

Blanding's turtle

Emydoidea blandingii

Classified as endangered in Illinois, the Blanding's turtle is a Chicago River resident that is suffering from habitat fragmentation and loss, predation, and mortality from traversing roads. Once widespread, they are now restricted to a small number of states and provinces in the Upper Midwest, New England, and southeastern Canada. A late maturing, long-lived species, the Blanding's turtle has demonstrated an inability to cope with events that reduce its population.

The Blanding's turtle is about the size of a small plate. Its most prominent identifying characteristic is its bright yellow chin and throat that makes it appear as if they smile all the time. Their dark shell has numerous, scattered yellow flecks.

Wetlands, especially those with adjacent sandy uplands are necessary to support Blanding's turtles. Calm, shallow waters like rivers and streams, with rich, aquatic vegetation are especially preferred. Blanding's turtles typically overwinter in the muddy depths of marshes, ponds, and streams. Small, ephemeral wetlands are frequently used by Blanding's turtles in spring and early summer, when these habitats provide basking sites, mating opportunities and food. They eat aquatic vegetation, macroinvertebrates, frogs and even small fish.

Blanding's turtles have delayed maturation, not reaching sexual maturity until they are 12 years old. Females lay only one clutch of eggs each year. Clutch size varies, usually about 10-20 eggs, with older, larger females often laying larger clutch sizes. Female Blanding's turtles often nest in agricultural fields. This may be hazardous to both adult females and nests in the form of chemicals, disking, machinery usage, increased nest predation, and shade produced by growing crops.

Females may travel up to one mile overland from their resident marsh to their nest site. This makes them vulnerable to predators and road mortality. Hatchlings often face a long overland journey just to get back to the water. During this journey, hatchlings are extremely vulnerable to predators and automobiles. Juvenile mortality has been estimated to be as high as 93%. Such losses have had an irreversible impact, resulting in the loss of many local turtle populations.

Protecting and restoring the wetland, river and dune habitats for Blanding's turtles is essential for their survival. Also essential is managing lands so as not to further fragment its remaining habitat. These turtles would also benefit greatly from the installation of fences diverting them into tunnels under roads. As of 2012, the Endangered Species Protection Board (ESPB) continues to work with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) on the development of an Illinois Blanding's Turtle Recovery Plan. Captive breeding programs, such as those at the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum and the Lake County Forest Preserve District, are in place across the Chicagoland region in an effort to increase the population.

