

NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

DIVISION OF FISH & WILDLIFE

ENDANGERED & NONGAME SPECIES PROGRAM

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# FIELD GUIDE TO REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS OF NEW JERSEY

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1<sup>ST</sup> EDITION, February 2001

FUNDED BY: CONSERVE WILDLIFE FUNDS AND U.S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE'S  
PARTNERSHIPS FOR WILDLIFE.



## **TURTLES OF NEW JERSEY**

### **Common Snapping Turtle (*Chelydra serpentina*)**

**Identification:** 8" - 14". This turtle is the largest in New Jersey and is very dull and dark, perfectly camouflaged for its foraging in the muck of ponds and riverbeds. The carapace can be a black or a light brown color, or any shade in between. Common Snapping Turtles have large heads and long tails, which are saw-toothed along the upper side.

**Where to find them:** Snapping turtles require permanent bodies of freshwater, large or small. They have also been known to live in brackish habitats. Snappers are rarely seen basking. On land, Common Snapping Turtles are quite strike-prone. However, when underwater, snapping turtles will typically pull their heads in if stepped on. They are usually found buried in the mud in shallow water.

**When to find them:** Active April through November.

**Range:** Entire state.

### **Common Musk Turtle [Stinkpot] (*Sternotherus odoratus*)**

**Identification:** 2" - 4 1/2". There are two characteristics that distinguish the Common Musk Turtle from the mud turtle found in New Jersey: (1) two light stripes on head, and (2) barbels on chin and throat. The carapace varies from light olive-brown to almost black and is smooth. The musk turtle has only one hinge on its plastron. The musk that the Common Musk Turtle emits when frightened is an indication of the species.

**Where to find them:** Musk turtles are found in the shallow waters of lakes, ponds, rivers, and canals. As it scours the bottom in search of food, a musk turtle may resemble a round stone. This resemblance to a stone can be magnified by the green algae growing on many of the turtles' shells. Common Musk Turtles can be observed basking on fallen trees and branches overhanging the water.

**When to find them:** Active April through September.

**Range:** Entire state.

### **Eastern Mud Turtle (*Kinosternon subrubrum subrubrum*)**

**Identification:** 3" - 4". The Eastern Mud Turtle closely resembles the Common Musk Turtle in appearance. The carapace is smooth and can vary from olive to brown to black, as in the musk turtle's coloration. However, the plastron is double-hinged and larger in the mud turtle, and may be marked with black or dark brown. A mud turtle's head can be spotted, mottled, or irregularly streaked with yellow.

**Where to find them:** Mud turtles also prefer shallow water. They are often found in ditches, wet meadows, small ponds, and marshes. Mud turtles will wander away from water quite often. This species of mud turtle can tolerate brackish water, and can be found at inner edges of tidal marshes and on many offshore islands.

**When to find them:** Active Mid-May through July.

**Range:** All of Southern Region. All of Mercer, Middlesex, Union, Essex, Hudson, Bergen, and Somerset Counties; southeastern portions of Hunterdon, Morris, and Passaic Counties in the Northern Region.

### **Spotted Turtle (*Clemmys guttata*)**

**Identification:** 3 1/2" - 4 1/2". The Spotted Turtle is easily identified by its spots, of course. However, the yellow spots are extremely variable in number. Hatchlings usually have one spot on each large scute on the carapace, whereas older turtles may have numerous spots on each scute. Conversely, older individuals may have few spots or may be lacking them entirely.

**Where to find them:** Spotted Turtles are found in marshy meadows, bogs, swamps, small ponds, ditches, and other shallow bodies of freshwater. Basking Spotted Turtles usually enter the water rather leisurely when disturbed, and not in a hurry like most other turtle species. They then hide themselves nearby in mud at the bottom.

**When to find them:** Much more frequently seen in spring than at other seasons.

**Range:** Entire state.

## **Bog Turtle (*Clemmys muhlenbergii*) State Endangered Species**

**Identification:** 3" - 3 1/2". The carapace of the bog turtle varies from light brown to black with each scute on the carapace bearing a sunburst-like pattern. Their limbs are typically brown, but may be flecked with orange. A key identifying mark is a large orange or yellow patch on each side of the head. The bog turtle is among the most difficult to find because of its decline in the state due to loss of habitat.

**Where to find them:** Bog turtles are found in bogs, swamps, and clear, slow-moving meadow streams with muddy bottoms. Bog turtles have specific habitat requirements, particularly vegetation. Sedge tussocks, skunk cabbage, cattail, jewelweed, and smartweed are plants common to bog turtle habitat.

**When to find them:** Mid-April through June as they sun on sedge tussocks and matted vegetation litter.

**Range:** Entire state. Their greatest numbers occur in the agricultural landscapes of northwestern and southwestern New Jersey.

## **Wood Turtle (*Clemmys insculpta*) State Threatened Species**

**Identification:** 5 1/2" - 8". The shell of the wood turtle is very rough and looks sculpted in appearance. Each scute of the carapace is in the form of an irregular pyramid rising upward in a series of concentric grooves and ridges. Parts of the neck and limbs of the wood turtle have reddish-orange coloration.

**Where to find them:** This turtle is a riparian species that uses a mosaic of wetland and upland habitats in the vicinity of its stream habitat. The wood turtle requires clean streams running through meadows, woods, and farmlands. While wood turtles are typically found in or near their home waters, they frequently wander far afield. They will rest in the shade of vegetation, fallen logs, or debris.

**When to find them:** Active late March or early April through October. Active mostly in morning and late afternoon/evening, but may also be out during midday.

**Range:** All of the Northern Region, except the urbanized regions of the eastern counties. Sparse records in the Southern Region.

## **Eastern Box Turtle (*Terrapene carolina carolina*)**

**Identification:** 4 1/2" - 6". The box turtle is a terrestrial species with a tall, domelike shell. The shell varies in color from yellow to orange to olive on a black or brown background. Box turtles have four toes on each hind foot. Males have a central concave area in the rear lobe of the plastron and their eyes are sometimes red. Young Eastern Box Turtles are much duller than the adults; they are typically a dull brown, but with a spot of yellow on each large scute of the carapace.

**Where to find them:** Although essentially terrestrial, these turtles sometimes soak themselves in mud or water. During hot, dry weather they burrow beneath logs or rotting vegetation, but brief summer showers usually bring them out of hiding, often in numbers.

**When to find them:** Active April through September.

**Range:** Entire state.

## **Northern Diamondback Terrapin (*Malaclemys terrapin terrapin*)**

**Identification:** Adult females 6" - 9"; males 4" - 5 1/2". The terrapin is found exclusively in salt marshes and other brackish-water habitats. The carapace of the diamondback terrapin has concentric rings or ridges and their heads and limbs are spotted. The color of the diamondback terrapin varies from a well-defined pattern with dark rings on a background of light gray or light brown to a uniform black or dark brown carapace. Their plastrons are orange or yellowish to greenish.

**Where to find them:** Coastal marshes, estuaries, coves, tidal flats, and inner edges of barrier beaches.

**When to find them:** Late May through July, when females emerge onto sandy areas to lay eggs.

**Range:** The saltwater coast of the entire state.

## **Common Map Turtle (*Graptemys geographica*)**

**Identification:** Adult females 7" - 10 3/4"; males 3 1/2" - 6 1/4". The shell of the Common Map Turtle is somewhat low and the keel, or ridge running down the center, may have slight raised knobs. If the pattern on the shell of a map turtle is well defined, it looks like a map of waterways on the turtle's back. There is a longitudinal yellow spot found behind each eye.

**Where to find them:** The Common Map Turtle prefers large bodies of water, like rivers and lakes. Map turtles are wary when found basking.

**When to find them:** Active June through August.

**Range:** Delaware River from Delaware Water Gap south to Trenton.

## **Red-eared Slider (*Trachemys scripta elegans*) Introduced Species**

**Identification:** 5" - 8". Red-eared Sliders typically have a trademark red stripe behind each eye. However, the red "ear" can vary in color and is sometimes yellow. Moreover, not all Red-eared Sliders have it. The carapace can vary from a uniform black to a bold pattern of green and yellow on black.

**Where to find them:** This is not a species native to New Jersey, and can be found anywhere in the state. Red-eared Sliders are often found in still water with a muddy bottom and abundant vegetation. They can be seen basking on logs above water or on masses of floating plants, and they are occasionally seen out on the banks.

**When to find them:** Active April through September.

**Range:** Entire state.

## **Redbelly Turtle (*Pseudemys rubriventris*)**

**Identification:** 10" - 12 1/2". While the Common Snapping Turtle is the largest turtle in our area, the Redbelly Turtle is the only big basking turtle throughout most of its range. They are much larger than painted turtles, which they are often found sunning together with on logs. Vertical reddish lines are typically found on each of the first 3 coastal scutes of adult female redbellies whereas old males are usually mottled with reddish brown. Many large adults, particularly in southern New Jersey, are highly melanistic (thoroughly black in color). However, even these highly melanistic turtles have some reddish markings, even if they are faint. The plastron is yellow, but marked with large gray smudges and bordered by a washed out pink or orange-red.

**Where to find them:** Ponds, rivers, ditches, and sloughs.

**When to find them:** Basking from June through August.

**Range:** All of the Southern Region. The Northern Region: Mercer, Monmouth, and southern Middlesex Counties.

## **Eastern Painted Turtle (*Chrysemys picta picta*)**

**Identification:** 4 1/2" - 6". The painted turtle typically has two bright yellow stripes on each side of its head. It is the only turtle in which the large scutes of the carapace are in more or less straight rows across the back. Using binoculars to sight a basking painted turtle, one can easily see the olive front edges of the large scutes forming light bands across the carapace. The plastron is plain yellow but often stained red by algae.

**Where to find them:** Any standing body of water.

**When to find them:** Active April through September.

**Range:** Entire state.

## **Eastern Spiny Softshell (*Apalone spinifera spinifera*) Introduced Species**

**Identification:** Adult females 7" - 17", males 5" - 9 1/4". The Eastern Spiny Softshell is almost perfectly round. Three key characteristics in their identification are streaked and spotted feet, ridges in both nostrils, and projections on the carapace. The background color of the carapace is light tan, like wet sand, with dark, round spots.

**Where to find them:** The Eastern Spiny Softshell is typically limited to rivers; however, they can also be found in lakes where mud bars are available. They are sometimes seen floating at the surface, where their shape is easily identifiable.

**When to find them:** Active May through September.

**Range:** An introduced and well-established population in the Maurice River system, Cumberland County.

**Common Snapping Turtle (*Chelydra serpentina*)**



**Common Musk Turtle [Stinkpot] (*Sternotherus odoratus*)**



**Eastern Mud Turtle (*Kinosternon subrubrum subrubrum*)**



**Spotted Turtle (*Clemmys guttata*)**



**Bog Turtle (*Clemmys muhlenbergii*) State Endangered Species**



**Wood Turtle (*Clemmys insculpta*) State Threatened Species**



**Eastern Box Turtle (*Terrapene carolina carolina*)**



**Northern Diamondback Terrapin (*Malaclemys terrapin terrapin*)**



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**Redbelly Turtle (*Pseudemys rubriventris*)**



**Eastern Painted Turtle (*Chrysemys picta picta*)**



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