

# Black River Black River Turtle

Tortuga negra (Spanish)

*Rhinoclemmys funerea*

Class: Reptilia  
Order: Testudines  
Family: Geomydidae  
Genus: Rhinoclemmys

## **Distribution**

This species is also known as the black wood turtle. It is a Central American freshwater turtle.

## **Habitat**

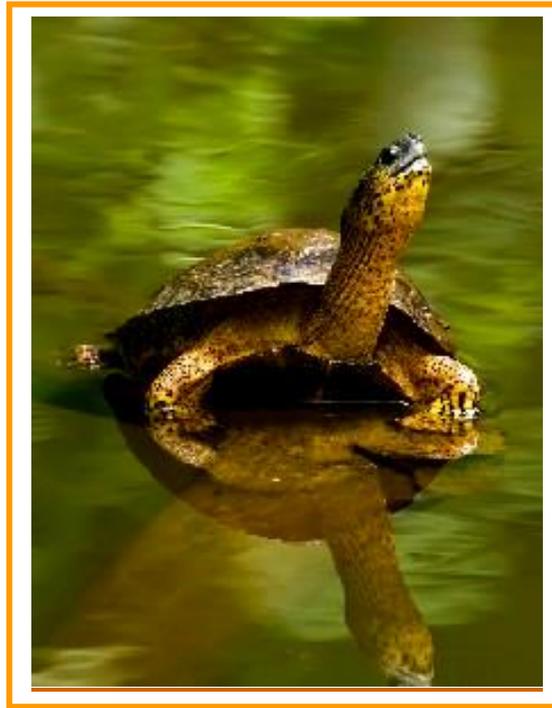
They are commonly found in or around marshes, ponds, swamps, and slow moving rivers in forested areas.

## **Food**

This group of turtles are omnivorous.

## **Reproduction**

Courtship in freshwater turtles includes a number of behaviours, which usually involve visual, tactile, olfactory, and auditory signals. These signals function in both species and sex recognition, and in the selection of potential mates.



They occur near the Coco River in southern Honduras and northern Nicaragua continuing south down through Costa Rica into Panama. In Costa Rica they are found in the waterways of the Caribbean lowlands.

Although a predominantly aquatic turtle they do enjoy basking during the day. To do so they use protruding areas above the water line. This makes them somewhat terrestrial but they are never far from water.

They feed on a variety of vegetation including flowers, fruits and grasses. They also consume small fish, insects and worms.

Environmental conditions play an important role in courtship and subsequent mating. Rain is an important trigger for this humidity loving species. Males are quite ardent in their pursuit of females. There are various precopulatory caresses and rituals, conducted, more so by him than her. Males may bob their heads, nip at the females and frequently lock themselves into position on the female's back. These specific behavioural sequences are required to facilitate successful copulation. Breeding takes place in water. All turtles lay eggs and all eggs are laid on land. She selects a suitable site and digs a nest using her hind legs. Her cloaca is extended to lay the eggs in the nest which she then covers over. In this genus clutch size is small with each egg large in comparison to the size of the turtle.

### Development

There is no parental care provided for hatchlings. They have to fend for themselves

### Characteristics

As its name implies, it is a darkly coloured river turtle. Though the carapace is basically black it can sometimes be on the more brownish side of black, especially when young. Its limbs are speckled with a lighter colour. The dark head and arms may have yellow to orange highlights or stripes. Being mainly an aquatic turtle the toes are webbed.

### Adaptations

It feeds both on land and in water. The diet is very diverse and as a result this turtle can always find food. Turtles have rigid beaks, and use their jaws to cut and chew food. Instead of having teeth, the upper and lower jaws of the turtle are covered by horny ridges.

### Status/Threats

IUCN: Near Threatened

The principal factors determining the decline of many freshwater chelonian populations are the loss of habitats that result from anthropogenic impacts, and the over-exploitation.

### Sightings at Cano Palma

These are a regular feature in the waterways surrounding the station and are seen on a regular basis around the boat dock.



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While in the egg baby turtles develop an egg-caruncle or tooth which they use to rupture the egg shell when hatching out. It is located on the upper jaw and falls off within a few days. They are immediately active, exiting the egg shell and nest very quickly. In appearance they are more clearly and brightly coloured than the adults.

They are the largest of the wood turtles, though only marginally larger than spot-legged wood Turtles *R. punctularia*. An adult may reach up to 35 cm in length. The brown or black high-domed back is very striking looking. Underneath, the plastron is black with yellow markings (seams). A second species *R. annulata* found in the same area looks very similar to juvenile *R. funerea*. They can be identified by the plastron markings.

This is a very wary turtle. If startled on land it will speedily retreat to water where it will dive below the surface to relative safety. The cryptic colour of young turtles and the dark colour of adult shells provide fairly good camouflage. Turtles have a degree of protection from their carapace and plastron which is fused together at the sides. At least one species of *Rhinoclemmys* lays eggs above ground in low bushes or bamboo, wedged between branches. An adaptation to areas of flood.

Crocodylians are major predators on juveniles and occasionally eat adults. Raptors and vultures prey on eggs. Humans have a major impact on black river turtles and many other species of turtles. They are over hunted as food items, both as eggs and adults. A great threat to this species is being struck by motor boats. This is a common occurrence causing injury or death.



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