

General Habitat Description for the Blanding's Turtle (*Emydoidea blandingii*)

A general habitat description is a technical document that provides greater clarity on the area of habitat protected for a species based on the general habitat definition found in the Endangered Species Act, 2007. General habitat protection does not include an area where the species formerly occurred or has the potential to be reintroduced unless existing members of the species depend on that area to carry out their life processes. A general habitat description also indicates how the species' habitat has been categorized, as per the policy "Categorizing and Protecting Habitat Under the Endangered Species Act", and is based on the best scientific information available.

HABITAT CATEGORIZATION

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| 1 | Nest and the area within 30 m or Overwintering sites and the area within 30 m |
| 2 | The wetland complex (i.e. all suitable wetlands or waterbodies within 500 m of each other) that extends up to 2 km from an occurrence, and the area within 30 m around those suitable wetlands or waterbodies |
| 3 | Area between 30 m and 250 m around suitable wetlands/waterbodies identified in Category 2, within 2 km of an occurrence |

Category 1

Nest sites and overwintering sites are essential features and along with the 30 m area surrounding them are considered to have the lowest tolerance to alteration. Blanding's Turtles depend on these areas for sensitive life processes including egg-laying, incubation, hatching of young, and hibernation. A 30 m radius (average tree height) buffer around nesting and overwintering sites is important to maintain the microclimate conditions (e.g., thermal, vegetative and lighting features). These areas are habitually used and may support concentrations of individuals.

Nesting Sites

Blanding's Turtle nests are created in open habitats with low vegetation cover and high sun exposure such as in forest clearings, meadows, shorelines, beaches, rock outcrops, cornfields, gravel roads, road shoulders, ploughed fields, gardens, powerline rights-of-ways, yards and abandoned railroad beds (Linck et al. 1989, Ross and Anderson 1990, Kiviat 1997, Standing et al. 1999, Joyal et al. 2001, Congdon et al. 2008, Downing et al. 2010, Refsnider and Linck 2012). Females often show high fidelity to the same general nesting areas (Congdon et al. 1983, McNeil 2002, Congdon et al. 2011).

Overwintering Sites

Overwintering sites are typically occupied for at least six months during the overwintering period in Ontario (Edge *et al.* 2009, Edge *et al.* 2010, Davy 2011 unpublished data, Paterson unpublished data 2013, NHIC 2013). Blanding's Turtles display overwintering site fidelity, using some sites year after year (Power 1989, McNeil 2002, Caverhill 2006 in Newton and Herman 2009, Edge *et al.* 2009). Many individuals may aggregate at one site while overwintering (Anderson 1990, St-Hilaire 2003 in COSEWIC 2005, Ross and Congdon *et al.* 2008, Edge *et al.* 2009).

Suitable Blanding's Turtle overwintering habitat typically includes permanent bogs, fens, marshes, ponds, channels or other habitats with free (unfrozen) shallow water (Joyal *et al.* 2001, Edge 2010, Seburn 2010). Blanding's Turtles studied in Algonquin Provincial park overwintered in wetlands with free water depths of 7 cm - 50 cm (Edge *et al.* 2009). This species may also hibernate within graminoid shallow marsh areas of larger marsh complexes by burying into substrates in areas of pooled water (Gillingwater unpublished data 2013). Blanding's Turtle's may also overwinter in seasonal pools or small excavated areas with standing water (Joyal *et al.* 2001, Rouse unpublished data 2012).

Category 2

The wetland complex that extends up to 2 km from an occurrence and 30 m around these suitable wetlands/waterbodies (Category 2) will be considered to have a moderate level of tolerance to alteration before their function is compromised. For the purpose of general habitat protection for Blanding's Turtle, a wetland complex is defined as all wetlands that are within 500 m of each other. This definition is based on the biology of the species and its documents movement patterns between adjacent suitable wetlands/waterbodies. In cases where an occurrence is not within suitable aquatic habitat, the nearest wetland should be considered the starting point for delineating the wetland complex.

Blanding's Turtles depend on these wetlands and the surrounding habitat throughout their home range for life processes including feeding, mating, thermoregulation, movement, and protection from predators.

Blanding's Turtle home range sizes and lengths in Ontario vary significantly between individuals within the same population and between different populations. In Algonquin Provincial Park, the average range length of radio-tracked Blanding's Turtles was 1.8 km (1.2 standard deviation), with a maximum of 4.3 km (Edge 2013 unpublished data). Recent Ontario studies documented a 90th percentile home range length of radio-tracked Blanding's Turtles in Parry Sound District and Bancroft District of 2.0 and 2.3 km, respectively (Rouse unpublished data 2013, Cameron unpublished data 2013). Average range length of a population on Grenadier Island, Ontario, was 813 m, with a maximum range length just over 2 km. In a Minnesota population, average range length was just over 1.6 km, with a maximum range length just over 5 km (Pappas *et al.* 2000).

Blanding's Turtles regularly move between wetlands or other aquatic areas in order to access mates, overwintering sites, nesting sites, other seasonally required resources and thermoregulation sites (Congdon *et al.* 2008, Edge *et al.* 2010). In a study from Algonquin Provincial Park, Blanding's Turtles made an average of four movements between wetlands each year with an average movement distance of 231 m for males and 497 m for females (Edge *et al.* 2010). Average interwetland movement distances of a population in Maine was 680 ± 550 m (Joyal *et al.* 2001). Rouse and Cameron (unpublished data 2013) found that Blanding's Turtles primarily moved through wetlands and other water and were rarely located more than 200 m from water. Since interwetland movements tend to average about 500 m, wetlands that are separated by more than 500 m from other suitable wetlands have a lower likelihood of being occupied.

A 30 m radius (average tree height) buffer around suitable wetlands helps to maintain microclimate conditions. Buffers of 30 m are widely recognized as providing a range of functional benefits to aquatic features and wetlands such as maintaining water quality by filtering sediment and nutrients, input of woody debris, and cooling water temperatures by shading and infiltrating surface runoff (OMNR 2010). Blanding's Turtles have also been shown to generally bask within 30 m of wetlands (Joyal *et al.* 2001).

Suitable habitat for Blanding's Turtles during the active season includes a variety of wetlands such as marsh, swamps, ponds, fens, bogs, slow-flowing streams, shallow bays of lakes or rivers, as well as graminoid shallow marsh and slough forest habitats that are adjacent to larger marsh complexes (Joyal *et al.* 2001, Gillingwater 2001, Gillingwater and Piraino 2004, 2007, Congdon *et al.* 2008, Edge *et al.* 2010; Seburn 2010). Suitable wetlands used during the active season are typically eutrophic (mineral or organic nutrient-rich), shallow with a soft substrate composed of decomposing materials, and often have emergent vegetation, such as water lilies and cattails (COSEWIC 2005, Congdon *et al.* 2008).

Category 3

The area between 30 m and 250 m around suitable Category 2 wetlands/waterbodies will be considered to have the highest tolerance to alteration. Blanding's Turtles depend on these areas as movement corridors between wetlands, which are essential for carrying out life processes associated with Category 1 and 2 habitats.

Blanding's Turtle nests are typically close to permanent wetlands and reported average distances between nests and the nearest wetland range from 99.5 to 242 m, with maximum distances of 256 m to just over 400 m (Joyal *et al.* 2001, Beaudry *et al.* 2010, Congdon *et al.* 2011, Paterson *et al.* 2012, Refsnider and Linck 2012). Consequently, the area within 250 m of suitable aquatic habitat provides critical movement corridors through which hatchling Blanding's Turtles access wetlands after hatching. This habitat is also used by some hatchlings as overwintering habitat in their first year (Paterson *et al.* 2012).

Although Blanding's Turtles nest close to water, they often travel considerable distances from their wetland of origin during nesting migrations, with movements of 6 km being documented in some Ontario populations (Edge *et al.* 2010). Although wetlands and ponds are used as movement corridors when available, females make extensive movements through upland habitat to access nesting sites (Congdon *et al.* 2008). As mentioned in the previous section (see Category 2), Blanding's Turtles also make regular overland movements between wetlands throughout the active season in order to access Category 1 and 2 habitats within their home range. Category 3 habitat provides essential movement corridors of up to 500 m between wetlands, which will encompass the areas that are most likely to be used for overland movement.

Activities in Blanding's Turtle habitat

Activities in general habitat can continue as long as the *function of these areas for the species is maintained and individuals of the species are not killed, harmed, or harassed.*

Generally compatible:

- Recreational use of the water such as swimming, boating, and fishing.
- Small-scale alterations to land cover that do not impede overland movements or impair nesting sites.

Generally not compatible*:

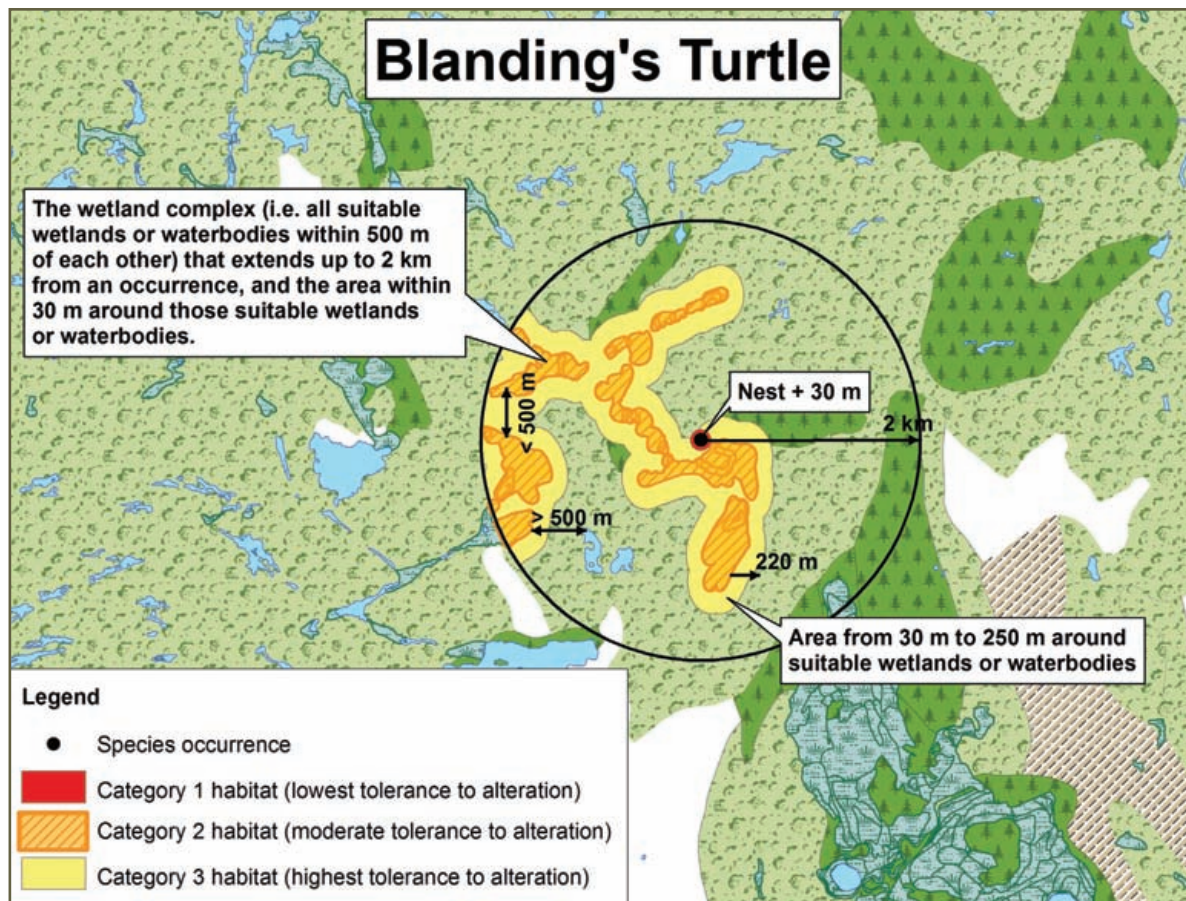
- Significant draining, infilling, dredging, or other significant alteration of wetlands or other suitable waterbodies.
- Significant alteration of shorelines, especially hardening (e.g. the use of gabion baskets, rip-rap, and rock armour).

* If you are considering an activity that may not be compatible with general habitat, please contact your local MNR office for more information.

Key terms:

- **Thermoregulation:** Some animals, such as turtles, use thermoregulation to alter their internal body temperature through behavioural patterns, such as basking in the sun to increase body temperature or seeking out cool areas to lower body temperature.

Sample application of the general habitat protection for Blanding's Turtle



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