Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

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Blanding's Turtle

Emydoidea blandingii

State Status: **Threatened**
Federal Status: None

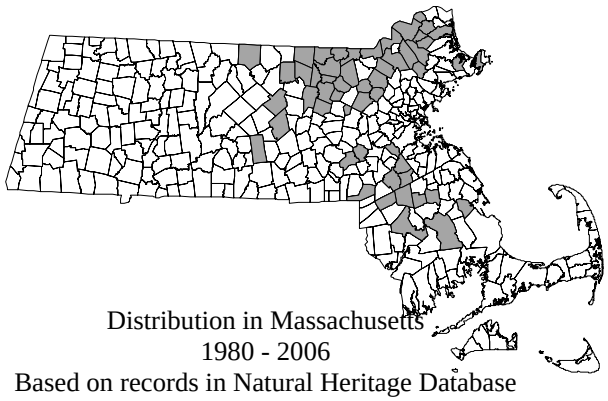
Photo by Susan Speak

DESCRIPTION: The Blanding's Turtle is a mid-sized turtle ranging between 16 and 22 cm (6-9 in.) in shell length. Its high-domed carapace (top shell) is dark and covered with pale yellow flecking. The lower shell (plastron) is yellow with large black blotches on the outer posterior corner of each scute (scale). The plastron is hinged, allowing movement; however, the shell does not close tightly. In older individuals, the entire plastron may be black. The most distinguishing feature is its long, yellow throat and chin, which makes it recognizable at a distance. Males have slightly concave plastrons, females have flat plastrons. The tails of males are thicker and their cloacal opening (the common orifice of the digestive, reproductive and urinary systems) is located beyond the edge of the carapace. Hatchlings have a brown carapace and brown to black plastron, and range between 3.4 and 3.7 cm (1.3-1.5 in.) in length.

SIMILAR SPECIES: This species could be confused with the Eastern Box Turtle (*Terrapene carolina*). The Eastern Box Turtle can have a yellow chin but lacks the yellow throat and neck. Box Turtles are smaller, 10-18 cm (4-7 in.) in shell length. In addition, the Box Turtle has a prominent mid-line ridge (keel) on the carapace, which is absent on Blanding's Turtles. The Blanding's Turtle may also be confused with the Spotted Turtle. However, The Spotted Turtle is much smaller, 3.5-4.5 inches in length and has very distinct round yellow spots.

HABITAT IN MASSACHUSETTS: Blanding's Turtles use a variety of wetland and terrestrial habitat types. Blanding's Turtles have been observed in seasonal pools, marshes, scrub-shrub wetlands and open uplands (Sievert et al. 2003). Habitat use appears to vary according to the individual and the amount of precipitation, with more upland utilization during dry years (Joyal at al. 2001). Wetlands are used for overwintering during their inactive season (Nov-Mar).

RANGE: The Blanding's Turtle is found primarily in the Great Lakes region, extending to Kansas. Several smaller, disjunct populations occur in the East: in southern Nova Scotia, in an arc extending from eastern Massachusetts through southeastern New Hampshire to southern Maine, and in the lower Hudson Valley of New York. These populations (with the exception of those in New Hampshire) are all listed as Threatened or Endangered at the state or provincial level.



Distribution in Massachusetts
1980 - 2006
Based on records in Natural Heritage Database

LIFE CYCLE & BEHAVIOR: Blanding's Turtles overwinter in organic substrate in the deepest parts of marshes, ponds, and occasionally, vernal pools. Some individuals overwinter under hummocks in red maple or highbush blueberry swamps. Upon emergence from overwintering, Blanding's Turtles often leave permanent wetlands and move overland to vernal pools and scrub-shrub swamps, where they feed and mate. It is during the summer months that females estivate in upland forest or along forest/field edges. At night and during periods of hot weather, Blanding's Turtles retreat to "forms". These small terrestrial shelters are found beneath leaf litter, in the grass, under logs or brush located up to 110 m (361 ft) from the nearest wetland. They are called "forms" because when the turtle leaves them, they retain the shape of the turtle's shell.

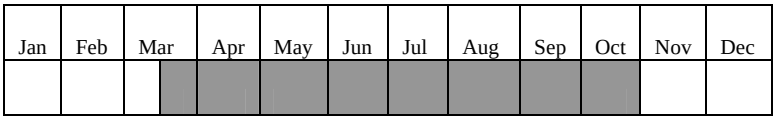
Blanding's Turtles are omnivores, eating both plants and animals. They eat while on land and in the water. The animals Blanding's Turtles are know to eat, either alive or as carrion, consist of Pulmonate snails, crayfish, earthworms, insects, golden shiners, brown bullheads, and other small vertebrates. Vernal pools are an important source of many of these prey items. The plants that Blanding's Turtles have been known to eat include coontail, duckweed, bulrush, and sedge.

Courtship and mating takes place during the spring and early summer and typically occurs in water. Baker and Gillingham (1983) reported that in seminatural conditions male Blanding's Turtles exhibit a variety of behaviors during mating including: chasing, mounting, chinning, gulping, swaying, violent swaying, and snorkeling. Chinning occurs after the male is mounted, if the female moves forward the male will start gulping (taking in water and expelling it over the female's head). Gulping is typically followed by swaying and escalates to violent swaying if the female remains motionless.

Females will remain in wetland or vernal pool habitat until they begin nesting. The majority of nesting occurs in June in open areas with well-drained loamy or sandy soils, such as: dirt roads, powerline right-of-ways, residential lawns, gravel pits and early successional fields. Female Blanding's Turtles reach sexual maturity at 14-20 years of age (Congdon *et al.*, 1993; Congdon and van Loben Sels, 1993) and may travel great distances, often more than 1 km (3280 ft), to find appropriate nesting habitat (Grgurovic and Sievert, 2005). Females typically begin nesting during the daylight and continue the process until after dark.

Blanding's Turtles display temperature-dependent sex determination; eggs incubated below a pivotal temperature that lies between 26.5°C and 30°C (79.7-86°F) produce males, and higher temperatures produce females (Ewert and Nelson 1991). Typical clutch size ranges from 10 to 12 eggs. Hatchlings emerge in the late August and September. The typical size of a hatchling is about 3.5 cm (1.4 in.) and 10 g (0.35 oz).

ACTIVE PERIOD



THREATS: Blanding's Turtles are particularly vulnerable because they travel very long distances during their active season, do not reproduce until late in life (14-20 yrs), and have low nest and juvenile survivorship. These traits make them extremely sensitive to even a 1-2% increase in adult mortality. Roads are the primary cause of adult mortality. Blanding's Turtles travel to multiple wetlands throughout a single year (typically 3-6) and adult females travel to nesting habitats, crossing roads in the process.

As this turtle is relatively difficult to study, it is not known how great a decline this species has experienced. In Massachusetts, few nesting sites are currently known and a variety of factors are attributed to this species' low numbers. Habitat loss, degradation, and fragmentation (i.e. roads) are driven by human activities such as commercial and residential expansion. Other threats include illegal collection, unnaturally inflated rates of predation in suburban and urban areas, agricultural and forestry practices, and natural succession (i.e. loss of nesting habitat).

MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS:
Using a turtle habitat model developed by UMass and NHESP records, Blanding's Turtle habitat needs to be assessed and prioritized for protection based on the extent, quality, and juxtaposition of habitats and their predicted ability to support self-sustaining populations of Blanding's Turtles. Other considerations should include the size and lack of fragmentation of both wetland and upland habitats and proximity and connectivity to other relatively unfragmented habitats, especially within existing protected open space.

Given limited conservation funds, alternatives to outright purchase of conservation land is an important component to the conservation strategy. These can include Conservation Restrictions (CRs) and Agricultural Preservation Restrictions (APRs). Another method of protecting large blocks of land is through the regulatory process by allowing the building of small or clustered roadside developments in conjunction with the protection of large areas of unimpacted land.

Habitat management and restoration guidelines should be developed and implemented in order to create and/or maintain consistent access to nesting habitat at key sites. This is most practical on state-owned conservation lands (i.e. DFW, DCR). However, educational materials should be made available to guide private land owners on appropriate management practices for Blanding's Turtle habitat.

Alternative wildlife corridor structures should be considered at strategic sites on existing roads. In particular, appropriate wildlife corridor structures should be considered for bridge and culvert upgrade and road-widening projects within Blanding's Turtle Habitat. Efforts should be made to inform Mass Highways of key locations where these measures would be most effective for turtle conservation.

Educational materials are being developed and distributed to the public in reference to the detrimental effects of keeping our native turtles as pets (an illegal activity that reduces reproduction in the population), releasing pet store turtles (which could spread disease), leaving cats and dogs outdoors unattended (particularly during the nesting season), feeding suburban wildlife (which increases numbers of natural predators to turtles), and driving ATVs in nesting areas from June-October. People should be encouraged, when safe to do so, to help Blanding's Turtles cross roads (always in the direction the animal was heading); however turtles should never be transported to "better" locations. They will naturally want to return to their original location and likely need to traverse roads to do so.

Increased law enforcement is needed to protect our wild populations, particularly during the nesting season when poaching is most frequent and ATV use is common and most damaging.

Forestry Conservation Management Practice guidelines should be applied on state and private lands to avoid direct turtle mortality. Seasonal timber harvesting restrictions apply to Blanding's Turtle habitat and to stands with wetlands. Motorized vehicle access to timber harvesting sites in Blanding's Turtle habitat is restricted to times when the Blanding's Turtle is overwintering. Hand felling in wetland areas is required in order to maintain structural integrity of overwintering sites.

Finally, a statewide monitoring program is needed to track long-term population trends in Blanding's Turtles.

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