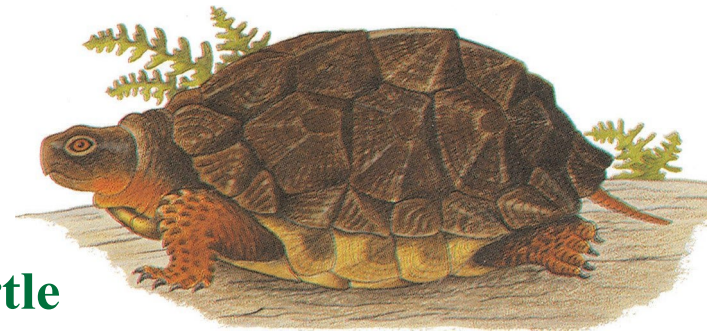


Wood Turtle

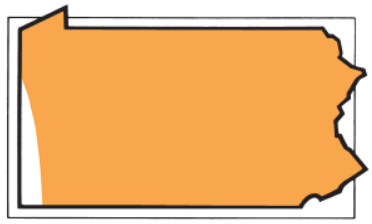
Clemmys insculpta

General characteristics. The wood turtle is often called the "sculptured turtle." Looking at its upper shell, it is easy to understand how it obtained this descriptive nickname. Its carapace appears as if an artist had taken a fine-edged knife and carefully carved an intricate, nearly symmetrical pattern from a piece of dark wood. Adults grow until the upper shell measures five to almost eight inches in length. Other than the box turtle, the wood turtle is Pennsylvania's most terrestrial turtle. During the late 1800s to early 1900s, this turtle was available at market for its meat.

Identification. The upper shell of the wood turtle is brown and keeled. Its scutes, or large scales, are pyramidal, a series of concentric growth ridges and grooves, larger on the bottom, becoming smaller as they approach the top. These exaggerated scales appear sculptured and are rough to the touch. The plastron, or lower shell, is yellow, and each of the scutes is margined on the outer edge with black blotches. The plastron is hingeless and can aid in distinguishing this turtle from the box and Blanding's turtles, which are considered "land" turtles like the wood turtle. The lower shell of the male is concave. The female's lower shell is flat or slightly convex. The skin on the neck and front legs is frequently reddish orange. The tail is moderately heavy and nearly as long as the carapace, or upper shell.

Range. The wood turtle's range extends from Nova Scotia south to Virginia. The wood turtle is found in most of the state's 67 counties but is missing from the western border.

Habitat. Although a terrestrial turtle, the wood turtle is very much at home in the water. In fact, it hibernates in water during the winter months. In Pennsylvania, only the box turtle is considered more terrestrial. The wood turtle wanders from home, ranging far afield if necessary to find its favorite habitat, which includes cool streams. It is especially fond of streams running through a hardwood forest. It can be found in marshy meadows and other farmland and is attracted to swampland with stands of red maple. It is an excellent climber, and even manmade barriers such as fences do not necessarily stop the wood turtle from going where it desires.



Reproduction. The wood turtle lays one clutch of four to 12 eggs a year. The elliptical eggs have shells that are flexible. The eggs are normally deposited by the female some time in May or June. They hatch in September or October, and it is not unusual for the young wood turtles to remain in the nest through the winter.

Food. Although omnivorous, the wood turtle is partial to vegetation, feeding voraciously on wild fruit. It favors strawberries and low-bush blueberries. Other plants, such as dandelion and sorrel with its heart-shaped leaflets, also are favored. The wood turtle eats slugs, insects and tadpoles and can be seen searching newly plowed ground for worms, especially after a cool spring rain.