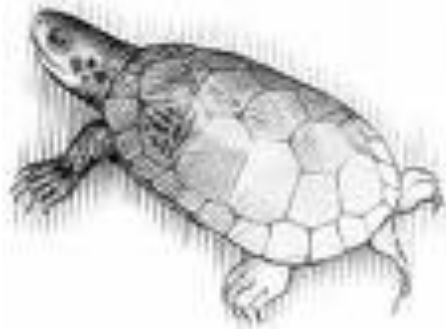


Creature Feature: Summer 2008

By W. Scott Douglas

Bog Turtles



Perhaps the most famous creature that is indigenous to the Cooks Creek Watershed is the bog turtle, *Glyptemys muhlenbergii*. Bog turtles are dark brown or black on top and brownish-black to yellow on the bottom, just like a lot of other turtles. The distinct reddish-orange patch behind each eye is, however, characteristic of the species. Unfortunately, this palm-sized turtle is threatened or endangered throughout its range, which is patchy on the eastern seaboard from CT to GA. The primary reason for their decline is habitat loss and fragmentation; but the small size and docile nature also makes them susceptible to poaching for the pet trade.

Bog turtles live only in open, marshy habitat underlain by limestone deposits – a habitat typical of our headwater springs and seeps. Vegetation in the habitat is critically important – too much shade will not provide enough warmth for their eggs to mature. The best habitat is swampy meadow with a mixture of sedges (*Carex* spp), rushes (*Juncus* spp.), skunk cabbage, cattails, mosses and grasses. Grazing livestock (within reason) will not harm the turtles; in fact, livestock helps maintain the habitat by keeping the ground soft and preventing succession. Bog turtles are opportunistic feeders, but prefer slugs, worms and insects. They live most of their lives buried in the muck, coming out in spring and early summer to mate, lay eggs and sun themselves. They make their nests in tussock sedge clumps, above the high water line.

Bog turtles are very specialized in their habitat needs. Alterations in water level, and even natural succession, can force a population to move away. Invasive plants such as purple loosestrife and common reed are particularly devastating as they out-compete the native vegetation that the bog turtles rely on for nesting sites, and decrease sunlight penetration. Development pressure not only reduces available habitat, but makes it more difficult for populations to relocate when the bog is no longer suitable for them. Because bog turtles are an endangered species in Pennsylvania, it is illegal to possess or transport them. In fact, it is not a good idea to even look for them unless you are accompanied by a certified bog turtle specialist. However, the CCWA is interested in finding where these guys are hanging out in the Watershed, so please let us know if you suspect you have suitable habitat. If you do

happen to see one, make sure you notify the PA Fish Commission http://www.fish.state.pa.us/dir_regions.htm#se or drop me a line at www.cooks creekpa.org. If you see any turtle on the roadway, do pick it up and help it get where it wants to go safely (do not put it back where it came from, it will just retry the crossing).