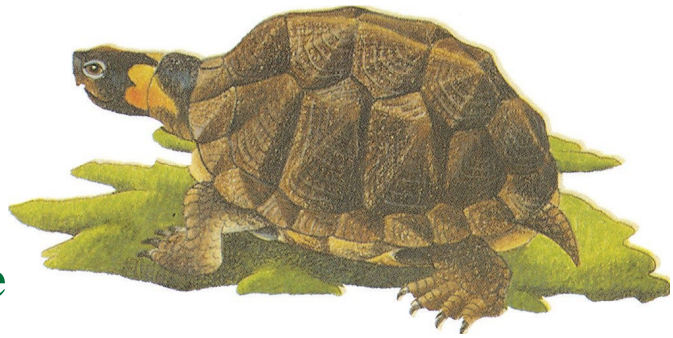


Bog Turtle

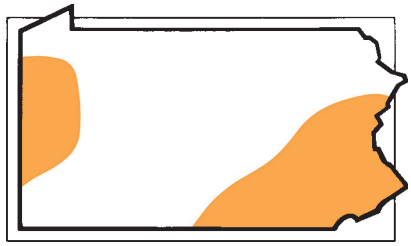
Clemmys muhlenbergii

PA Status: Endangered Species

General characteristics. The bog turtle was the first turtle to be placed on the Pennsylvania List of Endangered Species. It now appears only in isolated populations. Loss of habitat has been the biggest factor in its decline. Mankind's propensity for draining bogs, marshes and swampland has taken its toll on the bog turtle. Its habitat left high and dry, the bog turtle simply had no place to go. Some years ago, the pet trade also was a factor in the decline in populations of this species.

The bog turtle, sometimes referred to as Muhlenberg's turtle, is a secretive reptile. Scientists actively engaged in restoration efforts find that the bog turtle's retiring attitude makes it a difficult animal to study. In spite of its shy nature, it still likes to bask in full sunlight, often atop tufts of grass or perched on a log. The bog turtle is active from April through mid-October, perhaps a bit longer period than some turtles. It may bury itself and become inactive during the hot days of summer. The bog turtle is a small turtle, never reaching more than three or four inches long along its shell.

Identification. The bog turtle's carapace, or upper shell, is light brown to mahogany. Its large scutes sometimes have a tinge of yellowish or reddish marks in their centers. The plastron, which is hingeless, is brownish black with some yellow along the mid-line. The head is black and marked with a yellow, orange or red blotch on each side, an important identification characteristic. The male has a medium-thick tail.



Range. The bog turtle has been found in separated ranges across parts of New York and extending southward to the western border of North Carolina. Its range includes New Jersey. The bog turtle's distribution in Pennsylvania splits into two separate historic ranges-two areas where this turtle was once found in stable populations. The largest range includes southeastern Pennsylvania as far west as Franklin County and north to near the Pocono Mountains. The smaller of the two original ranges includes portions of three counties in the northwestern part of the state near the Ohio border. However, it's doubtful whether the species still occurs in this range.

Habitat. Wetlands, such as bogs, marshes and swamps, are preferred, but wet pastures also have been known to hold populations of the bog turtle. It likes narrow, shallow, slow-moving rivulets of unpolluted spring water flowing over a soft mucky bottom. The bog turtle seeks relief during periods of extremely hot weather and buries itself in mud or vegetative debris. It hibernates during the coldest winter months buried deeply in mud flooded over by water.

Reproduction. The bog turtle matures sexually at five to seven years of age. Mating occurs during the first warm days of spring. Nesting is completed in June when the female lays a clutch of one to six eggs in a two-inch deep cavity. The eggs, barely more than one inch in length, are elliptical and flexible. They hatch in August or September after a six to nine-week incubation period.

Food. The bog turtle is omnivorous, allowing it to enjoy a varied menu. It eats wild berries and also feeds on slugs, tadpoles, snails, worms and insects. The diet also includes the shoots of tender plants.