



WILDLIFE NOTES

Spiny softshell turtle

Apalone spinifera

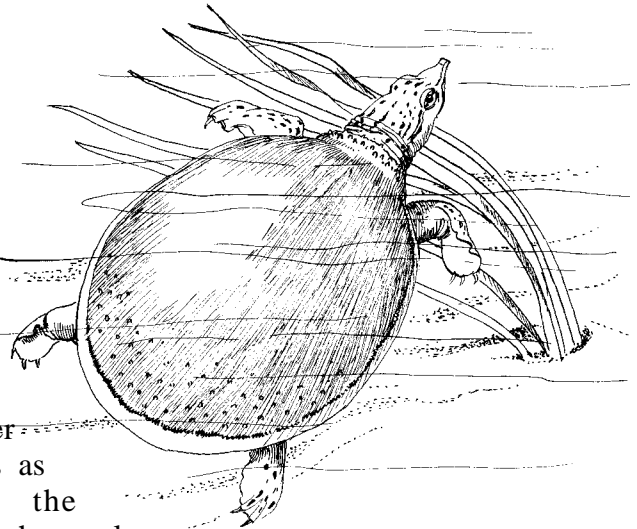
It spends its day basking on riverbanks or mudflats, or swimming in slow waters where its color blends with the vegetation. It is the spiny softshell, a medium-to-large reptile with a leathery carapace or "shell." It is called "spiny" because of the small spines or cones projecting from the front of the shell. The other softshell of New Mexico, *Apalone mutica*, lacks spines.

Softshells are numerous in New Mexico, and they play an important role in wetland communities because they act as scavengers of dead fish. In addition to carrion, they eat insects, mollusks, crayfish, and tadpole. They are found in the lower reaches of New Mexico's major river systems.

A young spiny softshell hatches in the early fall from eggs laid in June or July near the water's edge. In hatching it is already a survivor, as nests are often destroyed by skunks and raccoons. Another threat comes from chang-

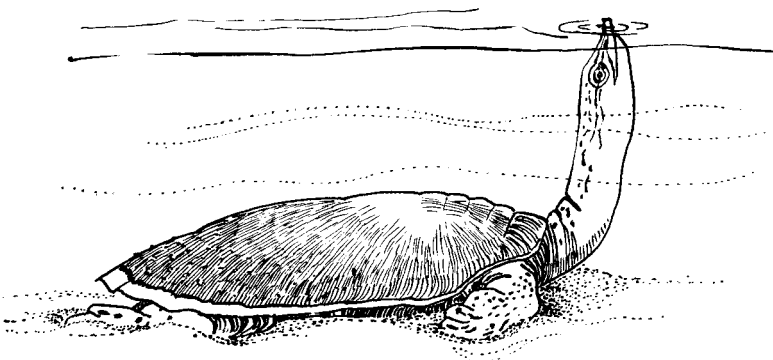
ing water levels that can flood nests. The young turtles inside the eggs can literally drown if the nest is inundated. A severe drop in water level is hazardous as well, because the hatchlings will then have a longer journey from the nest to the safety of the water. Water level fluctuations are usually greatest on man-made reservoirs, where water is stored for flood prevention and later released for community and agricultural uses.

If the young hatchling survives, it will grow from quarter-size to more than two inches in its first year. It may live decades and grow to be 18 inches across. It will live in a marsh, river, or lake with a soft bottom where it can bury itself with mud and silt until it lies completely concealed. It will sleep and hibernate in the mud. When not sleeping



or foraging, it will bask in the sun. The spiny softshell is a wary sun-bather and usually basks facing the water, ready for a quick getaway. Spiny softshells are agile and pugnacious – they can scratch and bite severely.

The adult spiny softshell has few enemies. Its closest brush with death may come when it earns the ire of fishermen because of its bait-stealing tricks. It takes an ecosystem-minded fisherman to resist the temptation to do the old leatherback in, and instead return the bad-tempered turtle to the waterways of New Mexico.



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