

ALABAMA'S
RED-BELLIED
TURTLES



One would imagine life as a turtle, just like life as a human, has its various ups and downs. Unfortunately, for Alabama's official state reptile, the red-bellied turtle, the struggle to survive has many uphill challenges especially when heavily travelled roadways invade this declining species' habitat. That's why the Alabama Department of Transportation is putting on the brakes and being proactive in its efforts to help ensure Alabama's red-bellied turtle population doesn't continue to decline. In 2008, ALDOT constructed a 3.4-mile low-barrier fence along both sides of the Mobile Bay Causeway to prevent access by mature females and their hatchlings and is also displaying banners along the fence-line to remind passing motorists of turtle nesting and hatching seasons.

Listed as endangered in 1987 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the red-bellied turtle (*Pseudemys alabamensis*) spends the majority of its time lounging atop of a half-sunken log bathed in warm sunlight. However, when Alabama's red-bellied turtles make a move from water to land to nest or hatch their young, the eminent danger from predators, including humans, becomes a major concern. Sure, there's a threat from fish crows, raccoons, and feral swine that feed on the eggs of the turtle nest and the snakes, alligators, large fish, and wading birds that prey on young turtles. However, the most danger comes from drivers who may be unaware of the seasons when the red-bellies are on the move and are crossing the coastal roadways.



Found only in four southern U.S. coastal counties - Baldwin and Mobile in Alabama and Harrison and Jackson in Mississippi, this remarkable species is slowly making a comeback thanks to conservation-minded people and organizations who know the red-bellied turtle is one of many wildlife species worth saving. One champion in the fight to save the "red-belly" is Dr. David Nelson, a herpetologist with the University of South Alabama who has been tracking the turtle's population for some time. According to Nelson's 2001 data, over 580 turtles were killed on the Causeway that year. The majority of those were spring hatchlings and females. Since it takes about 15 years for females to mature, losing them at such an alarming rate will deplete the species until

they become few and far between. However, the new fence addresses the problem by helping to keep turtles out of harm's way.



The eco-friendly fencing is concentrated at key points along the Causeway including the Blakely, Apalachee Rivers and Chacaloochee Bay near 5 Rivers - Alabama's Delta Resource Center. ALDOT's partnership with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the Nature Conservancy, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been extremely beneficial in protecting habitat areas and raising public awareness of the red-belly's plight. Banners hung on the fencing reflecting hatching season in the spring and nesting season in the fall will remind motorists to "Give Red-bellied Turtles a Brake"

The good news is that Nelson's recent data reflects the fencing is already making a huge difference in reducing the number of turtle fatalities. Nelson's 2010 data shows a dramatic decrease in the number of turtles killed along the Causeway (an 81 percent decline from 2007.) And, it is with great hope that ALDOT's fencing continues to turn the tide by keeping the red-bellies safe, allowing them to propagate.

We all have a responsibility to make a difference by respecting, protecting the abundant wildlife and natural resources found in our great state, and by ensuring those wonderful resources are left for future generations to enjoy. Who knows, life as a turtle may become a lot easier. All you have to do is give them a Brake so they can make tracks!

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