SUWANNEE COOTER

Pseudemys concinna suwanniensis

Order: Testudines
Family: Emydidae
FNAI Ranks: G5T3/S3
U.S. Status: none
FL Status: none

Description: A medium-sized to large (to 17 in. = 430 mm shell length) freshwater basking turtle characterized by a nearly black upper shell (carapace) with fine yellow markings, and an orange-yellow lower shell (plastron) with a variable amount of black pigment (often fading in adults) along the seams between scales. Fine yellow lines midway along the carapace (on the large costal scales) often in form of concentric circles or backward-facing C's. Bridge and underside of carapacial rim with complete set of black spots, often containing concentric yellow circles. Head and neck bear yellow stripes but no blotches; iris of eye often light blue-green; hind feet black above.

Similar Species: May co-occur with several other cooters and sliders. Most have straight yellow to red lines or bars on scales of carapace, rather than circles or C's. Plastron of Florida cooter, *Pseudemys floridana*, is plain yellow; that of slider, *Trachemys scripta*, is yellow but usually with two or more black spots toward front and rear; and that of Florida red-bellied turtle, *P. nelsoni*, is generally plain yellow-orange to reddish, although young individuals may have black spots and semi-circles. Slider has a yellow blotch or solid dark color rather than stripes behind each eye, and vertical stripes on skin on either side of tail. Compare also Barbour's map turtle (*Graptemys barbouri*; see species account). Another race of river cooter (*P. c. concinna*), with somewhat broader yellow and orange lines on carapace and stripes on hind feet, occurs west of the Apalachicola, with the two intergrading in the Apalachicola region.

Habitat: Rivers and large streams, including alluvial, blackwater, and spring-run streams, often with dense aquatic vegetation upon which species feeds. Occasionally enters estuaries at river mouths. Basks extensively on logs and floating vegetation mats. Nests on high banks and bars above floodplain.

Seasonal Occurrence: Present year-round but less conspicuous in cold weather;

basks regularly from spring through fall and on warm winter days; nests late March - early August, with hatchlings emerging in both fall and spring.

Florida Distribution: Inhabits most Gulf-draining river systems from the Ochlockonee River southward to the the Alafia River of west-central Florida, although apparently absent from some rivers such as the Hillsborough. River cooters also occur in rivers from the Apalachicola westward, but these populations are assigned to *P. c. concinna*, with the understanding that turtles in the Apalachicola-Ochlockonee region probably are intergradient (Jackson and Walker 1997, Jackson 2006).

Range-wide Distribution: Nearly restricted to Florida, but extends upstream in the Suwannee River system into southern Georgia. Other subspecies of river cooter inhabit much of the southeastern United States, with populations extending north to Illinois and west to Texas.

Conservation Status: Although populations have declined, this turtle is still relatively common in many rivers. Large stretches of several inhabited rivers are bordered by or included within public lands. Pollution poses a potential threat to all rivers and may have extirpated the Fenholloway River population.

Protection and Management: Maintain natural ecological integrity of inhabited rivers, including upstream stretches. Prevent all forms of riverine pollution as well as impoundment, channel dredging, and removal of snags. Avoid use of herbicides to control aquatic weeds, as this may destroy the food supply of this herbivorous turtle. At least some open to sparsely canopied upland habitat needs to be maintained along rivers to provide nesting sites that are warm enough to produce female offspring.

References: Ashton and Ashton 1991, Bartlett and Bartlett 1999, Conant and Collins 1991, Ernst et al. 1994, Jackson and Walker 1997, Moler (ed.) 1992.

Suwannee Cooter ***Pseudemys concinna suwanniensis***

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