

Audubon Tracks Rare Turtles in Albany and Catskill

By Richard Haley

LAST MAY, our Assistant Warden/Educator Larry Federman came across a female wood turtle at Audubon and Scenic Hudson's RamsHorn-Livingston Sanctuary in Catskill. The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation lists wood turtles as a Species of Special Concern. The Sanctuary includes the largest surviving tidal marsh in the Hudson River Estuary, and very little is known about wood turtles in a freshwater tidal stream. State Herpetologist Al Breisch at the DEC was interested, and loaned Audubon New York a radio transmitter to attach to the turtle and a receiver to follow the signal. Our Centers and Education Director, Richard Haley, has experience in radio tracking wood turtles in Connecticut.

Just a few weeks later, a male wood turtle turned up on the lawn at the Audubon Headquarters in Albany. Another call was placed to DEC, and soon another wood turtle was carrying a transmitter. Wood turtles are known to occur in the Albany

area, but little is known about exactly where they hibernate, lay eggs and roam in the summer.

Wood turtles spend about half the year in streams, from October through April, and the rest of the year on land, usually within a few hundred yards of a stream. They are often mistaken for either snapping turtles, because of their rough shells, or box turtles, because of the orange highlight on the shell. They eat a wide variety of plants and small animals, including slugs, earthworms, crayfish, and aquatic insects. They have superb abilities to navigate, and solve maze problems more readily than the classic laboratory rat. They can also climb steep slopes, and have been known to climb a 6-foot chain link fence to escape an enclosure. Like many other turtles, their populations have been dropping in recent decade from a combination of habitat loss, being killed by automobiles, and high populations of mid-sized predators such as raccoons, opossums, skunks and other egg predators. The Special Concern listing indicates that this is a species about which we need to gather more information.

The Albany turtle spent most of the summer wandering in the woods near the Audubon Headquarters, though there was a brief time away. Audubon could not locate the signal for several weeks, and then the turtle turned up in Al Breisch's hands, having been picked up in a park in downtown Albany, a few miles from where the turtle was originally found. It is likely that some well-meaning person picked up the turtle and took it to a pond in the park, thinking it needed that habitat. But wood turtles almost never use ponds. The turtle was quickly returned to its home area, and has now settled down in a tributary to the Normanskill to hibernate until the weather warms up.

The RamsHorn wood turtle wandered all summer about the sanctuary, through swamp, marsh, forest and field, and is now down at the bottom of the RamsHorn Creek, also waiting for spring while the tidal waters go back and forth over it every day.

While wood turtles are solitary in the summer, they often hibernate near one another. So Audubon staff will be donning wet suits and getting down into the cold water when the wood turtles come out of hibernation. If there are significant populations in either location, we hope to investigate them further, and to involve students in gathering data about these rarely seen but fascinating creatures.



Albany's male wood turtle wearing DEC tracking transmitter

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Did You Know?

By Jane E. S. Sokolow

The **COTTONWOOD** tree seed is the seed that often stays in flight the longest? Each tiny seed is surrounded by ultra-light white fluff hairs that carry it on the air from anywhere between a minute to a couple of days.

The worst place to stand in an electrical storm is under an **OAK** tree. The mighty oak gets blitzed by lightning more than any other tree. Oaks typically have very deep central roots that grow straight down beneath the tree. Also, hollow water filled cells run up and down in the wood of the oak's trunk. These two qualities make oak trees better grounded and more conductive than trees with shallow roots and closed cells.

The bark of a **REDWOOD** tree is fireproof. Fires that occur in redwood forests take place inside the trees.

The New York Stock Exchange began in 1792 when 24 brokers met under a **BUTTONWOOD** tree facing 68 Wall Street.

The fastest growing tree in the world is the **EUCALYPTUS**. One tree in New Guinea grew 35 ft. in one year. This is a little over 1 in. a day. In contrast, a **SIKA SPRUCE** inside the Arctic Circle, takes some 98 years to grow 11 inches; about 4,000 times slower.

Jane E. S. Sokolow, a member of Audubon's Stewardship Committee, is a science-writing consultant. She currently works with the New York City Parks and Recreation Department and has worked with the American Museum of Natural History, Audubon New York and the National Audubon Society.