



The Historical Distribution and Current Status of *Clemmys* in New York

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Early Reports: 1800-1919

Clemmys guttata (spotted turtle), *C. insculpta* (wood turtle) and *C. muhlenbergii* (bog turtle) were documented as occurring in New York in the early 1800's (DeKay 1842).

DeKay stated that *C. guttata* is "one of our commonest tortoises" and that "this little animal is found throughout the Union." DeKay observed *C. insculpta* in northern New York "along the banks of the Raquet and Saranac rivers" and in the northern Hudson River drainage. He did not comment on its general range or rarity, except to say "it is a northern species." He indicated that *C. muhlenbergii* was quite rare, knowing of only one location in New York near the New Jersey border.

Shortly after DeKay's monumental work was published, James Eights (1853) published a note claiming an earlier documentation of bog turtles. He states that "for the last thirty years we have been in the habit of obtaining them from a small morass in the county of Rensselaer." No one has reported a bog turtle from that county since.

Eckel and Paulmier (1902) commented on the three species of *Clemmys*. Spotted turtle was "common in ponds all over the state, frequently seen sitting on logs." The wood turtle was found "All over the state, taken both in land and water." The bog turtle was reported in the "Southern part of state, particularly in the branches of the Delaware river." Although they were correct about the southern part of the state, they were wrong about the branches of the Delaware River. There are no historic or current records from the Delaware River drainage in New York.

In a leaflet about the reptiles within 50 miles of New York City, Ditmars (1905) indicated that the spotted turtle's local distribution was "general and abundant" and that it "rivals the Painted Turtle in being the most common of local chelonians." The local distribution of the wood turtle was listed as "General in swampy districts, but not common." As for the bog turtle, Ditmars said "the species is very rare in this vicinity," but it is "Recorded from Staten Island and the Palisades of the Hudson River." There are no vouchered specimens from Staten Island. The population from the Palisades was last seen by DeKay in 1842. Babcock (1919) agreed with Ditmars as to the abundance of spotted turtles, stating that "The Spotted Turtle, with perhaps the exception of the Painted Turtle (*Chrysemys picta*), is the commonest Chelonian in New England."

Distribution

The maps below depict the historic and current distribution of the three species of *Clemmys*. These maps include museum records, field notes provided by various researchers, bog turtle surveys

conducted by New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Endangered Species Unit and data collected via the New York Amphibian and Reptile Atlas Project (Herp Atlas). It is interesting to note that the volunteers for the Herp Atlas submitted numerous spotted turtle (283 reports in 100 Atlas blocks) and wood turtle (349 reports from 189 Atlas blocks) observations, but they did not find any additional bog turtle habitats.

Clemmys insculpta is the most widespread of the three species, found in scattered locations throughout most of the state except for the higher elevations of the Adirondack and Catskill Mountains and on Long Island. Recently several specimens have been found on Long Island, but they are believed to be released animals or escaped pets.

The distribution of *Clemmys guttata* and *C. muhlenbergii* is similar except that *C. guttata* is found on Long Island whereas *C. muhlenbergii* is not. Both species are most common in the lower Hudson River drainage. There are scattered reports in the upper Hudson River drainage and as far north as Lake George, in the St. Lawrence River drainage. Both species also include a series of populations in the Lake Ontario basin. Although the populations in southeastern New York and western New York would be expected to be connected by populations in the Mohawk River Valley, neither species has been reported from Albany to Rome (a distance of about 90 miles). Although most modern field guides indicate *C. guttata* is found throughout the Southern Tier along Pennsylvania's northern border, it seems to be missing entirely from this region of the state, except for one historic reference in Allegany State Park (Bishop 1927).

Status

In New York a species can only be protected from collecting or sale if it is a "game species" (which can only be designated by the Legislature), or if it is an endangered or threatened species (designated by NYS Department of Environmental Conservation regulations).

Clemmys insculpta was one of the first reptiles in North America to be protected by law. In 1905, the New York State Legislature amended the "Forest, Fish and Game Law" to prohibit the "taking, killing or exposing for sale of all land turtles and tortoises, including the box and wood turtle." It is unclear which species were considered "land turtles and tortoises", but the wood turtle, *C. insculpta*, was specifically listed. Why the New York Legislature felt compelled to protect these species is not indicated, but Babcock (1919) offers an explanation: "The flesh of this turtle is edible and in some districts considerable numbers of these animals are collected to be sold as food. New York State has found it necessary to pass a law for their protection." The wood turtle is now listed as a "small game species" without an "open season." This means that it can not be collected, possessed, imported, killed, or sold without a permit.

The bog turtle was added to the list of protected small game species in 1966 and was the first reptile to be placed on New York's list of endangered species when the list was established in 1974.

The NYS Endangered Species Act was amended in 1981 to allow for designation of threatened species. The category of "special concern" was also created to identify species which are potentially at risk. However, "special concern" does not provide any protection. Both the spotted turtle and the wood turtle were designated as "special concern" in 1983. Although not protected by this designation, the spotted turtle does receive some minimal level of protection through the Public Health Law that prohibits the sale of turtles with a straight line carapace length of less than four inches. At least the smaller turtles cannot be sold.

The primary threats to these species has been loss of habitat and unregulated or illegal collection. For *C. guttata* and *C. muhlenbergii*, habitat loss has included draining and filling of wetlands, creation of reservoirs, exotic vegetation such as purple loosestrife and phragmites, residential and commercial development, highway construction, conversion of wetlands to muckland agriculture, and natural succession. Because of the more terrestrial nature of *C. insculpta*, highway construction that fragments its habitat is particularly threatening. Increased populations of raccoon, skunk and opossum that dig up nests and eat the eggs are also a significant threat.

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