

# Bog Turtle

## *Clemmys muhlenbergii*

You've heard the old phrase, "Good things come in small packages." Consider America's smallest turtle – the federally listed threatened bog turtle – which lives in small, sunny, wet meadows. The northeast population is limited to scattered locations in Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania.

### Our Tiniest Turtle

The bog turtle measures just 3 to 4 inches, no bigger than the palm of your hand, and can most easily be identified by a mahogany-colored shell and bright yellow-orange blotches located on both sides of the head. Bog turtles live in a mosaic of open, sunny, spring-fed wetlands and scattered dry areas. The variety of wet and dry places meets all the basic bog turtle needs: basking, foraging, nesting, hibernating and finding shelter. Sunny open areas provide the warmth needed to regulate the turtle's body temperature and incubate its eggs. Soft muddy areas allow turtles to escape, both from predators and extreme temperatures. Dry areas provide a place to nest. Springs and seeps that flow year-round ensure that bog turtles will not freeze during the winter.

Bog turtles are active from April through October. In the spring, they are busy basking, eating and mating. Bog turtles eat worms, slugs, beetles, snails, millipedes, seeds and carrion. During the summer months, bog turtles build nests in sphagnum moss or on clumps of sedges above the water level of the wetland. A female turtle lays from 1 to 6 eggs and leaves them to incubate unattended for 6 to 8 weeks. The eggs hatch from late August through September. Bog turtle eggs and young are prey for mice, raccoons, skunks, foxes and birds. In October, bog turtles nestle into abandoned muskrat and meadow vole



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burrows, logs, mud or tree roots, where they lie dormant through the winter; a dozen or more turtles may overwinter together. A bog turtle may live 40 to 50 years and spend its entire life in the same wetland where it was born.

### Grazing Cattle—Unlikely Friendship

Historically, this tiny turtle made its living in the sunny, wet meadows that were maintained by fire, beavers and grazers like bison. But these have declined as the human population has grown, leading the habitat to dwindle. The good news is that sunny, open meadows make good pastureland for small farms. Grazing cattle have taken on the role of fire, beavers and grazing bison, and today help keep encroaching trees and shrubs from taking over a wetland.

### Cutting Habitat into Pieces

The greatest threats to the bog turtle are the loss and fragmentation of its habitat. The places a bog turtle needs are also attractive to people for cropland, development and

roads. Draining, ditching and other changes that alter the flow of water ruin a wetland's ability to function. Development breaks up wetlands that are connected by small streams. These connections serve as potential corridors for bog turtles to travel from one wetland to another. Fragmenting connected wetlands limits the bog turtle's ability to find mates and new habitat, and increases the amount of edge – the line where open meadow and surrounding forest meet – around the wetlands. Increased edge provides habitat for predators and increases the likelihood of invasion by non-native and non-wetland plants.

### Unscrupulous Predators

The bog turtle's small size and attractive markings make it a target of disreputable pet traders. Bog turtles, and all other wild animals, are not pets and will not thrive in captivity. It is illegal to search, collect or sell them. If you ever find a bog turtle, leave it in its place.

### **Sunny Wet Meadows: Special Places**

The small wetlands that support bog turtles perform important infrastructure tasks such as purifying water, recharging underground aquifers and absorbing floodwaters. These unique wetlands are also home to many increasingly rare plants and animals, like the bobolink, American woodcock, Baltimore checkerspot butterfly, showy lady's slipper, and dragon's mouth orchid. Recognizing the importance of this habitat type, many partners have joined together to ensure its continued existence.

### **The Power of Partnerships**

Private landowners own the majority of the remaining bog turtle habitat, and the bog turtle will continue to survive only with their help. Farmers and conservation agencies and organizations are partnering to protect and maintain habitat for the bog turtle, while also maintaining pastureland for cattle. The Natural Resource Conservation Service has been instrumental in working with landowners to restore bog turtle habitat and create conservation easements, which are voluntary land preservation agreements between a landowner and an agency or conservation group that limit the amount and type of development possible on an identified parcel of land.

### **You Can Help the Bog Turtle**

- Please report to the authorities anyone you suspect or know to be taking and/or selling bog turtles.
- If you see a bog turtle crossing the road, carefully pick it up and carry it across the road in the same direction it was moving.
- Take care how you treat wetlands on your property and refrain from dumping trash in it. The wet meadow on your property may be helping to recharge and purify your well water.
- Protecting the wetlands where bog turtles live can directly benefit the quality of water for people living in the area.
- If they are found in your area, consider bog turtles in community planning.
- If you think you may have potential habitat, please contact your state wildlife agency or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Contact:

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Pennsylvania Field Office  
315 South Allen Street, Suite 322  
State College, PA 16801-4850  
Phone: 814/234 4090**

**Federal Relay Service  
for the deaf and hard-of-hearing  
1 800/877 8339**

**U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service  
1 800/344 WILD  
<http://www.fws.gov>**

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