

extirpated

Have You Seen Me?



The Midland Smooth Softshell Turtle is, without a doubt, the rarest turtle in Pennsylvania, having only been confirmed twice (most recently in 1901). This may be slightly misleading, however, and the apparent scarcity of these turtles in the early 1900's may just be an artifact of its out-of-the-way nature. Currently, it is listed as extirpated in Pennsylvania due to loss of habitat and pollution. The two reports in the state were from the Ohio River near Pittsburgh and from the Allegheny/Clarion Rivers in northern Armstrong County. Both of these have experienced either heavy damming and/or pollution in the past century.

Throughout its current known range, the midland smooth softshell turtle prefers to live in large, clean rivers. It basks less often than the spiny softshell turtle, which is why this species may not have been reported more often even when it was more common. These turtles tend to stay near deeper water within the river where the bottom is sandy or silty.

Easily confused with its spiny-shelled relative, the smooth softshell lacks the pointy projections on the front of the carapace (top shell). The other main difference is that the smooth softshell lacks a distinct ridge between the nostrils at the front of their snorkel-like head. Females are much larger than males, but both look similar otherwise with their brown or greenish carapaces that may have darker colored streaks or spots. Behind the eyes of this turtle is a pink or peach colored line leading back to the middle of the neck. The neck itself is extremely long, and it is not uncommon to see just the tip of the nose sticking up above the water as the animal takes a breath even as the rest of its body is buried in silt when the turtle ventures near the shallows.

Although it is unlikely that this rare species would have survived the stresses of development, habitat loss, and pollution, it should still be noted that stranger things have happened and someday we may list this turtle as a resident again.

How you can help:

If you find a turtle you believe may be a Midland Smooth Softshell, photograph the animal, document the place and time, and send in your report.

Identification Help:

To find more information on how to identify a Midland Smooth Softshell, including photographs and more characteristics, please visit <http://paherps.com>

Reports:

Please send any information, reports, and photographs to Tim Maret of the Pennsylvania Herpetological Atlas. <http://paherpatlas.org>