

USACE Natural Resource Management

Reptiles & Amphibians



Alabama Red-bellied Cooter

FAST FACTS

REASONS FOR LISTING STATUS: The Alabama red-bellied cooter, also known as the Alabama red-bellied turtle, was designated as Endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Listed in 1987, the species is critically endangered due to habitat loss and exploitation by humans. Loss of suitable nesting areas, illegal trapping for the pet trade, and entrapment in fishing nets and crab pots are examples of factors contributing to population decline. Additionally, raccoons and crows prey on the eggs of these turtles while large fish, shorebirds, snakes, and some mammals prey on hatchlings.

MANAGEMENT AND PROTECTION: The range of this species is restricted to the Mobile-Tensaw River Delta. Recommended management needs include the protection of principal habitat, especially nesting sites, and the reduction of predation by humans and animals. The USFWS has experimented with the installation of fencing along key transportation highways in the few known nesting sites to reduce vehicular interaction with nesting females and hatchlings. In 2019, the USFWS released a draft revised recovery plan for the species.

HABITAT NEEDS: As a herbaceous species, the Alabama red-bellied cooter:

- Prefers soft sandy bottoms in shallow areas of slow-moving freshwater streams and rivers that have extensive beds of submergent aquatic macrophytes.
- Snags, in addition to the dense beds of aquatic vegetation, provide the species with cover, predator avoidance, food, and structure for basking and thermoregulation.
- The species has been known to feed on hydrilla, brushy pondweed, eel-grass arrowhead, and mud plantain.
- The species can also be found in the more brackish waters of bays and bayous.

Description: This is a large (8-10 inch carapace length), freshwater turtle known for its orange to reddish plastron and prominent notch at the tip of the upper jaw. (USFWS).

Females are slightly larger with a carapace length reaching 15 inches. Carapace color may be greenish to dark brown or black with yellowish, orangish, or reddish vertical marking along the sides.

Photos: Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, USFWS

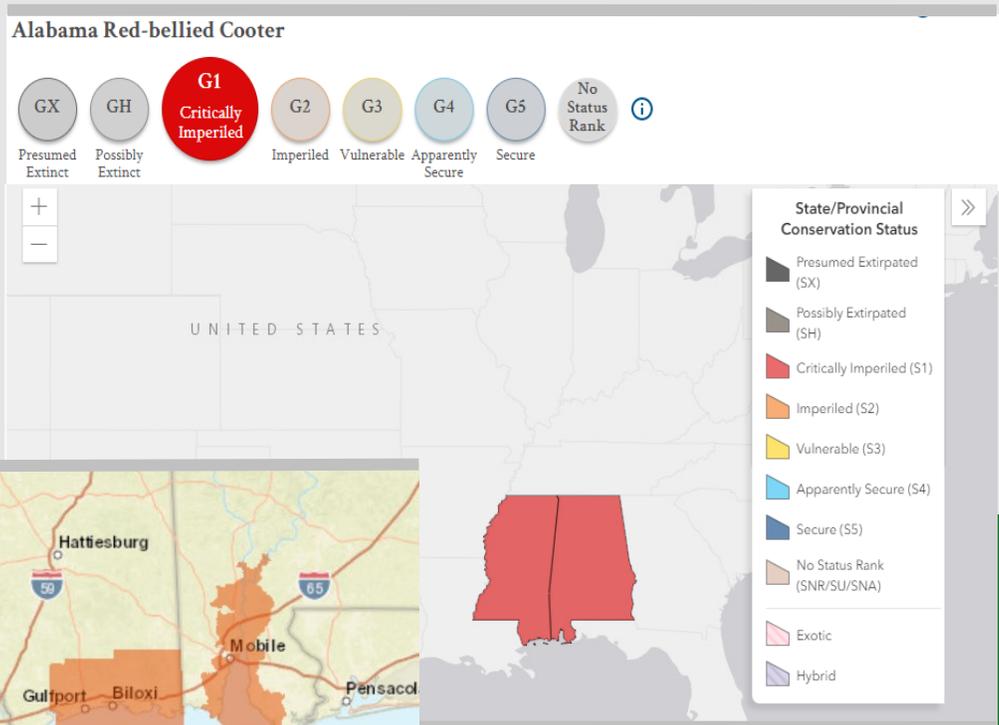
Natural Resource Management (NRM)

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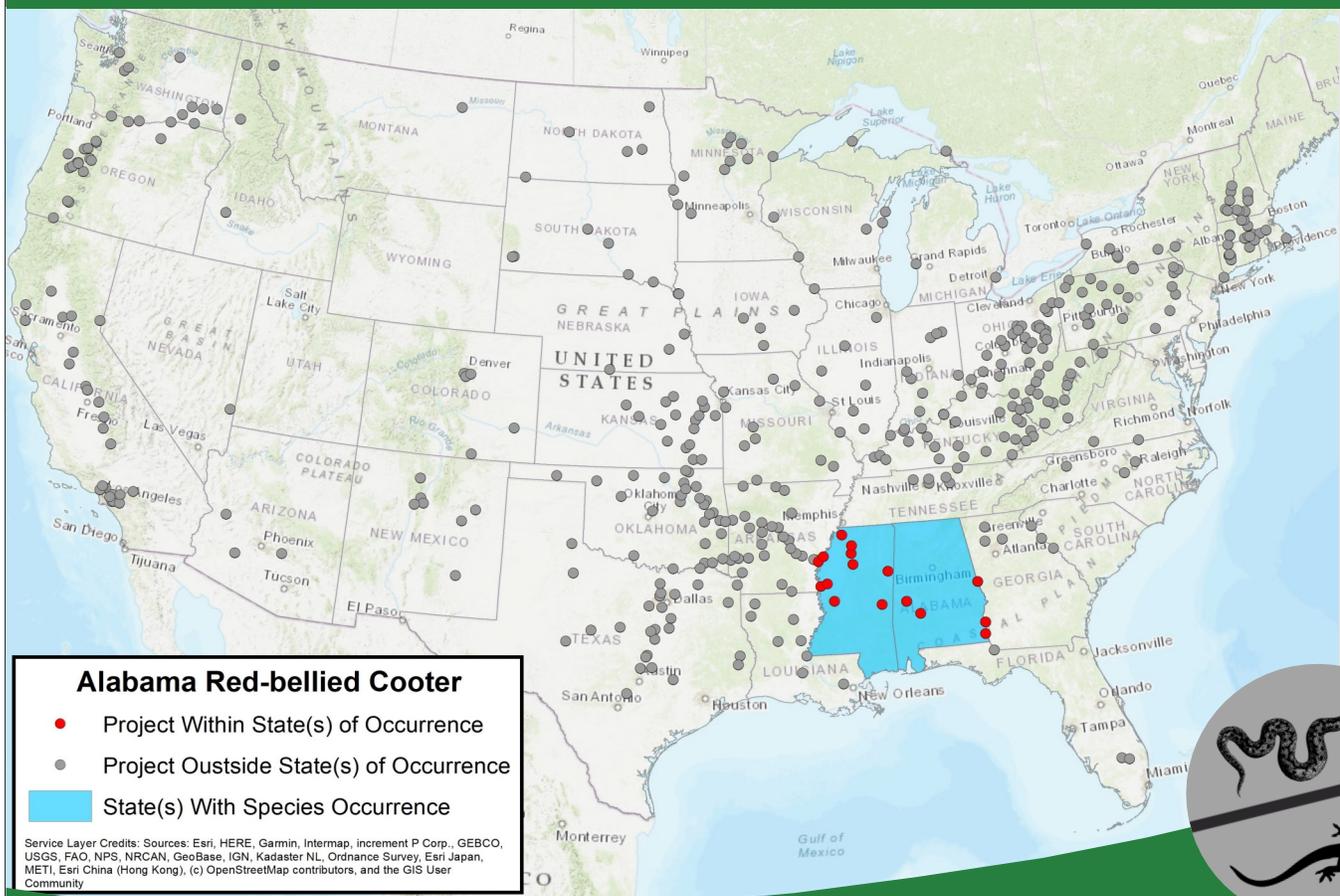


USACE ROLE: According to the Engineering Research and Development Center's Threatened and Endangered Species Team Cost Estimates, the USACE has expended over \$264,000 on efforts related to the Alabama red-bellied cooter since 2006. Many of these costs are related to coordination and determination, along with survey and inventory work.

WHAT IS USACE NRM DOING: Occurrence of the Alabama Red-bellied Cooter is rare and its range is estimated at only 5,800 to 8,200 square kilometers. USACE projects such as the Alabama River Lakes and the Black Warrior and Tombigbee Rivers are north of the current range of the species but could provide the type of habitat necessary if population expansion occurs in the future. Currently, many of the known nesting sites of the Alabama red-bellied cooter are located on public lands.



Map Above: NatureServe Explorer, the Alabama Red-bellied Cooter's status is Critically Imperiled in Alabama and Mississippi. Map Left: USFWS ECOS range map of the species.



Source: Map provided by Ashleigh Boss, ORISE Fellowship, Institute for Water Resources

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