BOG TURTLE

NORTH CAROLINA WILDLIFE RESOURCES COMMISSION *fact sheet, 2006*

The bog turtle reaches an adult length of only four to five inches, which makes it the smallest turtle in North America. The bog turtle has a dark-brown shell with a distinctive red, orange, or yellow marking on either side of its neck. It inhabits wetland areas such as wet meadows and bogs, and it has even been found in cattle pastures and beaver complexes in western North Carolina. It is an omnivorous reptile that feeds on worms, beetles, and snails along with various plant parts, including small berries.

Bog turtles typically become sexually mature at five to eight years of age and breed in the late spring or early summer. Females lay two or three eggs that hatch in August, September or October. Nest sites are generally located on elevated patches of sphagnum moss or sedges in a sunny area.

Bog turtles spend most of their time under the water, buried in mud, or hiding in thick vegetation, making them very difficult to locate. Therefore, their population numbers are often hard to estimate. Fewer than 100 bog turtle populations have been documented in North Carolina.

HABITAT LOSS

Habitat destruction is probably the greatest threat to bog turtle populations. The draining and filling of wetlands for development has destroyed or fragmented large wetland areas and suitable bog turtle habitat. Due to unchecked natural succession, many bogs are overgrown with trees, which can dry out the bog and shade out the moss and grass habitats bog turtles prefer. Another threat to the wild bog turtle population in North Carolina is illegal collection for the pet trade.

SPECIES STATUS

Due to population declines and threats to the species and its habitat, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service federally listed the northern population (from Maryland through New England) of the bog turtle as a threatened species in 1997. The southern population (from southwest Virginia through Georgia) received a status of "threatened due to similarity of appearance" because people cannot visually distinguish between turtles from the south and those from the north. This status does not afford bog turtles (and especially their habitats) in the south the same level of protection as those in the north. Bog turtles are state-listed as threatened in North Carolina.

An identifying characteristic of the diminutive bog turtle is the pair of yellow patches on either side of its head.

PROJECT BOG TURTLE

Project Bog Turtle is a conservation initiative of the N.C. Herpetological Society that began in the mid-1970s with a bog turtle distribution study in North Carolina. The objectives of this project focus on educating the public and landowners about bog turtle conservation, surveying for bog turtle populations and monitoring them for illegal collections, and protecting and restoring suitable bog turtle habitat in our state. Many different conservation organizations and individuals are involved in Project Bog Turtle including: the N.C. Museum of Natural Sciences, the Three Lakes Nature Center and the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission.

OMNIVOROUS

An omnivorous animal is one that feeds on both animal and plant matter. Plant matter includes a plant's roots and leaves as well as its reproductive parts— fruits or vegetables, nuts or seeds, bulbs or tubers. Animal matter includes an animal as well as its propagating bodies, such as eggs, roe or larvae.

Keys to bog turtle conservation are locating habitat and preventing illegal collection. Here a Wildlife Commission biologist searches for bog turtles, takes measurements and inserts a tiny PIT tag into each one.

SURVEYS AND MONITORING

The Commission began surveys for bog turtles in North Carolina in the early 1990s to determine their range. Since then, Commission biologists have conducted surveys every year and recorded important information on each bog turtle that is captured such as gender, age, shell length and the capture location. The range of bog turtle populations in North Carolina is restricted to the western region. Bog turtles have been observed from 22 counties west of Winston-Salem.

TURTLE TAGGING

The Commission is working in collaboration with Project Bog Turtle to tag bog turtles across the turtle's range in the Southeast. Each bog turtle captured during surveys is implanted with a harmless PIT-tag (Passive Integrated Transponder tag). These tags are unique identifiers that allow biologists to individually identify the turtle if it is captured again and help wildlife authorities such as the Commission to prevent the illegal collection of bog turtles.

The Commission works with many different organizations to protect and conserve the bog turtle population in North Carolina. Through a collaborative effort of education, research and enforcement among these organizations, the habitat required to support populations may be protected and enhanced so that our bog turtles will thrive into the future.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

1. Do not collect bog turtles from the wild without receiving special permits from the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission.
2. Do not purchase or accept illegally collected bog turtles.
3. Report any illegal bog turtle collections to the Commission at 1-800-662-7137.
4. Educate yourself and others regarding biology and population status of the bog turtle.
5. Join a conservation organization to remain updated on current conservation efforts.
6. Donate to the N.C. Nongame and Endangered Wildlife Fund.

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