DROUGHT IMPACT ON BLANDING'S TURTLE AND EPISTYLIS OCCURRENCE ON PAINTED TURTLES

LEE COUNTY NATURAL AREA GUARDIANS 319 SOUTH MASON, AMBOY, ILLINOIS 61310

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SEPTEMBER 1990 - JUNE 1991

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DROUGHT IMPACT ON BLANDING'S TURTLE

ABSTRACT

The drought of 1988-89 drastically reduced water levels in the wetlands of southwestern Lee County, Illinois. The disappearance of normally permanent aquatic habitat prompted concern by the Lee County Natural Area Guardians (LeeNAG) that Blanding's turtle (Emydoidea blandingi) had as a species been adversely affected. Reports of a landowner familiar with the species seemed to support this concern. Subsequent investigations and observations made after the return of normal water levels failed to confirm the investigators' suspicions.

INTRODUCTION

With the exception of box turtles and southern tortoises, most North American turtles seem to prefer an aquatic environment during that time of year when they are In this respect, Blanding's turtle occupies a active. rather unique position among native chelonians. Where a range of suitable habitats exists, this species exercises considerable freedom of choice. It has been variously described in the literature as "essentially aquatic" (Conant, 1958), "semi-aquatic" (Johnson, 1977) and "essentially terrestrial" (Carr, 1952). These diverse impressions probably reflect the adaptable nature of a creature whose habits are influenced by a number of environmental factors such as the availability of water, the presence (or absence) of food, the time of year and the proximity of nesting grounds. It is likely that other factors play a part as well.

In the Lee County portion of the Green River Lowlands, an area of numerous ponds and wetlands, Blanding's turtle displays a marked affinity for water. Of the 31 individuals collected in the 1989-90 survey, only one was captured on land. The scarcity of water resulting from the 1988-89 drought probably stimulated compensatory responses in local

Emydoidea. The purpose of this report is to suggest what some of those responses might have been.

METHODOLOGY

The low water conditions described above were noted during a 1989-90 LeeNAG survey of Blanding's turtle in the Lee County study area. The drought was in progress when this survey was begun in September 1989. Baseline data on turtle numbers for the period immediately preceding the drought were lacking; therefore, conclusions were by necessity based on observations made during the drought, after the return of normal water levels and to a lesser degree on anecdotal information provided by a landowner. This landowner had followed closely a 1986 turtle study of his wetland and was able to distinguish Blanding's turtle from two other inhabitants, painted turtle (Chrysemys picta) and snapping turtle (Chelydra serpentina). Published reports on the natural history of Emydoidea were examined to gain insight into the turtle's habits. Relative 1986 and 1989-90 water levels were compared for six sites which had produced Blanding's turtles in the earlier survey. Control ponds located near dry ponds were trapped at the height of the drought in 1989 to determine whether 1986 survey specimens had emigrated. These data were then used to establish whether any inhabitants of the permanent sites

moved to revitalized wetlands following the return of normal precipitation in the spring of 1990.

Although not scientific in the strictest sense, these methods represent all that were available under the circumstances and the conclusions drawn from them are considered by the investigators to be broadly valid.

RESULTS

This section usually details the results of procedures outlined in "Methodology". Since the present study is in essence an after-the-fact survey, we will use this space to report on observations made during the drought and following the return of normal water levels.

As stated above, we have no baseline data on Blanding's turtle numbers and distribution for the period immediately preceding the drought. However, some background information is available from the summer of 1986, roughly two years before the onset of dry conditions. This information was gathered during a LeeNAG survey of the yellow mud turtle (Kinosternon flavescens flavescens), conducted in southwest Lee County. In the course of trapping for the latter species, a total of 13 Blanding's turtles were taken from six sites (numbers 2, 3, 11, 14, 16 and 24). Three sites were located in Amboy township, two in May township and one in East Grove township. In 1986, all six sites were fully-charged wetlands.

In 1989, LeeNAG secured a Nongame Checkoff grant to conduct a follow-up survey of Blanding's turtle in the same area. At the time this survey was begun in September, drought conditions had prevailed for some 16 months. The investigators found that four of the six 1986 Blanding's sites (numbers 3, 14, 16 and 24) were dry and the remaining two (numbers 2 and 11) were dramatically reduced in size. The latter two sites were trapped without success. Some water remained in ponds within .5 km of the four dry sites. Trapping was done in these ponds in an effort to capture turtles which may have emigrated. Of four sites sampled, three (numbers 6, 17 and 20) produced no Blanding's turtles. The fourth (site 1) yielded six specimens, none of which carried 1986 survey marks.

During the winter of 1989-90, a landowner reported to the investigators that he had found remains of what he believed to be Blanding's turtles on his property. The site in question is the Guanci/Spears wetland (comprising sites 3, 4 and 5), a 7.5 ha marsh which normally retains water even in relatively dry years. It is the largest site in the study area and produced one Blanding's turtle in the 1986 mud turtle survey. Dependent solely on run-off for its water supply, this marsh had evaporated rapidly throughout the spring of 1988 and by July of that year was completely dry. The owner stated that while repairing duck blinds on

the site in early fall he noticed "a couple dozen" carapaces in and around the dry marsh and that some of them appeared to be those of Blanding's turtles. The investigators decided to conduct a walk-over of the area at the earliest opportunity to confirm this report. The search was carried out on March 11, 1990. At that time, vegetation was sparse and ground visibility very good. Water was restricted to a few shallow pools of perhaps 50 m² or less scattered over the bed of the marsh. The investigators felt that even though 18 months had elapsed since the reported discovery of the carapaces, at least some of them, or parts thereof, should remain.

Two complete circuits were made of the wetland's perimeter, one near the former shoreline and another some 10 m in. The marsh bed itself was then transected at regular intervals and the shallow pools were waded. After searching the entire 7.5 ha in this manner, only three fragmentary carapaces of painted turtles were found. An inspection of the timber and sand ridges surrounding the site turned up nothing, nor were any Blanding's turtle remains seen during the ensuing trapping season. In conclusion, it could not be confirmed that a die-off of *Emydoidea* had occurred at the Guanci/Spears wetland.

Spring and summer of 1990 saw the return of normal precipitation to the local area. The desiccated wetlands

quickly refilled with water and judging from the lush vegetation and abundant fauna, it was difficult to believe that a drought had taken place. Eight of 13 sites trapped during this period produced a total of 25 Blanding's turtles. Of these eight sites, six (3, 4, 5, 14, 16 and 21) had been dry at the end of the 1989 trapping season on The Guanci/Spears wetland (sites 3, 4 and 5), October 16. without water for most of 1988 and 1989, yielded 16 healthy specimens in May and June of 1990. Only one of the 31 individuals captured throughout the survey carried a 1986 survey mark. Although this leaves 12 turtles from that survey unaccounted for, we see no reason to suspect that they succumbed to the drought. Rather, the sheer size of the sample, including 25 individuals from eight sites over a six-week period, suggests that Lowlands Emydoidea weathered the drought quite well.

DISCUSSION

The trouble with designing a study to document drought responses is that researchers seldom know when a drought is about to occur. Such a study would ideally be in place and functioning well in advance of the drought's onset so that a baseline of "normal" behavior could be established.

Occasionally, a fortuitous turn of events will provide an opportunity when a drought takes place in the course of

long-term research being conducted for other purposes. good example can be found in a South Carolina study carried out by J. Whitfield Gibbons and associates. This study, designed to monitor populations of five turtle species in Ellenton Bay, spanned the 15 year period from 1967 to 1982. Especially precise information was gathered between February 1975 and July 1982 (excepting April through October 1979) when the site, a 10 ha wet area, was surrounded by a continuous drift fence. When drought struck the region in 1980-81, the researchers were already armed with 13 years of data on reproduction and turtle movements in and out of the Their conclusions appeared in an article entitled "Drought-Related Responses in Aquatic Turtle Populations" in Volume 17 of the Journal of Herpetology, 1983. (Copy attached.)

Since the South Carolina location is well south of its normal range, Emydoidea blandingi was not included in the species studied. However, the responses of those species which were studied - pond slider (Pseudemys scripta), cooter (Pseudemys floridana), chicken turtle (Deirochelys reticularia), mud turtle (Kinosternon subrubrum) and stinkpot (Sternotherus odoratus) - can probably be regarded as typical for most aquatic turtles faced with drought conditions.

Among the South Carolina turtles, the most frequently observed departures from normal behavior involved reproduction and emigration. Reproductive activity was "dramatically lower" (Gibbons and associates, 1983) in four of the five species. For 1981, egg laying was suspended in P. floridana and S. odoratus and sharply curtailed in P. scripta and D. reticularia. While the number of nesting K. subrubrum remained essentially the same, the percentage of females laying more than one clutch was lower. phenomenon of decreased fecundity in lean times is well documented in many animal species. It apparently allows the resulting lower populations to make better use of diminished Although it is unclear how the Ellenton Bay resources. statistics apply to Blanding's turtle in northern Illinois, it seems reasonable to assume that fewer eggs were laid in 1988-89 than in previous years. In the absence of hard evidence to support this assumption, it can be reported that LeeNAG investigators found little evidence of nesting activity on the sand ridges surrounding the Guanci/Spears wetland in late summer and fall of 1989. These ridges are known to be used by the indigenous populations of painted and snapping turtles and probably serve Emydoidea as well. In contrast, vigorous nesting activity by the former two species was observed in these areas following the return of normal water levels in 1990. This temporary reproductive

decline in *C. picta* and *C. serpentina* may have been accompanied by a similar response in Blanding's turtle.

Emigration, the movement of individuals from one body of water to another, is practiced by many turtle species and for some is considered normal behavior even in times of plenty. When extenuating circumstances (such as drought) render a habitat unliveable, emigration can become a survival tactic. The propensity to emigrate varies from one species to another. Turtles that are strongly aquatic (e.g. some Sternotherus and Trionyx species) seem reluctant to abandon a shrinking habitat and will often burrow into the mud when no water remains. Those species which are adapted to terrestrial travel will emigrate freely. In the South Carolina study, two species (P. floridana and P. scripta) which frequent ephemeral aquatic environments emigrated in much higher numbers during the drought. The majority departed toward the nearest permanent body of water. The highly aquatic D. reticularia and S. odoratus showed little change in emigration rates from previous years and most probably escaped dehydration by aestivating in the mud. The fifth species, K. subrubrum, is well adapted to terrestriality and is presumed to have been little affected by the drought.

For present purposes, we will consider which of the responses noted above may have been manifested in Lee County Emydoidea during the 1988-89 drought.

REPRODUCTION - Blanding's turtle breeds between March and November, most commonly in March, April and May.

Nesting takes place in June and July. Clutches range from six to eleven eggs and hatchlings emerge in August and September (Ernst and Barbour, 1972).

We will focus on the Guanci/Spears wetland, the largest site in the study area and the most prolific producer of Blanding's turtles in the 1989-90 survey. Judging from landowner reports, water supplies were severely depleted by late spring of 1988 and the marsh was completely dry by July. In 1989, the site held no water until late in the year. In effect, environmental conditions favoring normal reproduction were marginal in 1988 and extremely poor in 1989. The extent to which these factors influenced the breeding behavior of Guanci/Spears Emydoidea is uncertain. Individuals which emigrated to sites of permanent water may have nested successfully.

For added insight, we will turn again to the Ellenton Bay study. Reproductive adaptations to the 1981 drought differed widely in two of the five species observed. S. odoratus, a highly aquatic turtle, responded with a complete suspension of egg-laying, whereas K. subrubrum, which readily adapts to dry conditions, showed little change in reproductive output (Gibbons and associates, 1983). Ecologically, Emydoidea falls somewhere between these two

kinosternids, being neither highly aquatic nor highly terrestrial. It might be expected, then, that nesting by local Blanding's turtles may have been moderately suppressed by the 1988-89 drought.

Overall, reproductive success could have been more heavily impacted in the area of hatchling mortality than in either breeding or nesting. Young turtles emerging from the nest into drought conditions, with no nearby water available, are vulnerable to dehydration and predation.

Smith (1961) reported that:

"A number of baby Blanding's turtles were found dead and desiccated on August 26 in sand hills in Whiteside County. These young turtles were presumably hatchlings that had been killed by the hot sun before they could find their way across several hundred feet of sand to water."

EMIGRATION - Blanding's turtle feeds on land and in the water. While the species is now generally regarded as being primarily aquatic, it is apparently comfortable out of water and does not hesitate to travel on land. In his intensive study of *Emydoidea* in Lake and McHenry Counties, John Rowe noted that both sexes "occasionally made extensive overland movements to nesting sites or to reach other aquatic habitats in search of mates or food. Short term emigrations from water for basking and/or undetermined purposes were also observed." (Rowe, 1987.)

In the LeeNAG study area, six of the eight sites which produced Blanding's turtles in 1990 had been dry in 1989 (see "Results"). Of these six, five were located within .5 km of some permanent water. Four of the closer permanent water sites were trapped in 1989; only one yielded Emydoidea. None of the six individuals captured at that site carried 1986 survey marks and thus could not be identified as refugees from dried-out sites. The lack of captures at the other three permanent sites might be attributable to poor water conditions (low level - high temperature) which may have disrupted normal feeding activity. None of the aforementioned specimens collected and marked in 1989 were recaptured at nearby recharged sites in 1990.

Despite a shortage of supportive statistical data, the investigators believe that at least some Lee County

Emydoidea emigrated during the drought. This consensus is an extrapolation based on the following facts:

- Sites of known occupation by Blanding's turtles in 1986 were dry in 1989.
- 2. Other sites within a reasonable distance retained water throughout the drought.
- 3. Blanding's turtle is able and willing to travel overland.
- 4. In 1990, both water and Blanding's turtles had returned to the formerly dry sites.

In the final analysis, only two plausible possibilities can explain the absence of *Emydoidea* from their former habitats: they either emigrated or they aestivated. Given what we know of Blanding's turtle ecology, emigration seems the more likely possibility.

AESTIVATION - Some turtles avoid dehydration during dry weather by burrowing into mud and becoming more or less dormant. This reaction is typically seen in the more aquatic species. In the South Carolina study, S. odoratus, which seldom ventures onto land except to lay eggs, emigrated in low numbers and is presumed to have responded primarily by aestivating. Other species may aestivate on The spotted turtle, Clemmys guttata (Ward et al., land. 1976), K. subrubrum (Bennett et al., 1970) and K. flavescens (Cooper, 1977) have been reported to practice terrestrial aestivation (Rowe, 1987). Ross (1985) reportedly observed terrestrial aestivation in Blanding's turtle for up to five days. In the Lake/McHenry County study, Emydoidea travelling on land were seen to remain stationary in leaf litter for as long as six hours (Rowe, 1987). LeeNAG investigators could find no other references in the available literature to aestivation, either aquatic or terrestrial, in Blanding's turtle. The examples offered by Ross and Rowe did not persist long enough to be considered true aestivation. Considering the natural history of

Emydoidea blandingi and the lengthy duration of the drought, we believe that brief aestivation may have been practiced in occasional conjunction with, but not to the exclusion of, emigration.

SUMMARY

The history of Blanding's turtle in the swamps and marshes of the Green River drainage probably spans several thousand years. Over the millenia this species evolved strategies which enabled it to cope with the whims of The effective operation of these strategies requires certain natural conditions, foremost among which is the availability of suitable habitat. From a practical standpoint, we must conclude that the ability of Emydoidea blandingi to tolerate environmental calamities such as drought has dimished in proportion to the shrinking of its range due to agriculture and other development. Emigration, for example, is a viable adaptation only if there are places to emigrate to. The turtles of southwest Lee County are fortunate in that their environment retains at least a semblance of its former vitality. In today's world, however, this situation is more often the exception than the rule.

The foregoing data suggest that *Emydoidea* can successfully withstand severe conditions if it has the tools for survival at its disposal. The preservation of remaining

habitat with good water, intact and undisturbed nesting grounds, safe travel corridors and the protection mandated by current laws can assure the continued existence of Blanding's turtle in the Green River Lowlands.

Drought-Related Responses of Aquatic Turtle Populations

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ABSTRACT.—A major drought in South Carolina provided opportunity to observe certain repreductive and emigration responses of freshwater turtle populations that have been studied for 15 years. Five species responded differentially to the drying of a major aquatic habitat. Pseudemys scripta and P. floridana emigrated in greater numbers, and fewer females laid eggs than in any previous year. Sternotherus odoratus and Deirochelys reticularia did not reproduce at the level of previous years but did not abandon the aquatic habitat. Reproduction and emigration of Kinosternon subrubrum were not appreciably different from other years. The differing responses of the species are discussed in terms of the ecological and evolutionary differences between them.

Sporadic drought conditions in regions of the southeastern United States may result in the total drying of many relatively permanent aquatic areas (i.e., that do not dry annually). Among the aquatic habitats most affected are Carolina bays (Sharitz and Gibbons, 1982) that receive no input from springs or streams so that water levels are strongly influenced by precipitation and evaporation. Certain biological phenomena (e.g., death of stranded fishes) can be reliably related to the drying of a habitat; however, documenting the influence of a drought on phenomena such as migration or reproductive output in most animal species requires long term data so that natural variability can be separated from the effects of drought. Such data are rarely collected because of the necessity of uninterrupted studies that include years having widely differing environmental conditions.

Long-term population studies associated with a Carolina bay in South Carolina permitted an evaluation of the responses of freshwater turtles to drought conditions during 1980 and 1981 that resulted in almost total drying of the aquatic habitat under study. The objective of this paper is to examine several drought-related phenomena associated with five species of aquatic turtles (Pseudemys scripta, P. floridana, Deirochelys reticularia, Kinosternon subrubrum, and Sternotherus odoratus).

PROCEDURES

Observations were made at Ellenton Bay, a Carolina bay on the Savannah River Plant (SRP) in the Upper Coastal Plain near Aiken, South Carolina. During the past 15 years, Ellenton Bay has fluctuated in size from a 10 ha aquatic area to a terrestrial habitat with a few remaining muddy areas and less than 500 m² of open water. Ellenton Bay turtle populations (Gibbons, 1970) have been studied with varying degrees of intensity since 1967 Of the individuals marked by notching or drilling shell marginals in 1967 and 1968 some of each of six species were reciptured in 1980 or 1981.

Terrestrial movement was monitored with drift fencing and pittall traps (Gibbons and Semlitsch, 1982). Ellenton Buv was surrounded by a continuous drift fence (1240 m) from February 1975 to July 1982 with the exception of 10 April 1979 to 31 December 1979. Traps were checked daily during these periods and turtles were registered and measured before being released on the opposite side of the tence. A total of 6003 turtles of the 5 most common species were captured or recaptured.

In this paper, the term "emigration" indicates that a turtle (excluding gravid females) was leaving Ellenton Bay when it was last captured in a given year. To tablish the frequency and direction of emigration, the shape of the bay was cor-

geted to a circle and divided into 30° goions. Emigrating turtles were assigned the appropriate section for analysis. Data obtained during the years when Elenton Bay was enclosed by a drift fence slowed the identification of population reponses in 1981 that differed from prenous years. Numbers of turtles emigrating were recorded for the entire year in 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1980, and 1981. Fewith eggs were recorded for the me years with the exception of 1975. The veray technique (Gibbons and Greene, 1979) in conjunction with the drift fence was used to determine frequency and size of dutches. This approach has been succosfully used in previous studies at Ellenton Bay (Gibbons et al., 1982), and elsewhere (Tinkle et al., 1981; Congdon et al., 19834).

RESULTS

r Ellenton Bay, the deepest Carolina bay on the SRP, reached its lowest water level in a decade in November 1981 (Fig. 1), a level comparable to that reached during the autumn of 1969 (Gibbons, 1970). Only a few small (<100 m²), shallow (<30 cm depth) pools remained of the normally more extensive (≈10 ha) and deeper (1-15 m) aquatic habitat.

* Egg Laying.—The number of females bying eggs was dramatically lower for four species in 1981 than in any previous year for which records are available (Table 1). No individuals of P. floridana or S. enfortus nested at Ellenton Bay in 1981. In previous years, 3 to 12 P. floridana and 3 to 17 S. odoratus were known to lay eggs.

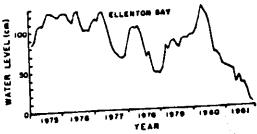


Fig. 1. Water level (cm) of Ellenton Bay from 1973 through 1981. The most notable changes in egg laying and emigration were observed during 1981, the year of most severe drought.

Only 3 P. scripta nested in 1981 compared to 10 to 35 in previous years. The fourth species, D. reticularia, normally nests at Ellenton Bay in late winter (Feb-March) and in early fall (Aug-Sep; Gibbons and Greene 1978): In late winter of previous years, 8 to 14 D. reticularia nested compared to 3 in the winter of 1981 and none in 1982. The number nesting in the autumn ranged from 8 to 17. In 1981, none nested during the fall. The number of K. subrubrum laying eggs in 1981 (N = 23) was comparable to other years (N = 19-54, \vec{x} = 37). However, the percentage of K. subrubrum laying more than one clutch in 1981 was only 4% compared to 14% to 44% in other years (Gibbons et al., 1982).

Emigration.—Unusually high numbers of both species of Pseudemys abandoned Ellenton Bay during late spring and early summer of 1981, and as of July 1982 most had not returned. As few as 25 and as many as 70 P. scripta have been registered as non-returning emigrants in previous years (Table 1). In 1981, 293 P. scripta de-

TABLE 1. Numbers of individual turtles laying eggs and emigrating (excluding 1979) from Ellenton by in years preceding the drought (1975–1980) and during the drought (1981).

e drought (1975-1980) and during the			Number emigrating		
			Pre-drought		
Pre-		-	-	Range	Drought
2		Drought	46	25-70	293
22	10-38 3-12	0	9	3-19 9- 1 0	40 33
25 41	16-32 19-54	3 23	61	49-93 4-14	76 10
•	Nur Pre- # 22 9	Pre-drought f Range 22 10-38 9 3-12 25 16-32 41 19-54	Pre-drought Range Drought	Number with clutches Pre- Pre-	Number with clutches Pre-drought Pre-drought f Range Drought f Range 22 10-38 3 46 25-70 29 3-12 0 9 3-19 25 16-32 3 23 9-40 25 16-32 3 61 49-93 41 19-54 23 8 4-14

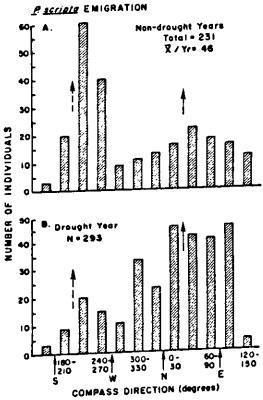


Fig. 2. Compass directions of Pseudemys scripta emigrants prior to and during the drought. Solid arrow indicates the direction of Bulldog Bay, the closest (400 m) permanent water. Dotted arrow indicates direction of Woods Bay, the closest (200 m) ephemeral body of water.

parted from the drying aquatic habitat (Table 1). Most (52%) emigrated in the direction ($\pm 60^{\circ}$) of the nearest remaining body of water in contrast to a mean of 32% that emigrated in that direction in previous, non-drought years (Fig. 2). Three to 19 *P. floridana* have been recorded emigrating in other years compared to 40 in 1981. Although the directional shift during 1981 compared to previous years was not as great as in *P. scripta*, the total number emigrating in 1981 (N = 40) was only slightly less than the total of the previous five years (N = 45).

Three species (D. reticularia, K. subrubrum, S. odoratus) did not emigrate in numbers greater than the maximum in previous years nor did they show any no-

ticeable shift in the direction of emigration. However, for each species, the number emigrating during the drought year exceeded the mean number emigrating during the five previous years for which we have data. In 5 earlier years, 9 to 10 D. reticularia left Ellenton Bay and did no return (Table 1). In 1981, 33 emigrated. As few as 49 and as many as 93 K. subrubrum emigrated from Ellenton Bay in the veam from 1975 to 1980 compared to 76 in 1-81 (Table 1). Sternotherus odoratus is typically more aquatic and in non-drought years fewer individuals emigrated compared to the other species ($\bar{x} = 8$; range 4-14). In 1981, 10 5. odoratus left Ellenton Bay and did not return (Table 1).

DISCUSSION

Five species of turtles studied in Ellenton Bay displayed three distinct patterns in reproduction and emigration in response to the drought conditions. We consider these patterns to represent different adaptive responses of the species and not to be artifacts of sampling design or collecting bias.

Two species (P. scripta and P. floridana) showed reduced reproductive output and substantially higher emigration rates in the drought year compared to previous years. Two other species (S. odoratus and D. reticularia) showed reduced reproductive output but no change in emigration patterns. The fifth species (K. subrubrum) did not show an appreciable change in reproductive output of the population with the exception of a lower proportion of multiple clutches in the drought year than in previous years. Neither the rate nor the direction of emigration of K. rubrum was detectably different from frevious years.

A large number of female Pseudemas of both species departed during the spins and summer of 1981, and most left after June, a time when most egg laying would have been completed (Gibbons et al., 1962). None of those emigrating in 1981 had over ductal eggs. The increase in emigration of the Pseudemys is unquestionably a droughter related phenomenon. More than 30% of

293 individuals of P. scripta and 70% the 40 P. floridana that left the Ellenton habitat traveled toward the nearest fody of water, a beaver pond about 400 meters away. Limited aquatic trapping (27 aptures) after June 1981 yielded 11 indiridual P. scripta that had been registered Ellenton Bay earlier that year, thus confirming that the beaver pond was the destination for some of the departing an-

Differential behavioral and reproducthe patterns of the five species can be remed to the ecological and evolutionary differences between them. Kinosternon abrubrum is the most terrestrial of the five species and laid eggs as in previous years. Not only do these individuals hibernate mand but they also feed on land (Scott, 876) and spend much of their life cycle the terrestrial environment (Bennett, 1572). Consequently, the gradual drying dithe aquatic environment would be expated to have less impact on such an anmal than it would on more aquatic tur-

des : Sternotherus odoratus, at the opposite exbeme, is the most aquatic of the five species. Sternotherus seldom venture onto and except for egg-laying and are ordiwrily found in permanent aquatic habi-Therefore, they might be expected to respond to drought conditions by tracking the remaining water and then, when water remains, burrowing into the and. Their dependence on the aquatic environment is reflected in their apparent selectance or inability to emigrate and the *htual cessation of reproduction under the sought conditions.

Deirochelys is a biological enigma in a wiety of ways, including fall and winter Alposition (Gibbons and Greene, 1978; Congdon et al., 1983b); most populations In this region of South Carolina are assodited with fluctuating, non-permanent sadies of water although this species is were aquatic than Kinosternon. The retation in available resources and habitat sulting from a reduced aquatic area and lead to lower egg production. Dei-Address presumably burrow to escape

drought conditions rather than resorting to emigration.

The two species of Pseudemys represent highly aquatic animals which are welladapted to temporary bodies of water as indicated by this study and others (Cagle, 1946; Moll and Legler, 1971). Thus, the response of such long-lived animals which can survive brief overland movements is to escape the adverse conditions by moving to another habitat. Whether a new habitat is located by a mechanism for seeing polarized light reflecting from a surface of a body of water or some other means is unresolved at this time. However, these two species maintain their ubiquity and abundance through an ability to capitalize on aquatic environments which are productive but ephemeral.

Without the data collected over several years, the effects of drought on the turtle populations and the differential responses of the species could not have been distinguished from annual variation during non-drought years. This research supports the contention that long-term studies are necessary to reveal certain ecological phenomena in natural populations of animals (Tinkle, 1979).

Acknowledgments.—We thank the numerous individuals who have assisted in installing, maintaining, and checking drift fences with pitfall traps in these studies. Support for the research was provided by Contract DE-AC09-76SR00819 between the U.S. Department of Energy and the University of Georgia and by NSF Grant No. 79-04756 to J. W. Gibbons.

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EPISTYLIS OCCURRENCE ON PAINTED TURTLES

ABSTRACT

Blanding's turtle (Emydoidea blandingi) in the Green River Lowlands, members of the Lee County Natural Area Guardians (LeeNAG) noticed that a high percentage of captured painted turtles (Chrysemys picta) carried a velvety, brownish growth on their plastrons. An affected specimen was delivered to the Jake Wolf Memorial Fish Hatchery where the growths were identified as colonies of a stalked protozoan belonging to the genus Epistylis. LeeNAG secured a Nongame Checkoff grant to examine this apparent parasitism in greater detail. Live trapping of C. picta in 1990-91 revealed a sharp reduction in the incidence of Epistylis, leading to speculation that the 1989 outbreak may have been a drought-related phenomenon.

INTRODUCTION

Protozoa are single-celled organisms with an extremely lengthy tenure on earth. Identifiable protozoan remains have been found in rocks estimated to be 400 million years old. These highly successful creatures exhibit a wide variety of different forms. Generally speaking, protozoa are either free-living or dependent on a host. Most species ingest particulate or dissolved organic matter (or other microorganisms) as food, but some contain chlorophyll and are able to produce their own nourishment through a process similar to photosynthesis.

The Epistylis species found on Lowlands C. picta was attached to the plastron by dichotomously branched, non-contractile stalks. While bearing a strong resemblance to parasitism, this association was probably not truly parasitic, since the turtles seemed to suffer no ill effects from their infestations. Captured specimens carrying large colonies of Epistylis, sometimes nearly covering the plastron, appeared otherwise healthy and active. These individuals had obviously been engaged in a quest for food when they entered the traps, and in physical condition and behavior did not differ noticeably from trapmates which were free of the protozoan.

The genus Chrysemys includes one species, C. picta, and four subspecies in the eastern United States. Two

subspecies, midland painted turtle (Chrysemys picta marginata) and western painted turtle (Chrysemys picta belli), are found in the Lee County study area. A third unclassified subspecies also occurs here and represents an intergrade between marginata and belli. Apart from a greater maximum size in western painted turtle, the three subspecies are virtually identical morphologically and are distinguishable only by markings on the plastron and carapace. All three were present in the LeeNAG survey sample.

Painted turtles are primarily aquatic and seem to prefer impoundments such as ponds and marshes over running streams. Breeding takes place mainly in the spring, followed by nesting in June and July. Survey team members observed egg-laying by two females late on the afternoon of July 1, 1990. Another female was found covering a fresh nest in mid-afternoon of June 8, 1991. Nestlings emerge late summer to early fall or, not uncommonly, the following spring. A newly hatched individual weighing 4 g was picked up by investigator Debra Osmer on a sand ridge near the Guanci/Spears wetland in early May 1990. This turtle had presumably over-wintered in the nest.

Painted turtles prey on crustaceans, mollusks, insects and fish. They also eat plant material and are not averse

to scavenging. In the LeeNAG study, traps were baited with chicken liver.

Most of the survey sites are ponds and marshes, remnants of two extensive wetlands which once covered a large portion of southern Lee County. Although the majority of these sites are natural impoundments, some have been deepened by dredging and berming. Many of the shallower sites dried up during the drought of 1988-89. The remainder, mainly deepened ponds and those fed by field tiles, suffered some loss of water and a resulting degradation in water quality. Decaying organic material may have fueled an explosive proliferation of aquatic bacteria upon which the *Epistylis* protozoan feeds.

METHODOLOGY

When the first *Epistylis*-infested painted turtles were captured in September 1989, LeeNAG began to search for information concerning the relationship between these two species. It soon became apparent that little was known on the subject in Illinois. On the chance that the phenomenon was localized in our study area, it was decided to expand the trapping area to determine whether *Epistylis* could be found on *C. picta* in other parts of Lee County. An announcement was posted in the newsletter of the Lee County Soil and Water Conservation District (LeeNAG's parent

organization) stating the purpose of the survey and asking that interested landowners/operators get in touch with the district office. Respondents were then contacted and formal trapping permission was obtained.

Trapping was carried out in September and October 1990 and April and May 1991 with traps borrowed from the Department of Conservation's Natural Heritage Division. original plan to trap two sites in each Lee County township was abandoned after it was discovered that little suitable habitat for C. picta remained in the more highly-developed northern townships. Sampling was expanded into eastern and western townships not previously trapped. In addition, follow-up trapping was done at those sites which had shown heavy concentrations of Epistylis in 1989 to see if levels of the protozoan had risen, fallen or remained the same. Captured turtles, including Blanding's and snapping turtles (Chelydra serpentina), were examined for the presence of Epistylis and released. Air and water temperatures, information regarding the site type (natural pond, oxbow, etc.) and data on captured specimens were recorded on survey sheets.

Two painted turtles with living colonies of *Epistylis* on the plastron were taken to the Jake Wolf Memorial Fish Hatchery at Manito where the identification was made by aquaculture coordinator Rodney Horner. Hatchery staff

intended to culture the *Epistylis* for further study; however, the colonies died before a proper culture medium could be obtained.

RESULTS

The results of the Epistylis survey rest on rather scanty evidence. Although the investigators met with modest success in September and October 1990, trapping in April and May 1991 produced very few turtles. This may have been due in part to a cool spring season and abundant supplies of food and water. In all, 54 trap-days yielded only 25 painted turtles. Our efforts were far better rewarded in 1989-90, when somewhat more intensive trapping produced 207 specimens of C. picta during roughly the same period. vast majority of these were captured in the spring of 1990 when the turtles were just returning to normal activity following two years of drought. By April 1991, after a year of regular precipitation, area wetlands were brim full and restocked with standard turtle fare. Several sites were seen to contain large masses of frog eggs and tadpoles, crayfish, gastropods and thick beds of aquatic vegetation. Although numerous painted turtles were seen basking at some sites, they seemed reluctant to enter the traps. As it were, the trappers had lost the advantage bestowed by slim pickings. Quite possibly, the turtles were difficult to bait because they were easily finding all the natural

sustenance they needed. A case in point is the Hilliard site. Here, in a man-made pond with adjoining wetland, painted turtles were seen basking on every visit. A fish kill had taken place over the winter, providing the turtles with a windfall of dead bluegills and bass. Several of these were found lying on the bottom in shallow water, shredded in a manner which suggested scavenging. No turtles were captured in 14 trap-days. Well-provisioned with carrion and natural prey, *C. picta* could afford to be very cautious about approaching traps.

On the basis of the captures that were made, it appears likely that *Epistylis*, rampant in parts of the study area in the fall of 1989 and spring of 1990, was definitely on the wane by early fall of 1990 and non-existent as large colonies on painted turtles by the spring of 1991. At Fifty Turtlehead Pond, the site of the heaviest infestations, every one of 14 painted turtles taken in April and May 1990 was affected to some degree by *Epistylis*. Of six specimens trapped at the site in September of that year, one carried a small amount of visible *Epistylis*. This turtle was the only individual captured during the present survey to be affected by the protozoan. Overall, trapping of 14 sites in ten townships produced 28 turtles from eight sites in five townships. The count includes 25 painted turtles, two Blanding's turtles and one snapping turtle.

DISCUSSION

The association of Epistylis with C. picta had not been seen by local DOC biologists or fisheries pathologist Rod Horner prior to its discovery during the LeeNAG Blanding's turtle survey of 1989-90. A 1986 survey of the yellow mud turtle (Kinosternon flavescens flavescens), conducted jointly by the Department of Conservation and the Natural Area Guardians, collected 74 painted turtles from the same area. None were reported to harbor colonies of protozoa. The rise of Epistylis during the worst drought in five decades, coupled with its decline as precipitation returned to normal, seems to suggest that the outbreak was drought related.

Epistylis may always have existed in the wetlands of Lee County, living on *C. picta* in colonies small enough to escape notice. As a predator of bacteria, its populations are controlled by the relative abundance of its prey. The drought of 1988-89 reduced water levels in area wetlands, resulting in the death of phytoplankton and aquatic microfauna. The increased availability of decomposing organic matter and the rise in water temperature may have created a situation that was conducive to the proliferation of bacteria and the organisms which feed on them. As wetland volumes decreased, *Epistylis* concentrations became higher. Still, it is unclear exactly why large, visible

colonies began to appear on painted turtles. Perhaps this is a natural development when Epistylis densities reach a certain level. At any rate, the turtles showed no apparent distress. Since these protozoa feed on bacteria, this is not a case of true parasitism, but rather one of commensalism. That is, the host animal neither loses nor gains from the association. The turtle may merely represent a convenient substrate for Epistylis, a mode of transportation by which the protozoan hitches a ride around its habitat.

Also unclear is why *Epistylis* selects *C. picta* as a substrate over either *E. blandingi* or *C. serpentina*. Horner feels that the *Epistylis*/painted turtle relationship might be one of long standing and that the other two chelonians are somehow better able to resist the protozoan. Only one of 33 Blanding's turtles examined during the surveys of 1989-90 and 1990-91 showed any sign of *Epistylis*, and this was barely detectable. Of ten snapping turtles, none were infected.

Epistylis also demonstrated selectivity in its choice of the plastron over other body zones for the location of colonies. Research by survey members turned up only two references to Epistylis on painted turtles. In those cases, E. chrysemydis and E. niagarae were reported to have been found on C. p. belli. Chrysemydis had selected the

carapace; the location of *niagarae* was not specified. Even in the worst infestations seen by LeeNAG investigators, *Epistylis* almost never invaded the carapace. After the plastron, the second most common site of infection was soft tissue, especially in the sockets of the hind legs. On one severely coated specimen of *C. picta* trapped in 1989, the right side of the head, including the eye, was nearly covered. Even this turtle did not seem to be particularly bothered. Small colonies were also occasionally found on the bridge between the carapace and plastron.

The *Epistylis* found on Lowlands painted turtles has not been positively identified beyond the genus. In view of its apparent preference for the plastron, one might be tempted to regard it as a new species. It may be more likely, however, that we are dealing with a known species, possibly *chrysemydis*, which has for unknown reasons evolved a penchant for the plastron in this area.

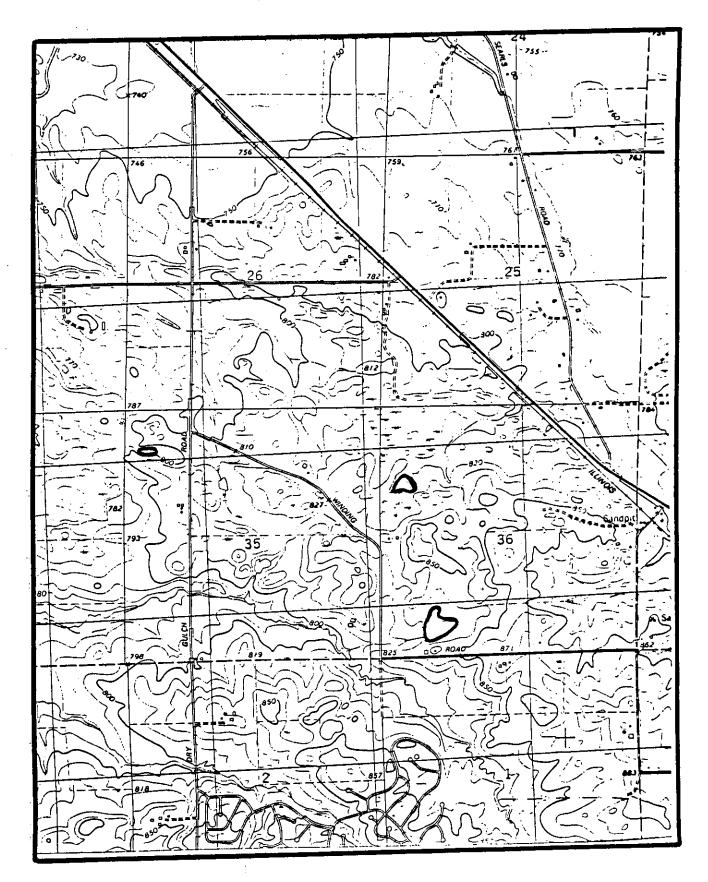
Throughout the 1989-90 survey, the incidence of Epistylis seemed to have been centered geographically in Amboy Township, with the highest rates and heaviest individual infestations reported from Sections 35 and 36. Occurrences decreased in frequency and severity away from this center. As might be expected, the outbreak persisted the longest where it had been most prevalent. The last case was seen in Fifty Turtlehead Pond, Section 36. It is

interesting to note that the rash of *Epistylis* was almost site-specific. Turtles in some ponds remained entirely free of visible colonies while those in neighboring sites were heavily infected. Every one of 14 specimens recovered from Fifty Turtlehead Pond in the spring of 1990 hosted *Epistylis*. At the same time, less than 1/2 km away in Zellhoffer Ponds 1 and 2, all 28 *C. picta* collected were clean.

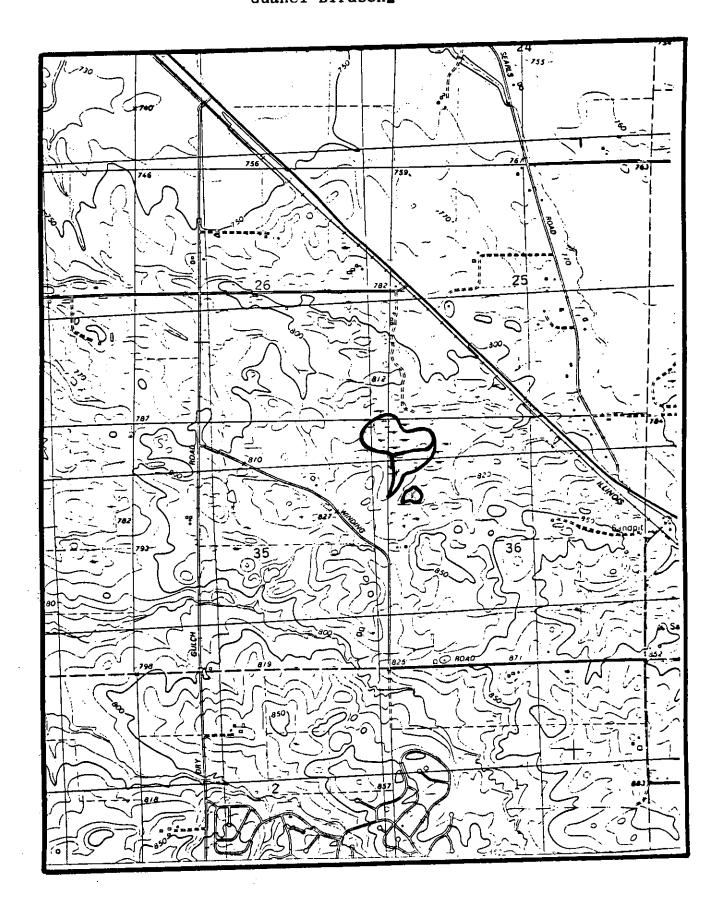
SUMMARY

From the evidence, it appears that the Epistylis epidemic among study area painted turtles was probably triggered by the 1988-89 drought. No Epistylis was seen in 74 C. picta captured in 1986, a year of normal precipitation. At the height of the drought in 1989, the protozoan was much in evidence, with an estimated 40 percent of 207 individuals infected. When wetlands refilled in 1990, Epistylis all but disappeared. No cases were found in 1991. LeeNAG believes that a combination of factors including low water levels, high temperatures, plentiful forage for bacteria and abundant turtle hosts contributed to the outbreak. There have probably been similar Epistylis population explosions in the past when conditions were right. The physical well-being of C. picta is apparently unaffected by even large colonies of the protozoan.

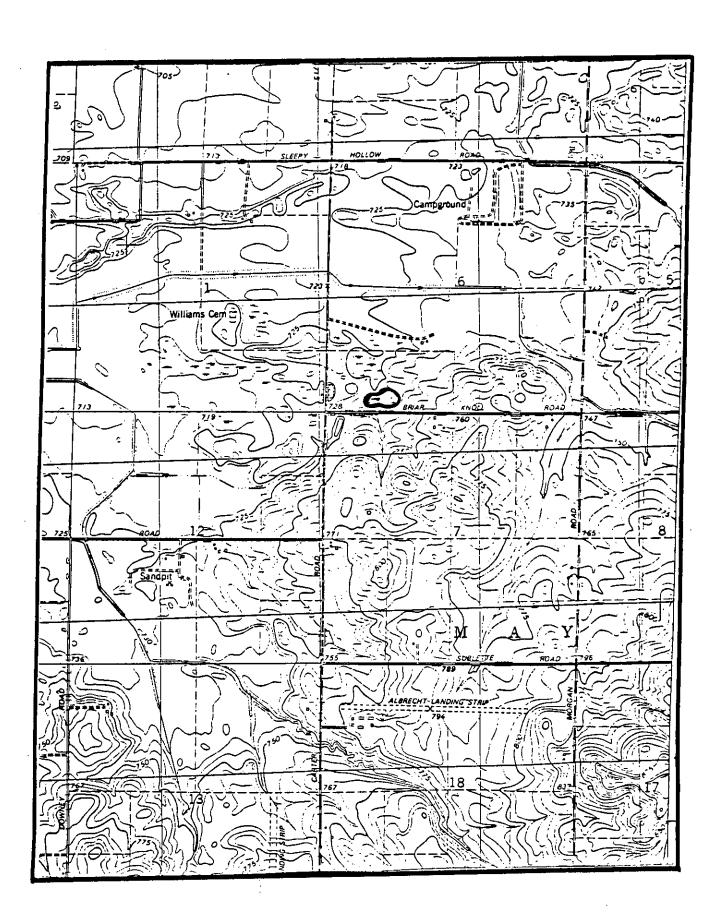
Epistylis Sites - 1989 Fredenhagen Long Pond Guanci 50 Turtlehead Spears South



Epistylis Sites - 1990 Guanci Indian Ridge Guanci 50 Turtlehead Guanci Birdsong

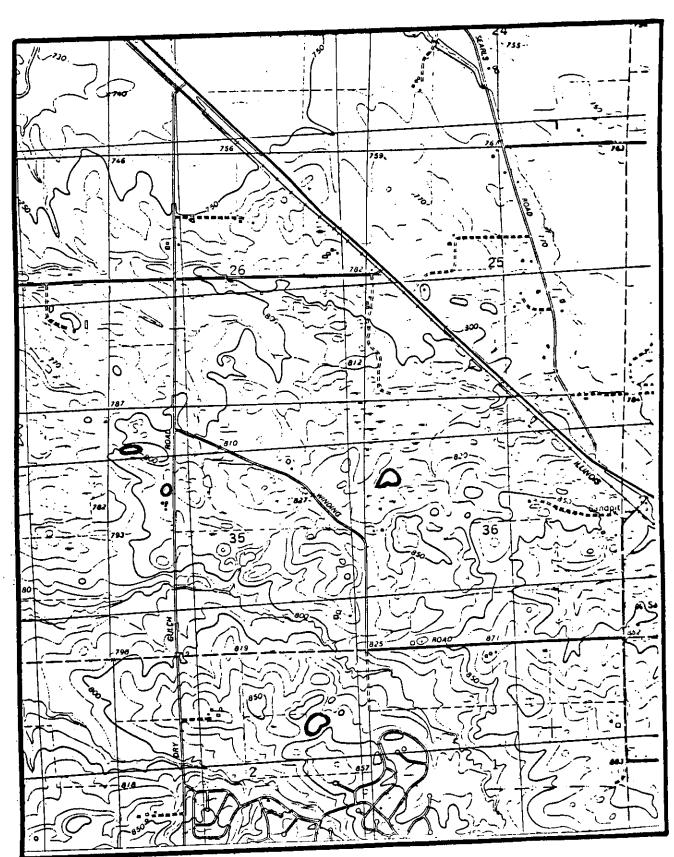


Epistylis Sites - 1990 Kant Road Pond

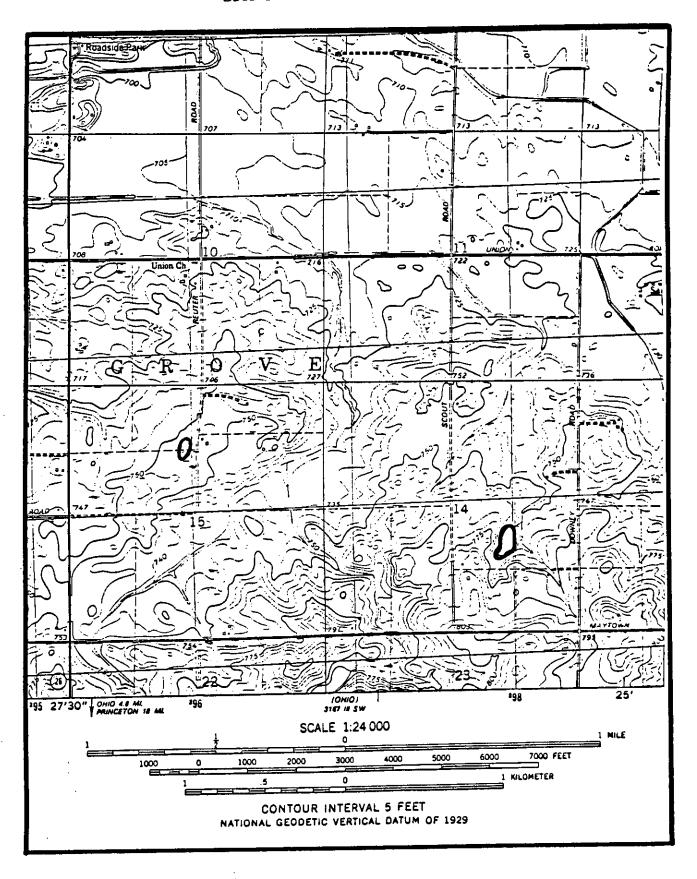


Site #10 Long Pond

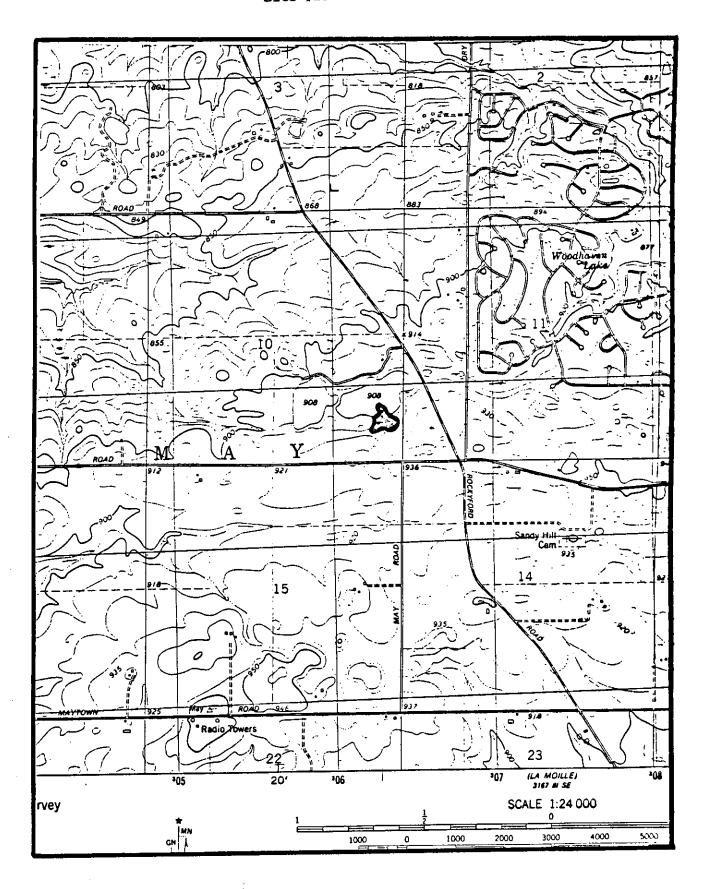
Site #31 Prairie Pond



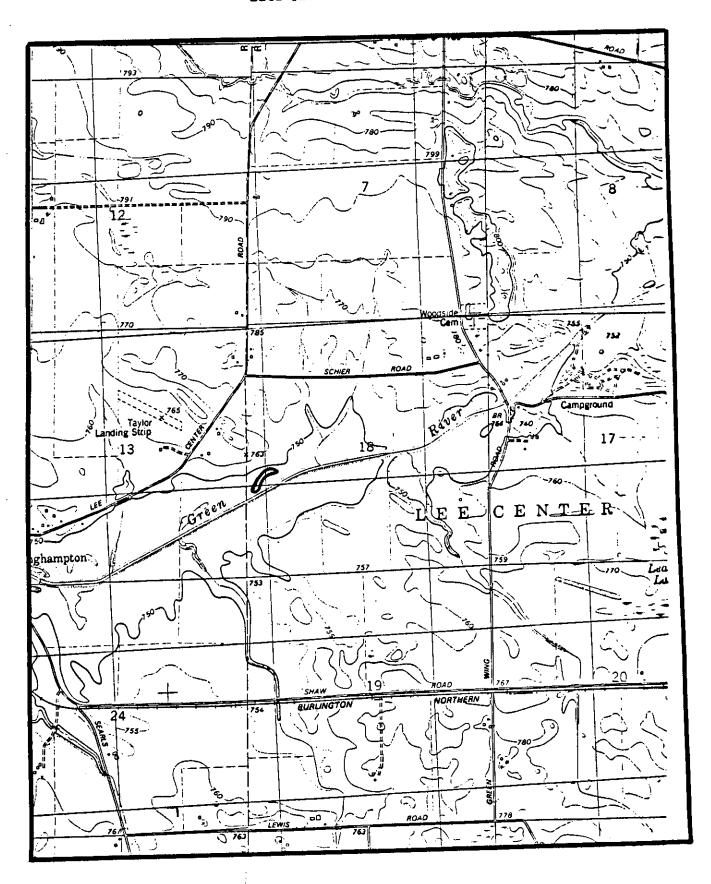
Site #26 Cliff's Pond



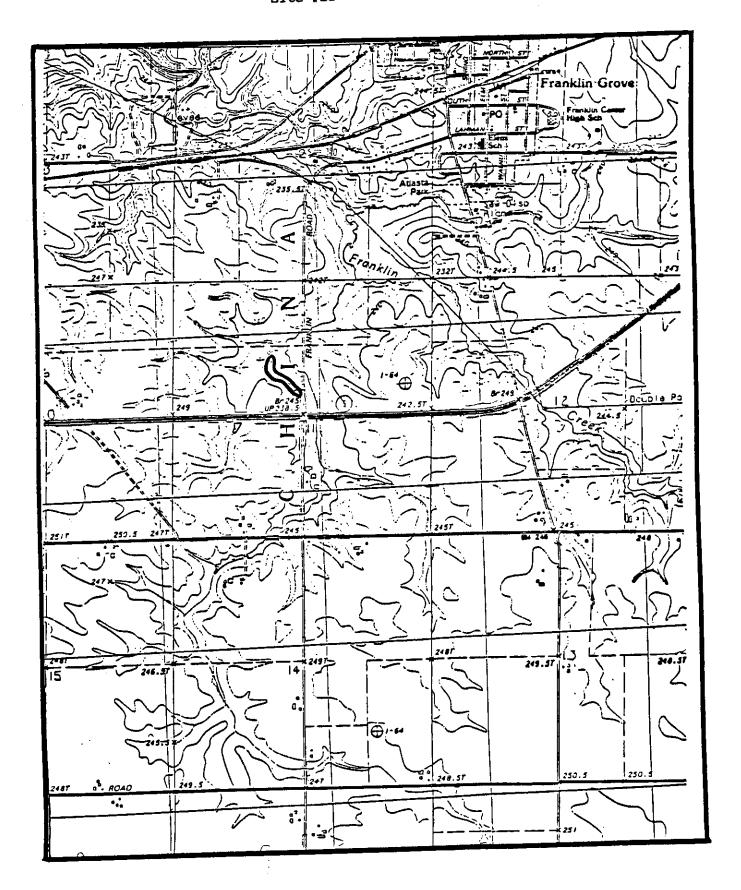
Site #25 Racetrack



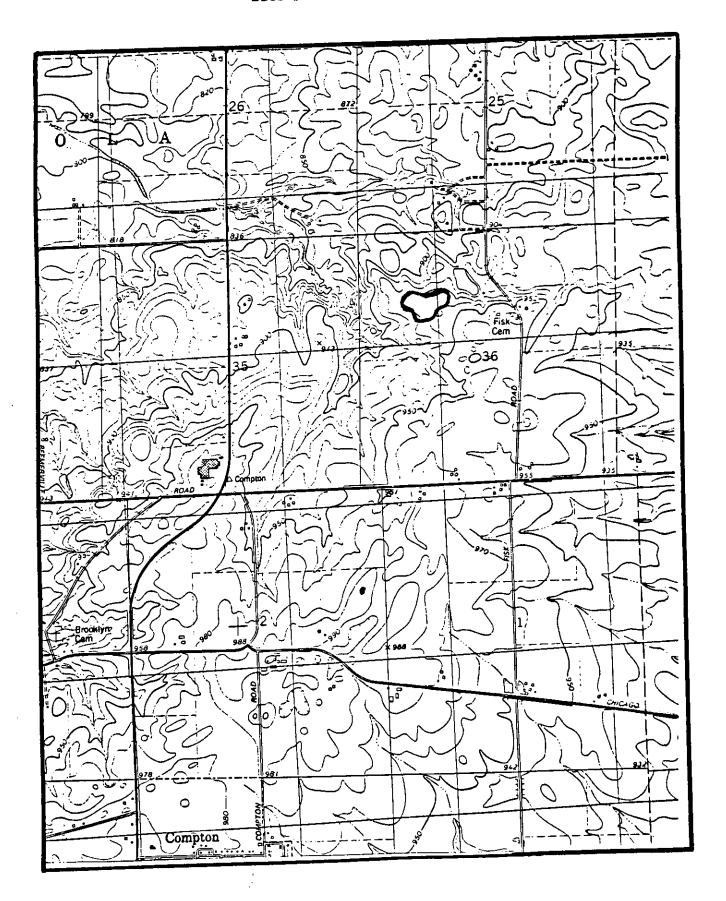
Site #27 Oxbow



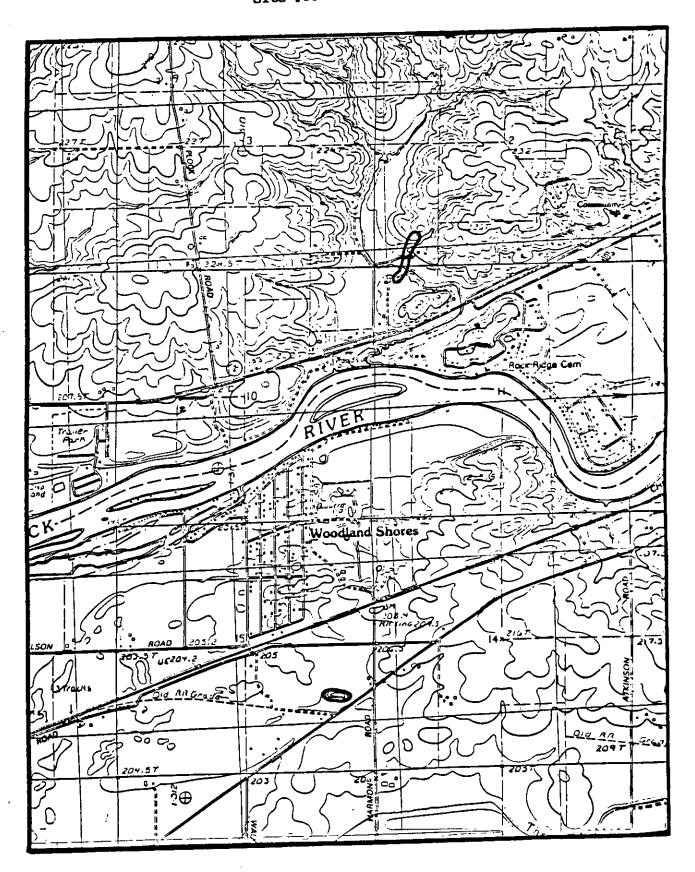
Site #28 Ramadell Creek



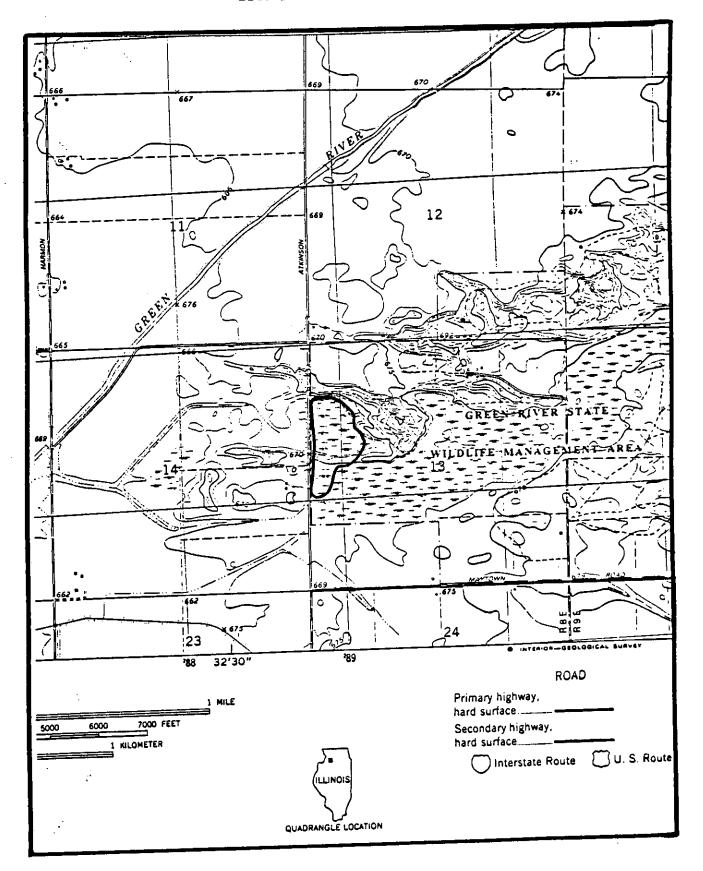
Site #29 Hornung



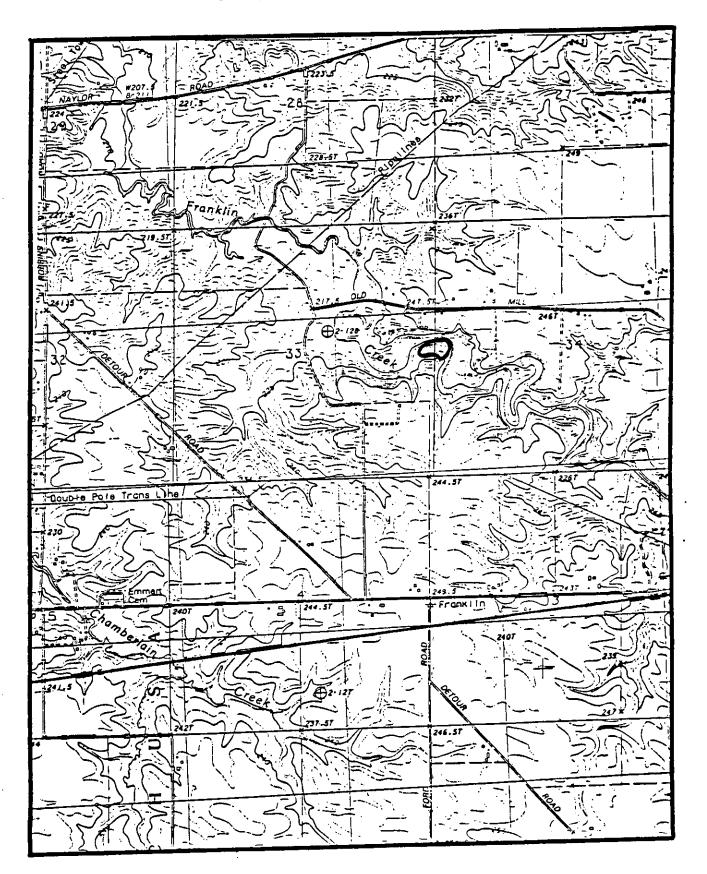
Site #33 Grosbeak



Site #32 Yellow Head

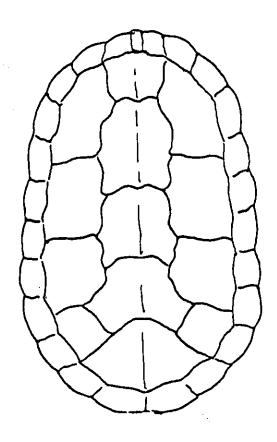


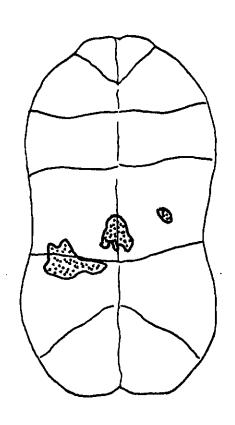
Site #34 Hackberry



EPISTYLIS SURVEY DATA SHEET

Turtlehe	ad Pond	TWSP:	Amboy		DATE:	9-22	- 50
E: Deepened Pond		AIR TEMP: 23 C		23 C	WATER TEMP:		18 C
4	_		Osmer, L	eVin		NO.	6
URED: .						NO.	
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on the	abdominal and	femoral :	cutes of	the plas	tron.		
							
	Deeper 4 PURED:	TRAPPERS: Chrysemys One of the six indivi	Deepened Pond AIR TRAPPERS: Chrysemys picta One of the six individuals sho	Deepened Pond AIR TEMP: TRAPPERS: Chrysemys picta One of the six individuals showed small	Deepened Pond AIR TEMP: TRAPPERS: Chrysemys picta One of the six individuals showed small colonie	Deepened Pond AIR TEMP: 23 C WATER TE TRAPPERS: Rogers, Osmer, LeVin Chrysemys picta	Deepened Pond AIR TEMP: 23 C WATER TEMP: TRAPPERS: Rogers, Osmer, LeVin Chrysemys picta NO. NO. One of the six individuals showed small colonies of Epistylis





SITE ROSTER

SITE #	SITE NAME	TWP	SEC	OWNER
06	50 Turtlehead	Amboy	25	J. Guanci
10	Long Pond	Amboy	35	W. Fredenhagen
16	Mud Turtle	East Grove	15	G. Swickheimer
23	Basking Pond	Amboy	35	W. Fredenhagen
25	Racetrack	May	10	Bank Trust #1114
26	Cliff's Pond	East Grove	14	C. Albrecht
27	Oxbow	Lee Center	18	R. White
28	Ramsdell Creek	China	11	D. Ramsdell
29	Hornung	Viola	36	J. Hornung
30	Hilliard	Nelson	15	A. Hilliard
31	Prairie Pond	May	2	D. Bonnell
32	Yellow Head	Hamilton	13	State of Illinois
33	Grosbeak	Palmyra	2	D. Hose
34	Hackberry	Nachusa	33	State of Illinois

Trap Results

Site #	Site Name	Species	#	Epistylis
06	50 Turtlehead	C. picta	6	1
10	Long Pond	0	0	0
16	Mud Turtle	0	0	0
23	Basking Pond	E. blandingi	2	0
25	Racetrack	C. picta	6	0
26	Cliff's Pond	0	0	0
27	0xbow	C. picta	5	0
28	Ramsdell Creek	C. serpentina	1	0
29	Hornung	0	0	0
30 [°]	Hilliard	0	0	0
31	Prairie Pond	C. picta	1	0
32	Yellow Head	0	0	0
33	Grosbeak	0	0	0
34	Hackberry	C. picta	7	0
14	14	3	28	1

FOR INHEDIATE RELEASE August 17,1990

From: Lee County Soil & Water Conservation District

319 S. Mason Amboy, Il. 61310 (815) 857-3623 Hazel Reuter

Subject: Illinois Department of Conservation Grant

The Lee County Soil & Water Conservation District is pleased to announce that William E. Rogers and Debra A. Osmer of the Natural Area Guardians have received their second Illinois Department of Conservation Nongame Checkoff Grant to study the increasingly rare Blanding's turtle in Lee County.

The 1990-91 grant will also survey all reptilian species for a previously undiscovered protozoan parasite which was first documented by Rogers in 1989. The Illinois Nongame Grant program is funded by citizen donations. This grant is one of 22 grants funded for 1990-91 in the state.

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MAR.	26SUSTAINABLE AG WORKSHOP
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APR.	8 TO 12 USDA SERVICE CERTER
	A STAN DECEMBER DECEM
APR.	10FISH DELIVERY9:00 AHSOIL STEWARDSHIP WEEK 28 THRU MAY 5
MAY	28 THRU MAY 5 BOARD MEETING8:30 PMUSDA SERVICE CENTER

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The Natural Area Guardians held the annual joint meeting with the Lee Co. Historical Society on Feb. 13th. An interesting program was provide by Larry Jones. Larry has many beautiful slides of birds we may see around our feeders as well as birds from Texas and California.

The Mar. 19th meeting will feature a representative from Ducks Unlimited as the speaker. Ducks Unlimited are very busy trying to save and establish duck habitat. Most know the duck population is declining.

is declining. Turtle surveying will soon be in full swing as the weather warms up! Two ponds or bodies of water are sought in each township. These waters will be live trapped seeking to find a parasite called Epistylis which affects Painted All turtles are returned to Turtles. their original habitat after If any landowner wishes examination. to participate call the office -The survey is carried 815/857-3623. out with funding from the Illinois

Wildlife Conservation checkoff.



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The tip of an old hedgepost provides a lookout for a crow, and bluebirds make a happy home in the hollowed space below.

A travel lane for creatures who shun the furrowed field, for without this precious shelter, their fate if surely sealed.

Foxes and shrews and butterflies all need this old fencerow, Oh, spare this narrow strip of land, this relic from long ago. D-90



GRANT RECEIVED
We are pleased to announce
that another Wildlife Conservation Checkoff grant has been
received by the LeeNAG's,
written by Wm. E. Rogers.

This is a second grant to study Blanding's turtles and to survey all reptilian species for a protozoan parasite documented in our 1989 study.

The Illinois Mongame Grant program is funded by citizens donations. This is one of 22 grants funded for 1990-91.

Your district directors and staff attending the 1990 Summer Conference received valuable information to better serve our cooperators. Our District received a medallion for continued excellence in planning and carrying out district activities from the Goodyear Company.

Two staffers, RC Edmondson and Secretary Reuter received certificates for 10 years of service.

A resolution to register th Natural Area Guardian name for exclusive use by soil and water conservation districts wa passed.

A record number of directors from throughout the state attended the meeting. goal of 300 has been set for next year.

Association of Illinois Soi and Water Districts executive board members were elected. Rudy Rice was elected to a second two-year term as president. Others elected include Lee Bunting Vice Pres., Charles Curry, Treasurer and Stan Howell, Secretary.



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CALENDAR

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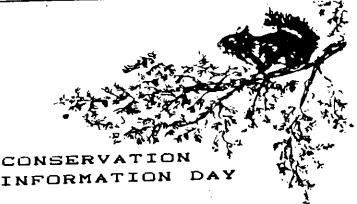


DO SOMETHING WILD - remember Illinois' nongame wildlife on your Illinois tax form: All you do is mark line 16a on Illinois form 1040, enter the amount (minimum #1) you wish to contribute from your tax refund and the non-game wildlife benefit. The program first appeared in 1984, since that time Illinoisans have donated \$1.325 million to this fund.

The funds are used for studies, surveys, equipment, educational materials, etc. to benefit non-game species. The non-game species make up 95% of the wildlife.

The Lee County Natural Area Guardians have been the recipient of several of the small projects program. As part of the program NAG will be live trapping turtles throughout Lee County in the spring of 1991. We will be looking for a parasite called Epistylis which affects painted turtles. Landowners who wish to participate in this important survey are asked to return the attached permission slip or call the SWCD office (815/857-3623). Your cooperation is greatly appreciated.

I WOULD LIKE TURTLE SURVEY.	PARTICIPATE	IN	THE	LEE	CO
NAME	 				
ADDRESS	-				
TWP	 _SECTION				



Come in Feb. 11, 1991 between 9:00 AM and 12:00 AM and chat with the experts!

February 11 will bring four area conservation specialists from the Ill. Department of Conservation to the USDA Service Center in Amboy.

Throughout the year many people come in or call the office with a flood of questions concerning wildlife habitat establishment, tree planting, groundhog and beaver control, pond stocking, algae control and many other inquires.

Are you having problems with trespassers, law breakers or changing laws concerning hunting? Come in and talk with Conservation Police Officer Mark Wallzynski.

Want your pond checked for fish and weed control? Ken Clodfelter will be here to answer your questions.

Want to improve your wildlife habitat? Scott Schaeffer will be here to assist your needs and furnish wildlife seeding if available.

There have been a number of farmstead windbreaks established in Lee County due to the expertise of Geo. Poe District Forester. Do you have a tree problem or question concerning forestry needs?





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SOURCE: 1982 Illinois General Highway Map And Information From SCS Field Personnel. Polyconic Projection.

<u>ω</u> HYDROLOGIC UNIT MAP LEE COUNTY, ILLINOIS 07120007 Hydrologic River Basin Number 070 07 Watershed Boundary Hydrologic River Basin Boundary Subwatershed Boundary Watershed Number Subwatershed Number VICINITY MAP

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to thank the following people and organizations for their cooperation and assistance during the turtle survey: the owners/operators who allowed us to trap; Hazel Reuter, Shirley Walder, David Benson and the staff at the USDA Service Center in Amboy; Bob and Dorothy Levin, Kevin Kellen, Dr. Cassandra Rodgers, Wally Janoskey, Doris Carey and other LeeNAG members who helped in the project; and especially Natural Heritage biologists Randy Nyboer and Jim Heim, and DOC fisheries pathologist Rod Horner, whose insights were very helpful in the preparation of this report.

DROUGHT IMPACT ON BLANDING'S TURTLE AND EPISTYLIS OCCURRENCE ON PAINTED TURTLES

CONDUCTED BY THE LEE COUNTY NATURAL AREA GUARDIANS

FUNDED BY THE ILLINOIS NONGAME WILDLIFE CONSERVATION CHECKOFF PROGRAM

EXPENSES

BILL FOR SERVICES RENDERED:		
COMMODITIES		\$ 250.00
	,	125.00
CONTRACTUAL		350.00
MILEAGE		
TOTAL		725.00
•		
Signed Welliam E. Rogers	Date 6-26-91	·
Signed Acade On Acade	Date 6-26-9)	·
(Debra A. Osmer)		

Itemized bills on file at Lee County Soil and Water Conservation District

319 South Mason Amboy, IL 61310

815/857-3623

FEIN #36-2680632