10 inches long and weigh 7 pounds, and they can live 20 years or more in captivity.

Apparently, a turtle owner who can't make the commitment might just turn the animal loose in a park pond.

The Department of Wildlife lists red-eared sliders (scientific name *Trachemys scripta elegans*) in its Nevada Aquatic Invasive Species Management Plan as a species of greater concern but with possible control options available and limited geographic distribution. The concern could be more for how the red-eared sliders could compete with Nevada's one indigenous species of turtle, the Western pond turtle, which is found in the natural waterways of the Reno/Carson City area. At worst, the red-eared snappers are a nuisance in Southern Nevada, and people might not rate them that, Bieser said.

If food runs low or disease takes hold, that could regulate the population. People can introduce them to the environment, but they are not easily taken out.

"Ultimately, unless you're going to stop the source from being put in, like stop people from continuing to release turtles, most of those mitigation measures haven't really been successful anyway," Bieser said. "It's just a matter of the turtles basically creating their own carrying capacity."

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