



WILDLIFE NOTES

Threatened
Species

Western river cooter



Distinguishing Features

The river cooter (*Pseudemys gorzugi*) is a member of the family Emydidae, which includes all of the box turtles and water turtles. The river cooter has a hard, unribbed upper shell and a lower shell that does not fully close. The lower shell is made up of 12 plates. At least 9 other species of turtles occur in New Mexico along with the river cooter. The river cooter may be distinguished from other turtles by the combination of a flattened lower surface of the chin (as viewed from head-on), and teeth only along the crushing surface of the upper jaw.

Descriptive Details

The color of the river cooter varies. In general, the upper shell of the adult is olive to brown, with

whorls, circles, and long furrows of yellowish or light brown on each of the plates. These turtles have a backward "C" shaped marking on the back edge of the second lateral or side

plate. The under shell is yellow. The head, neck, legs, and tail are greenish, with yellow lines and scrawls. There is usually a broad, yellow blotch behind the eye. The eye is also yellow. This turtle has forelimbs with long toenails, and the tails are relatively long and thick – especially in males. This is a fairly large species which reaches lengths of up to 16 inches. The webbing between their toes is red.

Distribution

This turtle is found from the lower Pecos River drainage – from just downstream of Brantley Dam to Red Bluff Reservoir and including all of the Black and Delaware rivers. All of these locations make up key habitat areas for the river cooter. There is also an unconfirmed sighting at Bitter Lake Na-

tional Wildlife Refuge (Chaves County), but no population has been confirmed as existing there.

Biology

The river cooter is primarily a stream species, preferring waters which have a slow to moderate current, firm bottoms, and abundant aquatic vegetation. In NW Mexico it inhabits streams with relatively clear water and rocky or sandy bottoms. This turtle spends much of its time submerged, resting or searching for food, and leaves the water only to bask and nest. As with all turtles, it must surface to breathe. These turtles are primarily plant eaters, and their diet includes both aquatic and non-aquatic plants. However, some river cooter populations are carnivorous, feeding on crayfish, tadpoles, small fish, snails, and insects – in addition to a variety of plant species. Nests of this species are located in sandy soil, usually within 100 feet of the water. They lay seven to 20 eggs which hatch in August and September. The river cooter can live up to 40 years.

Status

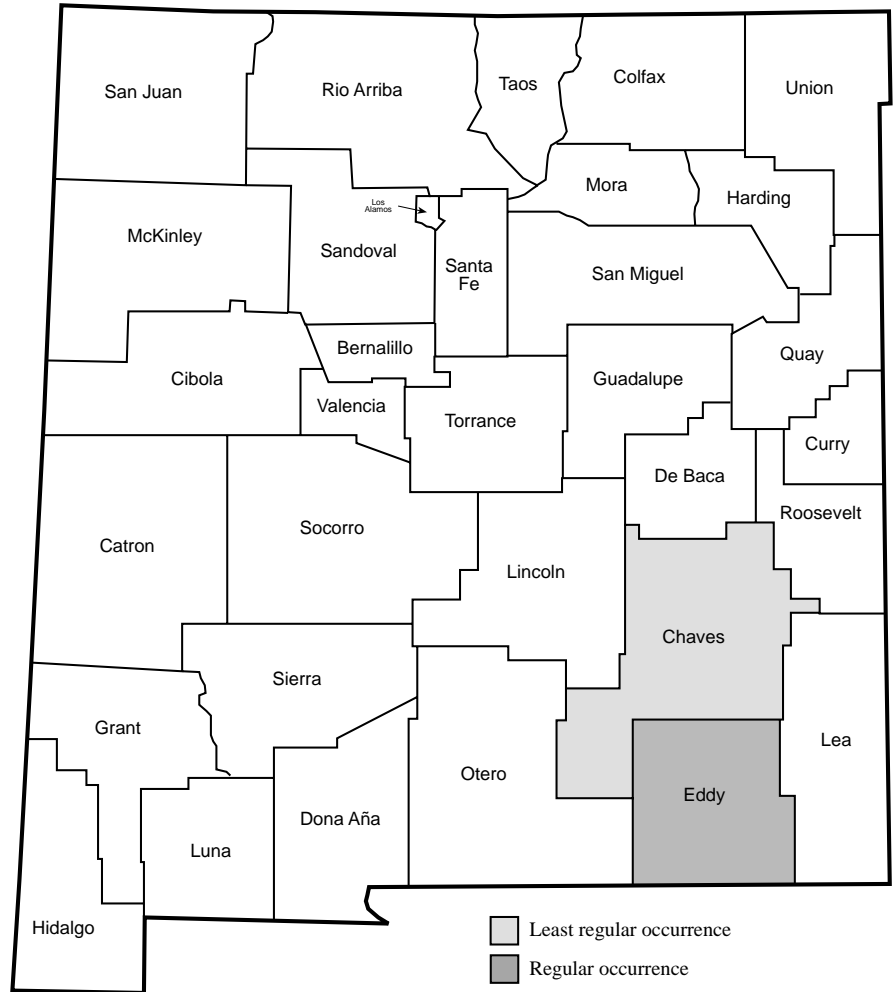
The river cooter is probably secure over most of its range, but some populations are vulnerable and may be subject to declines. In New Mexico, the species appears com-

mon within its restricted range. However, populations have declined – largely due to degradation of habitat through stream-dewatering, loss of vegetation, and pollution. The primary threat to Western river cooters is illegal shooting.

Conservation

The aquatic habitats of this turtle should be protected from loss or alteration if the species is to be maintained in the state. In addition, prohibitions against excessive collecting and other taking should continue.

Updated 2/02



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