SMOOTH SOFTSHELL
Apalone mutica

Order: Testudines
Family: Trionychidae
FNAI Ranks: G5/S1
U.S. Status: none
FL Status: none

Description: The soft, leathery shell of softshell turtles makes them resemble pancakes with legs. All species have long necks and heads, ending in a snorkel-like nose. The rear feet of these powerful swimmers are strongly webbed. Smooth softshell lacks spines, bumps or sandpapery projections on front edge of upper shell (carapace), and nasal septum (dividing membrane between nostrils) lacks ridges. Carapace of subspecies calvata is olive-gray to brown and typically marked with large spots that may fade in adults, especially females. Lower shell (plastron) pale, top of snout unstriped, feet without pronounced markings. Females may reach 10 in. (254 mm) shell length , males 7 in. (178 mm).

Similar Species: Two other softshell turtles occur in Florida. Both spiny (*Apalone spinifera*) and Florida (*A. ferox*) softshells have bumps, spines, or sandpapery projections on front of carapace, and ridges in the nostrils. Spiny softshells in Florida have two or more dark lines paralleling rear edge of carapace, and feet may be streaked or spotted. Florida softshells are darker, and young have bold yellow lines atop snout.

Habitat: Rivers and large streams; commonly buries itself underwater along edges of and within shallowly inundated sandbars, where it uses its long neck and nose to reach the surface for air.

Seasonal Occurrence: Year-round, but less conspicuous in colder months; nests late spring-early summer.

Florida Distribution: Its occurrence in the western panhandle marks the southeastern periphery of this species' broad range. Although currently known only from the Escambia River near Century, it might occur in some other Florida panhandle rivers.

Smooth Softshell ***Apalone mutica***

Range-wide Distribution: Smooth softshells occupy rivers throughout much of the central United States, centering on the Mississippi River system. Subspecies *calvatus* is limited to Gulf-draining rivers from southeastern Louisiana to western Florida, including southern Mississippi and Alabama.

Conservation Status: Much of land bordering Escambia River is in state ownership. However, water quality of this river is degraded by pollution, particularly from a paper mill in southern Alabama.

Protection and Management: Protect the Escambia River, especially its upper reaches, from any further water quality degradation. Specifically, prevent pollution, siltation, channelization, and impoundment. Maintain active sandbar habitat.

References: Ashton and Ashton 1991, Bartlett and Bartlett 1999, Conant and Collins 1991, Ernst et al. 1994, Moler (ed.) 1992, Mount 1975.

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