SPINY SOFTSHELL
Apalone spinifera

Order: Testudines
Family: Trionychidae
FNAI Ranks: G5/S3
U.S. Status: none
FL Status: none

Description: The soft, leathery shell of softshell turtles makes them resemble pancakes with legs; carapaces are typically brownish, and plastrons white. All species have long necks and heads, ending in a snorkel-like nose. The rear feet of these powerful swimmers are strongly webbed. The carapace of the spiny softshell bears small spines along its front edge and may have a sandpapery texture, and the nasal septum between the nostrils bears a pair of laterally projecting ridges. Spiny softshells in Florida (assigned to the subspecies *A. s. aspera*, the Gulf coast spiny softshell) typically have a light brown carapace with numerous spots and two or more dark lines paralleling the rear edge (though these fade in older adults, especially females, which can become mottled). The feet may be streaked or spotted, and there is a pair of light lines on the side of the head that usually meet toward the neck. Females may reach 21 in. (54 cm) shell length, males 12 in. (30 cm), though both somewhat less in Florida.

Similar Species: Two other softshell turtles occur in Florida. The smooth softshell (*A. mutica*), documented in Florida only from the Escambia River, lacks any spines, bumps, or sandpapery projections at the front of the carapace, and the nasal septum between the nostrils lacks ridges; the dorsal surface of the snout is unstriped, and the feet lack pronounced markings. The Florida softshell (*A. ferox*), which can reach very large size (to 26 in., 67 cm) has low bumps on the front of the carapace, which is otherwise fairly smooth, but there are ridges on the nasal septum. Florida softshells are often darker and less patterned than other species, although young juveniles have bold yellow lines atop the snout.

Habitat: This species inhabits rivers and large streams, where it commonly buries itself in shallow sandbars, using its long neck and nose to reach the surface for air. Though wary, it sometimes can be observed basking on snags or at the water's edge.

Seasonal Occurrence: Present year-round but less conspicuous in colder months; nests late spring to early summer.

Florida Distribution: Occurs in most panhandle river systems from the Perdido to the Ochlockonee just west of Tallahassee. An isolated population also inhabits the St. Marys River in northeastern Florida northwest of Jacksonville. The Florida portion of the Suwannee River system seems to represent a distributional hiatus in the state range.

Range-wide Distribution: Spiny softshells occupy rivers and some lakes throughout much of the central and southern United States, centering on the Mississippi River system, but reaching as far as southeastern Canada and northern Mexico. The subspecies *aspera* extends from eastern Louisiana to southern North Carolina.

Conservation Status: Extensive tracts of floodplain bordering most Florida panhandle rivers are in conservation land, but greater protection is needed along many tributaries. Water quality of some rivers is degraded by pollution and in need of improvement.

Protection and Management: Acquire and protect remaining private floodplains and uplands bordering all occupied rivers and tributary streams; eliminate or closely monitor activities such as timbering that may cause soil disturbance. Maintain natural river and stream flows, and identify and control sources of water pollution. Maintain state regulations that strictly limit take of softshell turtles.

References: Ernst and Lovich 2009, Krysko et al. 2019, Moler 2006, Powell et al. 2016.

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