



Smooth Softshell (*Apalone mutica*)

A-pal-lone mute-ick-ah



**Mike Day*

Description: 4 ½ to 7 inch carapace length for males, 6 ½ to 14 inch carapace length for females. Smooth Softshell turtles are a large turtle species, most notably lacking a hardened, bony carapace with scutes. The carapace is instead characterized as flattened, soft and cartilaginous, ranging in color from brownish to grayish brown with scattered, irregular dark fleck, dots, and dashes. Carapaces of large, adult females may be a much darker, uniform, or nearly uniform brown or olive brown. Blunt tubercles, or projections on the front margins of the carapace distinguish the smooth softshell from the spiny softshell. The skin on the head, neck, and limbs is of a similar color. A narrow yellowish post ocular stripe may also be present. The usually pale colored plastron is quite reduced. Both softshells in Wisconsin can be characterized by their tubular snouts and highly webbed feet.

Taxonomy and Classification:

Life: All living, physical, and animate entities

Domain: Eukaryota

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata/Vertebrata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Testudines

Suborder: Cryptodira

Family: Trionychidae

Subfamily: Trionychinae

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Genus: Apalone

Species: *Apalone mutica**

**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

Similar/Confusing Species: The spiny softshell (*Apalone spinifera*) has spiny tubercles present on the anterior margins of the carapace behind the head and neck, and a wider distribution in Wisconsin than the smooth softshell. The spiny softshell also has lateral projection on the nasal septum as well.

Etymology: Apalone- Apo (separate, solitary, or alone) or Apalos (soft or tender). mutica-mutilis (shortened or docked).

Subspecies: Midland smooth softshell (*Apalone mutica mutica*).

Range & Habitat: Generally restricted in range in Wisconsin to the southwestern quarter and extreme western tier. Smooth softshells prefer larger, permanent bodies of water with sandy or muddy bottoms, mainly including the Wisconsin and Mississippi river ways and their larger tributaries.

Habits & Natural History: Smooth softshell turtles are large, primarily aquatic to semi aquatic species, and the lesser distributed of the two softshell species in Wisconsin, being found primarily in the main river channels of the Mississippi and Wisconsin rivers. Seldom venturing far from permanent water, smooth softshells are fast and powerful swimmers, where they can even outswim some fish, and are primarily carnivorous (feeding on small fish, frogs, aquatic insects, invertebrates, and carrion). Following emergence in March or April, smooth softshells construct nesting sites in sandy areas near the water in May and June, and may be encountered nesting or moving overland. Softshell turtles are also capable of moving quickly on land as well, and have long necks and powerful jaws that they readily use when cornered or restrained.

Phenology: Smooth softshell turtles will begin emerging from overwintering and mating as early as early April through May, and remain active throughout the year through September or October (or sometimes even later in the year if warmer temperatures persist or otherwise permit). Many Wisconsin turtles begin moving over land and are often encountered during May through early July as they search for sandy nesting sites.

Conservation Status: WI Special Concern. Regulated by WI DNR. IUCN Red List Least Concern (LC).

Contact

Authored by Eric Roscoe. For any additional questions, comments, and/or concerns regarding this species, group of species, or this informational sheet, please email and contact the Madison Area Herpetological Society at info@madisonherps.org

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