

Wood Turtle, *Glyptemys insculpta*

Status: *State:* Threatened *Federal:* Not listed

Identification

As the taxonomic name insculpta indicates, the wood turtle is distinguished by the sculpted or grooved appearance of its carapace, or upper shell. Each season a new annulus, or ridge, is formed, giving each scute (a scale-like horny layer) a distinctive pyramid-shaped appearance. As the turtle ages, natural wear smooths the surface of the shell. While the scutes of the carapace are brown, the plastron,



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or underneath the shell, consists of yellow scutes with brown or black blotches on each outer edge. The legs and throat are reddish-orange. The male wood turtle has a concave plastron while that of the female is flat or convex. The male also has a thicker tail than the female. Adult wood turtles measure 14 to 20 cm (5.5 to 8.0 in.) in length (Conant and Collins 1991).

Habitat

Unlike other turtle species that favor either land or water, the wood turtle resides in both aquatic and terrestrial environments. Aquatic habitats are required for mating, feeding, and hibernation, while terrestrial habitats are used for egg laying and foraging. Freshwater streams, brooks, creeks, or rivers that are relatively remote provide the habitat needed by these turtles. Consequently, wood turtles are often found within streams containing native brook trout (Salvelinus fontinalis). These tributaries are characteristically clean, free of litter and pollutants, and occur within undisturbed uplands such as fields, meadows, or forests. Open fields and thickets of alder (Alnus spp.), greenbrier (Smilax spp.), or multiflora rose (Rosa multiflora) are favored basking habitats. Lowland, mid-successional forests dominated by oaks (Quercus spp.), black birch (Betula lenta), and red maple (Acer rubrum) may also be used. Wood turtles may also be found on abandoned railroad beds or agricultural fields and pastures. Nevertheless, wood turtle habitats typically contain few roads and are often over one-half of a mile away from developed or populated areas (Zappalorti et al. 1984). Individuals from relict or declining populations are also sighted in areas of formally good habitat that have been fragmented by roads and development.

Status and Conservation

Historically, the wood turtle was a fairly common species within suitable habitat in New Jersey. By the 1970s, however, declines were noted as wood turtles were absent from many historic sites due to habitat loss and stream degradation. Consequently, the wood turtle was listed as a threatened species in New Jersey in 1979. The New Jersey Natural Heritage Program considers the wood turtle to be “demonstrably secure globally,” yet “rare in New Jersey” (Office of Natural Lands Management 1992).

Since the late 1970s, biologists have monitored and surveyed wood turtle sites in New Jersey, providing valuable data regarding the life history, reproduction, and habitat use of these turtles in the state. There is, however, a continuing need to examine the productivity and juvenile survival of wood turtles, which may be threatened by disturbance or predation.

In 1995, the wood turtle was proposed for inclusion on the federal endangered species list. Despite declines in several northeastern states, populations were considered stable enough throughout the species’ entire range to deny listing. However, the wood turtle was considered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a species that, “although not necessarily now threatened with extinction may become so unless trade in them is strictly controlled” (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 1995). As a result, international trade of these turtles is strictly monitored and regulated through the CITES Act (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna Act). The New Jersey Endangered Species Act prohibits the collection or possession of wood turtles.