

USACE Natural Resource Management

Reptiles & Amphibians



Plymouth Redbelly Turtle

FAST FACTS

REASONS FOR LISTING STATUS: The Plymouth redbelly turtle, now referred to as the northern red-bellied cooter, was listed as Endangered under the Endangered Species Act in 1980. The listing was the result of declining historic population numbers, increasing development along shorelines and between ponds, and increased predation pressure. Critical habitat was also established in 1980.

The Plymouth population at the time of listing was recognized as a distinct subspecies. A 1994 recovery plan revision for the species addressed recommended changes in taxonomy. In 2006, a 90-day finding on a petition to delist the Plymouth redbelly turtle was initiated; a 5-year review of the species in 2007 supported retention of the red-bellied cooter on the list of threatened and endangered species through an amended listing that identifies this population as an endangered distinct population segment (DPS). This DPS lives more than 250 miles from other populations of the species, which inhabit areas along the coast in southern New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina.

MANAGEMENT AND PROTECTION: The Massasoit National Wildlife Refuge is part of the largest contiguous pitch pine scrub oak habitat area north of the Long Island Sound. The refuge was established to contribute to the recovery of this endangered turtle along with other species of conservation concern. (USFWS).

Additionally, a "headstarting" program introduced over 2,500 turtles to ten ponds and two rivers between 1985 and 2005. During this time, all nests discovered were caged to protect the eggs and hatchlings from predators (*about 95% of uncaged nests suffer predation*). When hatching was complete, 50% of the hatchlings were released into the same pond and 50% were moved to headstarting facilities which raised them to a size that was less vulnerable to predation. The headstarted turtles were reintroduced to the same or new sites. (Center for Biological Diversity)

HABITAT NEEDS: The northern red-bellied cooter is endemic to ponds in eastern Massachusetts.

- The species requires good water quality and suitable basking, nesting, and overwintering sites free from disturbance.
- Typically, breeds in sandy soils.

Description: The northern red-bellied cooter is larger than most freshwater turtles with an adult size of 10 to 12 inches weighing up to 10 pounds. The carapace is brown to black with a red bar on each marginal scute.

The species has a prominent notch at the top of the upper jaw and an arrow-shaped stripe that runs on top of the head, between the eyes, to the snout. The plastron is reddish in color with dark markings that fade with age.

Photo: USFWS

Natural Resource Management (NRM)

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USACE ROLE: While USACE has not tracked costs associated with the northern red-bellied cooter, coordination efforts between the USACE and the USFWS ensure that any projects undertaken afford the necessary protections to the species.

Photo: USACE's Cape Cod Canal

WHAT IS USACE NRM DOING:

USACE's Cape Cod Canal is one of the few projects within the small range of the DPS that has the potential for occurrence of the northern red-bellied cooter.

A major threat to the species is lack of open-canopy, sunny habitat due to changes in land use. Historically, natural fires frequently burned pine barrens occupied by the species, leaving openings preferred by the turtles for nesting. With urbanization, fewer fires occurred resulting in closed-canopy forests. These areas do not provide the heat needed for incubating eggs in nesting habitat. Prescribed fires can produce necessary canopy openings as desired by the species for nesting and incubation. The Natural Resources Management Program supports the use of prescribed fire as a habitat management tool where conditions are appropriate.



US Army Corps of Engineers

Cape Cod Canal

Buzzards Bay and Sandwich, Massachusetts

