

WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

Cooters and Sliders

No matter what body of water you visit in Florida — rivers, ponds, lakes, canals, cypress swamps, springs, and marshes — there's a very good chance you'll see a turtle. Counting the huge sea turtles that lumber onto our beaches to lay eggs in summer, there are 27 different species of turtles in Florida. In our region of the state, 2 of these stand out above all the others as the turtles that we see basking on logs in aquatic habitats — the Florida Red-bellied Slider and the Peninsula Cooter.

These 2 turtles are about the same size and shape, with thick shells measuring about a foot

in length (the cooter's shell sometimes reaches 15 inches). They also both have numerous stripes on their legs, heads, and necks. And when approached too closely by foot or in a canoe or kayak, these turtles "slide" quickly into the water from their basking logs. I've seen as many as 50 of both species basking together on the same logs along the St. John's and Silver Rivers.

In most cases, the 2 turtles can be differentiated by color. The Red-bellied Slider, as its name indicates, generally has a reddish or orange plastron (bottom shell), as well as red bars running down the carapace (upper shell). The Peninsula Cooter lacks the red coloration (its plastron is yellow) and its upper shell is usually decorated with a pattern of light yellowish wavy lines. (*See my accompanying photo of both species basking on the same log)

Although these turtles are highly aquatic, females must leave the water to dig nests for

their eggs, usually in a sunny spot with loose soil such as the open shores of a pond. In Victoria Park, be on the lookout for turtles crossing the roads to reach favorite nesting areas, and if you see one on the road, help it reach safety by moving it in the direction that it was traveling.