

Malayan Flat-shelled Terrapin *Notochelys platynota* near Kota Tinggi, Johor, Peninsular Malaysia

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Observer: Nick Baker.

Photographs by: Nick Baker.

Subject identified by: Kelvin K. P. Lim.

Location: Kampung Batu Empat, Kota Tinggi, Johor, Peninsular Malaysia.

Elevation: 15 metres asl.

Habitat: Degraded scrub, adjacent to oil palm plantation.

Date and time: 03 December 2018, 09:29 hrs.

Identity of subject: Malayan Flat-shelled Terrapin, *Notochelys platynota* (Reptilia, Testudines, Geoemydidae).

Description of record: Whilst driving along Route 91, northwest of Kota Tinggi, near Kampung Batu Empat, a chelonian was seen attempting to cross the main road. After quickly taking an in-situ photograph (Fig. 1), the animal was carefully retrieved and taken to the adjacent habitat, which comprised partly waterlogged, long grass and scrub adjacent to a small oil palm plantation. Photographs of the plastron were taken (Fig. 2), and the animal was then released unharmed.



Fig. 1.

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Fig. 2.

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Remarks: *Notochelys platynota* attains a maximum carapace length of 36 to 40 cm, and is distinguished from other freshwater turtles in Southeast Asia by its flat-topped carapace with six to seven vertebral scutes (compared to typically five vertebral scutes on the other species) [see Fig. 1]. While the carapaces of adults are usually uniform brown, those of hatchlings are roundish and coloured green, yellow or orange, with black spots. The species is distributed from southern Vietnam, Thailand, down the Malay Peninsula (including Singapore) to Sumatra, Borneo and Java (Lim & Das, 1999: 81; Bonin et al., 2006: 338; Auliya, 2007: 62).

The Malayan Flat-shelled Terrapin occurs in freshwater habitats such as slow-flowing waterways with muddy substrate and dense vegetation, as well as marshes, lakes and swamp-forest. It is omnivorous but feeds primarily on water plants and fallen fruit. Although largely aquatic in habits, it is known to readily make long overland journeys (Bonin et al., 2006: 338). This was what the featured example seemed to be doing: it was found approximately 4 km from relatively intact primary or mature secondary forest, comprising the southern part of the Gunung Pantii Forest Reserve, and approximately 1 km from degraded, secondary wetland habitats, comprising a fast flowing stream (issuing from the Kota Tinggi waterfalls area) and adjacent shallow lakes (probably formed by sand extraction).

There appear to be no previous formal records of *Notochelys platynota* from the Kota Tinggi district but the species is expected to occur there. A juvenile example was reported in August 1995 to the west of Kota Tinggi, from the foot of Gunung Pulai (Lim et al., 1995: 27).

References:

- Auliya, M. (2007). *An identification Guide to the Tortoises and Freshwater Turtles of Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Singapore and Timor Leste*. TRAFFIC Southeast Asia, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia. 98 pp.
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- Lim B. L. & Das, I. (1999). *Turtles of Borneo and Peninsular Malaysia*. Natural History Publications (Borneo), Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. ix + 151 pp.
- Lim, K., R. Subaraj & Teo, R. (1995, issued 2000). Records for 1995. *The Pangolin*, 8 (1-4): 10-30.