
 STATUS OF THE WOOD TURTLE
 (Clemmys insculpta)
 IN VIRGINIA

by Robert C. Simpson*
 and Heather Simpson*

Middletown, VA

New information on the range and locally high population densities of the wood turtle in VA.

On a field trip, the wild-life management class of Lord Fairfax Community College (Middletown, VA), was delighted to discover a wood turtle, a species which was endangered in Virginia. However, Don MacDonald, a student and local resident of 30 years proclaimed "they were still common in the area." And, indeed, the next class period produced two wood turtles and an eastern box turtle (Terrapene carolina carolina), which his children had found. He also had a wealth of turtle information volunteered by his grandmother. Her name for the box turtle (T. c. carolina) was "wood" turtle. The wood turtle (C. insculpta) was called a "skiddlepot", "skillpot", or "siddlepot." She described the wood turtle (C. insculpta) as being quite common, but not as common as the box turtle (T. c. carolina). Years ago they used to make soup out of the wood turtle, but this practice is no longer continued. Other long-time residents also called the box turtle a "wood" turtle, and "skiddlepot" was the most frequently used name for the wood turtle.

However, some people used "skiddlepot" for the soft-shell turtle (Trionyx s. spiniferus), or for the painted turtle (Chrysemys picta), or for snapping turtles (Chelydra serpentina) while, to other non-discriminating residents, all turtles were "skiddlepots." In some parts of the wood turtle's range it is called the "redleg" (Conant, 1975, p.48). In Virginia, this name is apparently not used even though the local people frequently refer to it as "the turtle with red legs."

Requests for wood turtle information were soon answered. John Dunn used an old wood turtle shell for a doorstop and described the turtles as common along trout streams in Frederick County, VA. Jack Chamberlain, a biology teacher in Winchester, VA, had a student bring eight live wood turtles into school one day. These specimens were from near North Mountain and road # 522. Other reports came

from both Frederick and Shenandoah Counties. The turtles were locally common at Back Creek, Cedar Creek, Pembroke Springs, Star Tannery, an area west of Winchester, and the region between Strasburg and Wardensville, VA. Most of the turtles were either found crossing roads or along the flood plains of small creeks where pawpaw (Asimina triloba) and bladdernut (Staphlea trifoliata) grow. There were also several reports from counties in West Virginia immediately bordering VA. Kelly Ramsey reported the species as locally common in Hardy County, WV. At the end of summer (1975) the school's file records showed wood turtles to be the third most common turtle in northwestern VA. Only the box turtle and painted turtle were more frequently recorded.

During the summer of 1976 more records were received. The wood turtle's present known range in VA now includes a heavy concentration along the edge (eastern) of North Mountain in FREDERICK County, and south at least to Edinburg and Columbia Furnace in SHENANDOAH Co.

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VaHS BULLETIN is a newsletter appearing at least four times a year. Its pages are open for articles or comment on topics related to Virginian herpetology. The principal activity is the state survey of reptiles and amphibians.

VaHS BULLETIN is sent, gratis, to Virginia's university and college biology, zoology, and natural science departments. Science and biology teachers --high school or junior high-- may receive the VaHS BULLETIN (including membership) at \$1.3

STATUS of the WOOD TURTLE
IN VIRGINIA, Continued:

There are records from Woodstock; Strasburg, Middletown, and Stephen's City, but most of the population appears to be west of US #11. Even though extensive field work was done in Fort Valley, and the habitat seemed ideal for the wood turtle, this species was curiously absent in that locality. There are two old records from FAIRFAX County and single records from ARLINGTON and from LOUDOUN Counties. A real search should be made to see if wood turtle colonies still exist at these locations. A sight record, from about 10 years ago, between the Beltway (I-495) and Great Falls. (Tobey, 1976, VaHS-B #78) indicates that wood turtles might still be present in northeastern VA.

The LOUDOUN County record may be an indication that the wood turtle could be found along streams at the base of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Our limited data indicates that, at least at the extreme edge of the wood turtle's range, there may be some correlation between the mineral content of the substrate and the occurrence of the species.

In Virginia, wood turtles are frequently associated with alluvial areas at the base of shale barrens. Limestone rocks in the turtle's home range may also be important.

The author would appreciate habitat information with wood turtle records:

Specifically, the soil and bedrock type would be very important. If there is another type of bedrock within the home range of each individual turtle, this should also be recorded.

A thorough study should be done to determine the exact range and population density of the wood turtle and, consequently, its status in the herpetofauna of Virginia. In northwestern Virginia the wood turtle has a higher population density than former records indicated, even though the range does seem very restricted.

(Prof.) Robert C. Simpson*
and (Mrs.) Heather Simpson*
P. O. Box # 48
MIDDLETOWN, VA 22645

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Conant, R. (1975) A FIELD GUIDE to REPTILES and AMPHIBIANS of EASTERN and CENTRAL NORTH AMERICA, Houghton Mifflin Company Boston, MA

Tobey, F.J., Jr. (1976) VaHS BULLETIN No.78, page 4, (editor's note).

POST SCRIPT:

VaHS BULLETIN No. 76, p.3 listed the wood turtle (Clemmys insculpta) first among five endangered reptiles. The listing was based upon a late '73 study by Wayne P. Russ of VPI&SU entitled "The Rare and Endangered Terrestrial Vertebrates of Virginia" --- a Master's Thesis, Blacksburg, VA.

The wood turtle (Clemmys insculpta) should, as a result of Prof. Simpson's study, be considered and listed as "peripheral" in Virginia, since its range comes into the northern counties of the state. FT

Written comments should be sent to the author; a copy to the editor, VaHS BULLETIN, P.O. Box #1376 LEESBURG, VA 22075

SCARLET SNAKE RECORD FOR
WESTERN VIRGINIA: OTHERS?

The distribution map for scarlet snakes in the 2nd edition of the FIELD GUIDE (Conant, 1975, Map #152) shows an isolated area for the northern subspecies, Cemophora coccinea copei, in central western Virginia. It may be desirable to place "on the record" the details of the capture upon which the spot was based.

On June 14, 1944, while walking along U.S. #60 about 1 mile west of Covington, ALLEGHANY Co., VA, I spotted, just off the pavement, a small very flattened and dried snake which was totally unfamiliar to me. Soon after soaking it in warm water to restore the form and color, the specimen was put into alcohol and sent to Dr. Conant for identification. Recognizing it to be a scarlet snake, he suggested that it be sent on to Dr. Arnold Grobman who, at that time, was studying Cemophora. Dr. Grobman confirmed the identification and further specified that the specimen represented the northern subspecies which at the time (1945) hadn't been formally reestablished. The specimen has been in my possession for the past 20 years or so, but has now (1977) been deposited in the U. S. National Museum of Natural History (Smithsonian).

The circumstances of its discovery leave somewhat unsettled the status of this form in western Virginia. Since only one was found during a decade of personal collecting in the area, it might be argued that the specimen had been caught in eastern Virginia, kept as a pet, and escaped from an automobile to be subsequently run over at the spot where I found it. Alternately, C. coccinea is a notoriously secretive species, and its natural occurrence in the upper valley of the James River is, of course, paralleled by that of the six-lined racerunner and the southeastern five-lined skink, to mention only two reptiles with similar geographic ranges.

My personal opinion favors the likelihood that the specimen in question represents a small, naturally occurring population in ALLEGHANY Co., VA.

June 9, 1977

(Dr.) Richard L. Hoffman**
Radford College
RADFORD, VA 24142

Editor's note:
These explanatory notes shed light on the range of the scarlet snake in Virginia. We hope that a regular feature can be presented in each issue from similar collecting notes!

VaHS MEMBERSHIP CARDS

A membership card was sent to all members with VaHS BULLETIN No. 82.

If an error has been made please bring it to the Secretary's attention at your earliest convenience.

If you do not want to be a VaHS member and a card was sent, simply return it with (or without) comments on your position.

A MEMBERSHIP ROSTER is in early stages of assembly. We will need your help in making certain that your address, name, and status are correct. Check the address on your current issue of VaHS BULLETIN.

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATIONS OR RENEWALS ARE STILL TIMELY, IF SENT SOON!

All membership renewals or applications must be accompanied by a VaHS application or renewal form. (The form appears at the bottom of the last page in each issue of VaHS-B.) The form is used for both renewals or initial VaHS membership applications. It becomes a permanent file record. If you are renewing membership, the year you first became a VaHS member should be put after "introductory" () in the brackets. ICB/ft

The use of the form will guarantee that you'll receive VaHS B and credit!

WIDE COLOR VARIATION SEEN
IN EASTERN BOX TURTLES

(continued from column one:)

NORTHWEST RIVER PARK

A color photograph of an extremely ornate and brilliantly colored eastern box turtle (Terrapene c. carolina) has been sent to VaHS by (Mr.) George S. Morrison* Rt.#2, Box 371-U, King George, VA 22485. He states that "all of the turtle's physical features are those of an eastern box turtle, but the colors are extraordinary." We certainly have to agree. It's a shame we can't reproduce it here.

Kentucky Press) states regarding the eastern box turtle: ". . . The carapace is brownish, with an extremely variable yellow or orangish pattern of radiating lines, spots, bars, or irregular blotches on each scute."

The City of Chesapeake has recently opened a 763-acre wooded park called Northwest River Park. It lies 8 miles east of the Great Dismal Swamp in the southeast corner of Chesapeake (formerly NORFOLK County) VA. It is bordered on three sides by natural waterways: Indian Creek, Northwest River, and Smith Creek. The park is open all year, 7 days a week, and offers all recreational activities including nature study. (Mr.) Gary M. Williamson* longtime member of VaHS is park ranger.

The late Dr. Doris M. Cochran, curator of reptiles at the U.S. National Museum of Natural History, was extremely fond of box turtles and often showed a collection of shells that had been picked up in areas where specimens (eastern box turtles) did not survive aestivation. These shells showed a remarkable range of color both background and pattern on the carapace. Concerning these colorful patterns, Dr. Carl H. Ernst** and Dr. Roger Barbour's "TURTLES of the U. S." (1972, University of

Dr. Roger Conant's FIELD GUIDE (1975) states: "A 'land turtle' with a high domelike shell and an extremely variable coloration pattern. Both upper and lower shells may be yellow, orange, or olive on black or brown; either dark or light colors may predominate."

One piece of excellent advice served up in the introduction (p.2) states: "In trying to make identifications remember that animals are not cut out by die-stamping machines or patterned by a trip through a printing press. Variation is a normal part of nature, and some species may show bewildering modifications of coloration and pattern."

We hope to present a list which he has gathered of the local herpetiles at an early date plus any collecting notes Gary may have taken in the area. Gary has offered to cooperate with (Dr.) A. J. Bullard on his search for Hyla andersoni in SE VA.

VaHS BULLETIN No. 81 was mailed to:

521 in Virginia
118 in other states

639 total

* VaHS member
** VaHS director

USE THE VaHS
MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION OR
RENEWAL FORM APPEARING AT
BOTTOM OF THE LAST INSIDE
PAGE OF EACH BULLETIN.

However, PLEASE NOTE:
VaHS is trimming its "out of state list" and, soon will trim its VA list for mailing economies. JOIN and SUPPORT the VaHS now!

CONTRIBUTE BRIEF ARTICLES,
IDEAS, OR COLLECTING NOTES
TO THE VaHS BULLETIN.

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NEXT MEETING OF THE EASTERN

SEABOARD HERPETOLOGICAL LEAGUE

The Eastern Seaboard Herpetological League (ESHL) will meet in the Frankford Plains Community House in Augusta, New Jersey on 8 October 1977.

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION,

WRITE:

(Mr.) Tom G. BLOOMER
CROSS CREEK FARMS
AUGUSTA, N.J. 07822

Host is the North New Jersey Herpetological Society formerly the Muhlenberg Group. The spot is just 2 miles from Branchville, in Sussex County, New Jersey. ...

FUNNEL-TRAPPING GREATER SIRENS IN VA SUGGESTED

"SALAMANDERS IN VIRGINIA" FEATURED IN JUNE WILDLIFE

Continued from column one:

"... I did not realize that there are so few records for the greater siren (Siren lacertina) in Virginia. I feel most certain that if funnel-trapping were used in swampy habitats below the fall line (i.e., on the Coastal Plain, Tidewater) you would find greater sirens throughout the area. ... I strongly suggest that the funnel trapping technique be tried. There is no trick to it at all. Just pick a likely looking swamp and put a plastic fish-type funnel trap or several dozen in it at depths not exceeding the maximum diameter of the trap (so the sirens can rise to breathe). Water with a maximum of submergent and emergent aquatic vegetation, not over a foot in depth, is preferable. No bait is required and the trap should be left overnight. Spring and fall are better than summer.

(Dr.) Frederick R. Gehlbach
Department of Biology
Baylor University
Waco, Texas 76703

Editor's Note:

Since Some licensing or permit aspects are likely we asked Col. John H. McLaughlin,* Chief, Law Enforcement Div, VA Commission of Game and Inland Fisheries, about it.

"Thanks for your letter concerning the possible trapping of the greater siren (S. lacertina). I assume that the traps for these animals would be set below the fall line and in tidal areas. ... The Marine Resources Commission is responsible for salt water fish, commercial operations and all methods of taking these fish below the fall line. Since the traps for the siren would be in their jurisdiction, I called Mr. Bob Hancock, Chief of Law Enforcement, Virginia Marine Resources Commission, 2401 West Avenue, Newport News, VA 23607."

"He could see no particular problem in the use of the proposed traps, but it would certainly be advisable for anyone using them to contact their Commission (address above). Be sure to mark the traps. This, would eliminate their being mistaken for eel or fish traps. ..."

Sincerely,

(Col.) John H. McLaughlin*
Chief, Law Enforcement Division, Com. on Game and Inland Fisheries
Box #11104, RICHMOND, VA 23230

* VaHS member
** VaHS director

The June 1977 issue of VIRGINIA WILDLIFE carries the latest of the series of articles on reptiles and amphibians by (Mr.) Joseph C. Mitchell.* The article is a good general summary of the varieties to be found in this state despite some notable typographical errors. (VaHS BULLETIN No.80 will be useful for the correct spelling of the standard common and the scientific names of VA. species.)

VIRGINIA WILDLIFE artist and photographer, Mr. Carl "Spike" Knuth, deserves plaudits along with the author for his centerfold illustrations of many of the salamanders, waterdog, mudpuppy, amphiuma, siren, and hellbender. (We hope reprints will be available, eventually, with corrections included.)

Joseph C. Mitchell*, now temporarily out of the United States on an environmental research assignment in cooperation with the government of a southern neighbor Nation, will be returning to active VA HS participation in fall, 1977. Messages can be sent in care of VaHS P.O. Box #1376, Leesburg, VA., 22075 or his U. of T. address:

Mr. Joseph C. Mitchell*
Graduate Ecology Program
408 10th Street/U. of T.
KNOXVILLE, TN 37916

"THE RAT:

LAPDOG of the DEVIL"
by Thomas Y. Canby
photos by
James L. Stanfield

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC
July 1977 pp. 60-87

The author notes: "This year in the U.S. alone, rats will bite thousands of humans, inflicting disease, despair, terror. They will destroy perhaps a billion dollars' worth of property, excluding innumerable 'fires of undetermined origin' they will cause by gnawing insulation from electrical wiring. In a world that is haunted by threat of famine, they will destroy approximately a fifth of all food crops planted."

"When we speak of rats," explained Professor Wm.B. Jackson, director of the Environmental Studies Center at Ohio's Bowling Green State University, "we're dealing with one of the most numerous and successful mammals on earth, excepting only man himself."

The article ticks off the abilities of rats-----
They can:

- (1) Wriggle through a hole no larger than a quarter;
- (2) scale a brick wall as though it had rungs;
- (3) swim half a mile and tread water for 3 days;
- (4) gnaw thru lead pipes and cinder-blocks with chisel teeth

Continued from column one:

that exert an incredible 24,000 pounds per square-inch; (5) survive being flushed down a toilet and enter buildings by the same route; and (6) multiply so rapidly that a pair could have 15,000 descendants in a year's life span.

The article in NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC leaves the impression that it is man who is to blame, in great part, for the success of rats. A caption for one of the illustrations says: "In primal Edens snakes and other predators probably kept the rat at bay. An Indian python in the Madras snake park demonstrates: crush, . . . and gulp, . . . But pythons don't patrol city streets, where the rat's main enemy, man, is also its greatest benefactor ..."

Observation: Allowing rat snakes to survive in the Virginia countryside might solve some rural rodent control problems. This GEOGRAPHIC article is extremely readable! FT

"RAT SOCIETIES" by Richard Lore and David Flannelly

SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN
May 1977
pp. 106-116

The authors observe: "... the brown rat (Rattus norvegicus) is omnivorous and can thrive on anything and everything human beings eat. ... Their nocturnal habits, coupled with the fact that they live in subterranean burrows or other equally inaccessible sites, enable them to survive quite severe environments and to avoid direct confrontations with human beings. Finally, rats have a comparatively high reproductive rate, and their ability to co-exist with man provides them with a margin of safety against many natural predators such as snakes, owls, and a variety of small carnivorous mammals. . . ."

"Rats' social systems are fluid and therefore capable of rapid change when they are confronted with the characteristic human tendency to alter environments in radical fashion." The authors note that "in many mammalian species aggressive interchanges between sexual partners are common, but in rats (such) activity is remarkably peaceful."

VA. SPECIMENS IN VPI & SU
BIOLOGY DEPARTMENT MUSEUM
HERPETOLOGICAL COLLECTION

A collection of reptiles and amphibians is housed in the Museum of the Biology Department, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA. Although a census has not been taken, first estimates show that there are about 1,000 lots which may contain from 3,000 to 5,000 specimens. This may represent 23 families, 60 genera, and 115 species and subspecies.

This collection began with a small nucleus gathered by Dr. Duke Wilder, and other students and members of the Biology Department staff. Brian Craig* of Bedford, VA, donated a representative collection of snakes from BEDFORD County. Recently, additions have come from the tireless efforts of Chris A. Pague* who has made important additions to the collection from the Appalachians of North Carolina and Virginia and from the Coastal Plain of these two states.

Additional specimens for the VPI & SU collections are being held in a unit called the Amelia County Extension Collection at the County Extension (VPI & SU) Office, Amelia, VA. It is under the care of Mr. Michael J. Clifford*, County Extension Agent.

Continued from column one:

A large collection of herpetiles was donated by the University of Virginia. This material was gathered by Dr. W. Leslie Burger (a VaHS past-president*) and his associates in the late 1950's and early 1960's. This collection was stored until 1976 at the Park Headquarters, Seward Forest, Triplett, BRUNSWICK Co., VA. All of this has now been curated. Facilities for study in the museum are provided by the Biology Department.

The collections at VPI&SU Blacksburg, VA are now available for study or loan to qualified persons upon application.

(Dr.) Robert D. Ross**
Biology Department
V.P.I. and S.U.
Blacksburg, VA
24061

Editor's Note:

The VPI and SU collection now assumes significance as, perhaps, the largest collection of Virginian herpetiles in the area. It is good to know that the Burger Collection, a portion of which has been carried on the VaHS distribution maps as Collection No. 4, has found a safe harbor. In that collection alone are many state and county records. FJT

STATEWIDE INTEREST IN THE
"VIRGINIA INDEX" TO FIELD
GUIDE BY DR. CONANT (1975)

VaHS B #80 has proven to be a "best seller." We have received over 100 requests for the issue from people who have not been on the mailing list.

"Virginia Index" to Dr. Roger Conant's revised (1975) FIELD GUIDE TO REPTILES and AMPHIBIANS was advertised as "freely available from VaHS" in a number of VA forestry, camping, and outdoors publications. Requests have come in from all over Virginia and a few from adjacent states.

The mail has been swamped with requests for VaHS-B #80 (the Virginia Index) new and renewed membership applications, news notes, collecting data, good news from the VaHS Treasurer on the number of responses to the VaHS program support drive.

Scouters (adult leaders in Scouting, USA) have responded to notices that ran in the SCOUTERS' NEWS-LETTERS from six Scouting Councils covering the Commonwealth of Virginia.

To date, we have received over 100 names and addresses for Reptile Study and other merit badge counselors and scout camp staff.

* VaHS member
** VaHS director

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APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP IN VaHS, or MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL

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