

# 2011 “YEAR OF THE TURTLE”

## Cooters



*Peninsular Cooter (Pseudemys floridana peninsularis)*

*Rainbow Run State Park; Dunnellon FL*

*Photo: Molly O'Connor -*

“Cooter” is an unusual name for a turtle and there are several stories of its origin. They, along with sliders, are one of the most abundant and commonly seen turtles in the freshwater aquatic systems of our state. The first problem with distinguishing cooters (*Pseudemys*) from others is how to distinguish them from their close cousins the sliders (*Trachemys*). They are so closely related that Dr. Peter Pritchard, in his book Encyclopedia of Turtles (1979), has them both listed as *Pseudemys*. We use a few characteristics when trying to identify cooters from sliders. First, the sliders have a large yellow patch behind their eye; one subspecies of slider actually has a red patch there. Cooters either have either yellow stripes or very little bright coloration at all. The second characteristic is the shape of the carapace; sliders tend to be rounder where cooters are more oval. The size of the carapace can also be used; cooters have carapace lengths of 32-33 cm where sliders only reach 25-cm. One final characteristic that can be used is the color of the plastron. Adult cooters have a yellow or orange plastron with little or no dark markings. Sliders on the other hand have elaborate dark markings across their plastrons. With a little practice in the field the “turtle watcher” will quickly learn how to tell these two apart.

In Florida the cooters can be separated into three distinct groups; the red-bellies, the river cooters, and the pond cooters. The Florida Red-Belly Turtle (*Pseudemys nelsoni*) is only found in the peninsula part of our state, it has not been recorded west of the Apalachicola River. In that part of Florida it can easily be identified by the reddish-orange plastron and the single stripe on each scute (scale) of the carapace. The Alabama Red-Belly Turtle (*Pseudemys alabamensis*) is an endangered cooter from the Mobile Bay area. It is *very* possible that this species exist in Escambia County Florida, though there are no records of it here as far as we know. Those exploring the Perdido River or other bodies of water along the state line should recognize this species from others by its’ reddish plastron. However, there is a species of freshwater turtle in the Mobile Bay area that could be confused with the Alabama Red-Belly and that is the Southern Painted Turtle (*Chrysemys picta dorsalis*). This turtle also has red markings but can be distinguished from the Red-Belly by the red stripe that runs down the middle of its carapace. Again, there are no records of either of these in our state but those exploring near the state line could encounter one or both.

As the name suggest, river cooters (*Pseudemys concinna*) prefer flowing rivers to quiet ponds. They differ from red-bellies in that their plastrons are yellow with black margins where scutes connect. Their carapace has numerous thin yellow or orange stripes; in this species the striping forms what appears to be a letter “C” on the second costal scute of the plastron (the costal scutes are the rows of scutes between the backbone and the shell edge). These relatively large turtles can be seen basking on logs in rivers all throughout the southeastern United States. In Florida there are two subspecies; the River Cooter (*Pseudemys concinna concinna*) which is found throughout the panhandle of Florida and the Suwannee Cooter (*Pseudemys concinna suwanniensis*) found from Apalachicola to the Orlando area; there are no records of river cooters south of Orlando.

The Pond Cooter (or Florida Cooter; *Pseudemys floridana*) is found throughout the eastern seaboard of the United States from Virginia to Mobile Bay. In this range it can be found in rivers (though rare there), ponds, lakes, ditches, golf courses, retention ponds, and any source of slow flowing water. They differ from river cooters in several ways; their habitat selection, their thin carapace markings do not form the letter “C” on the second costal, and their plastron is completely yellow – no dark markings at all. In Florida there are two recognized subspecies. The Florida Cooter (*Pseudemys floridana floridana*) is found in the Florida panhandle and the Peninsula Cooter (*Pseudemys floridana peninsularis*) is found in the peninsula portion of our state. The difference between these is the pattern of stripes on their heads.



*Florida Red Belly Turtle (Pseudemys nelsoni)*  
Gainesville, FL  
Photo: Molly O'Connor

All species of cooters are vegetarians as adults, feeding on a variety of aquatic plants. Males of this group can be distinguished by their extremely long front claws. These are actually quiet soft and are used to entice females into mating. We have seen them swim to the face of a female, bend their elbows in such a way that the claws point towards her, and then begin to vibrate them very fast – rubbing the tips on her neck as they do. Interestingly we have seen them do this to species and subspecies other than their own 😊. Nesting occurs on the highest/driest ground they can find. If the river banks are steep, they will nest very close to the waters edge. If not, they have been known to move over 75 feet from the rivers edge searching for a good nesting area. Molly and I found a cooter nest in the parking lot of Wakulla State Park; this was a *considerable* distance from the spring itself. Another interesting point of their natural history is the female’s tendency to dig three separate holes right next to each other at the nesting site. Sometimes she will lay eggs in all three holes, sometimes only in one or two. It is thought that this is done to confuse predators trying to locate and eat the eggs. This is the only turtle, to our knowledge, that does this and can be used to identify the nest.

The status of cooters in Florida varies from subspecies. The Suwannee Cooter is one of the four species that the FWC currently has listed in ruling 68A – 25.002. It is believed that the primary issue for this turtle is harvesting by humans for food. George Heinrich, Dr. Dale Jackson, and others have found several trash piles of cooter shells in the Big Bend area of the state. Even though this turtle has had a harvest limit of only two turtles per person it is obvious that this has not slowed some “turtle hunters” down – hence the stronger – NO TAKE – ruling by the FWC in July of 2009. Though the other subspecies of cooters seem to be common in Florida all of them are now protected by Ruling 68A-25.002. In Alabama the Alabama Red-Belly is considered “endangered” by the state and there is a NO TAKE policy in Mobile Bay area.



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