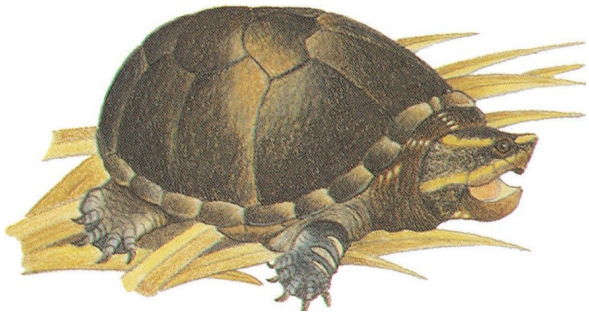
Eastern Musk Turtle

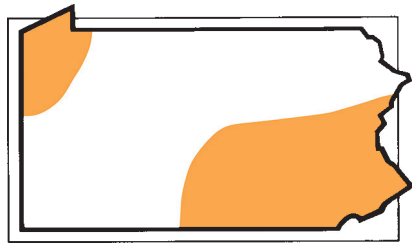


Sternotherus odoratus

General characteristics. The eastern musk turtle, formerly known as the stinkpot turtle, is the only musk turtle inhabiting Pennsylvania. Although abundant in many waters within its range, it often is not seen because it is primarily an aquatic animal. Nonetheless, it likes to leave the water to bask in the sun, and quite mobile, often climbs slanted trees or logs to find a resting place. An apparent ability over other turtles to climb steeper surfaces is provided by a smaller plastron, which allows greater movement of the legs. The carapace measures three inches to just over four inches in adults. In clear water the stinkpot might be observed walking across the bottom in search of food. It often is caught by a surprised angler. When disturbed, it is liable to secrete a foul-smelling yellowish fluid. This fluid, which acts in many cases as a deterrent to would-be attackers, is discharged from two pairs of musk glands located under the border of the upper shell. Some have described the stinkpot as pugnacious, almost vicious. It is said to have a short temper and strong jaws.

Identification. The eastern musk turtle 's carapace is smooth, highly domed and elongated. It is normally olive-brown to dark gray and may be marked with irregular streaks or spots of a darker color. The small plastron has 11 scutes with small patches of skin visible between them. There is a single hinge that is difficult to locate on most specimens. The female's tail is very short. The male's tail tends to be a bit longer and ends in a blunt, horny nail. Small fleshy barbels protrude from the chin and throat. On most individuals, two light stripes stand out on an otherwise black head.

Range. Although thought at one time to be distributed statewide, recent studies show that the eastern musk turtle does not inhabit the Allegheny Mountains. These same studies indicate that the eastern musk turtle dwells in two separate ranges in opposite corners of the state. In the northwest, it is found in the swampy areas of the Shenango River Watershed and Lake Erie. It also is found in a larger area of southeastern Pennsylvania and particularly in the more centrally located counties where prosperous populations of stinkpots have been discovered in the limestone streams. The eastern musk turtle is distributed from New England, southern Ontario and Wisconsin, south to Texas and Florida.

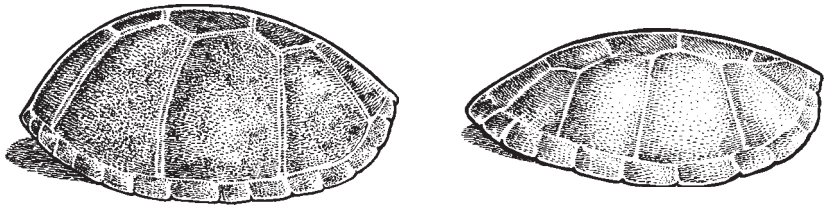


Habitat. The eastern musk turtle prefers quiet, slow-moving, shallow streams and rivers, preferably with a mud bottom. In early spring the eastern musk turtle seeks out waters shallow enough so that it can bask with the center of its carapace exposed to the warm sun.

Reproduction. The eastern musk turtle is one of the first turtles to nest, beginning in May but going as late as August. Mating occurs under water. Then, leaving the water, the female lays one to nine eggs in a shallow nest dug under a rotting stump or within the confines of an old muskrat hole. The eggs are off-white but circled with a stark-white band. They are thick-shelled, elongated and just a bit more than one inch long. The eggs take nine to 12 weeks to incubate. The carapace of the newly hatched turtle is black, three-quarters to one inch in length, and it has a rough texture.

Food. The eastern musk turtle is carnivorous and seems to eat nearly anything it is able to catch. A sampling of the stinkpot's diet includes small fish, snails, aquatic insects, clams, worms and fish eggs. Apparently hungry a large portion of the time, the stinkpot has been known to forage for a meal day and night.

Figure IV-8



Eastern Musk Turtle *Other Turtles*

The upper shell of the eastern musk turtle is raised in the shape of a high dome. Others tend to be only slightly raised or rounded.