

## DESCRIPTION OF INVASIVE EXOTIC REPTILE SPECIES FROM THE LESSER ANTILLES



### *Pelusios castaneus*

(Schweigger, 1812)

Common name: African mud turtle, Swamp terrapin.

Order: Testudines, Family: Pelomedusidae

#### Description

**Morphology.** Medium sized freshwater turtle. *Pelusios castaneus* possess two intergular scutes on the plastron (characteristic of the Pleurodira suborder), does not have a cervical scute (characteristic of the Pelusomidae family), and present a hinge between the pectoral and abdominal scutes of the plastron. The carapace is oblong or elliptical, and enlarged on the posterior part. The colour of the carapace and plastron is generally black, but may vary towards lighter shades of brown, or even yellow for the plastron. The colour of the head varies from olive to brown, and is marked with black spots. The limbs are poorly webbed and possess powerful claws (Bour et al., 2016).

**Standard body size (carapace length).** 220 to 285 mm (Bour et al., 2016)

**Sexual dimorphism.** Males are generally smaller than females.

**Variations.** Some characters, such as the pigmentation and sinuosity of the head spots or the peripheral pigmentation of the plastron, seem to vary more or less regularly along the East-West axis of its native range, as well as according to the environment, from savannahs to forest environments (Bour et al., 2016).

#### Distribution

**Native.** Mauritania (possibly), Mali (possibly), Burkina Faso, Cap-verde, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroun, Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Sao Tomé and Pincipe, Republic of the Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo,

Angola (Burger et al., 2004; Chirio and Ineich, 2006; Rhodin et al., 2010; Ullenbruch et al., 2010; Böhme et al., 2011; Bour et al., 2016; Kindler et al., 2016; Marques et al., 2018; Nneji et al., 2019; Luiselli et al., 2021).

**Introduced.** Caribbean: Guadeloupe (Rhodin et al., 2010; Fritz et al., 2011; Bour et al., 2016).

One observation reported in Martinique, but no established population to date (INPN OpenObs, 2021).

One observation also reported in La Réunion, but no established population to date (Cornuaille et al., 2021).

### **Biology and ecology**

**Habitat.** *Pelusios castaneus* inhabit different freshwater environments, such as ponds and lakes, swamps, mangroves and rivers of West-African forested habitats and savannahs (Bour et al., 2016; Kindler et al., 2016; Luiselli et al., 2021).

**Diet.** Omnivore, *P. castaneus* adapt its diet to the resources available in its environment. The species can feed on plants (including seeds and fruits), molluscs, crustaceans, insects, fishes and amphibians (Bour et al., 2016; Luiselli et al., 2021).

**Reproduction.** In natural environment, the nesting season takes place during the dry season. Due to the extent of its range, the egg-laying period varies by region: egg-laying occurs between February and March in the Northern Hemisphere, and between July and September in the Southern Hemisphere. Nests contain three to nine eggs, and females lay eggs twice a year (Bour et al., 2016).

**Behaviour.** In its native range, the dry season can lead to the temporary disappearance of water ponds. The species then aestivate, buried in the mud or in the sand, awaiting the return of more favourable conditions.

### **Impact and management of introduced populations**

**Impact.** Little is known about the impact of *Pelusios castaneus* on native ecosystems in introduced regions.

**Management.** No targeted control measures have been established in the regions where the species has been introduced.

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