

The red-eared slider, *Trachemys scripta elegans*, in the British Virgin Islands

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Key data: *Trachemys scripta elegans*; Emydidae; red-eared slider; population; British Virgin Islands. Tortola; Road Town; pond in J.R. O'Neal Botanic Gardens (18°25'38"N, 64°37'22"W); 21 October 2003; collected by Fred Sibley; MCZ R183688. Virgin Gorda; Spanish Town (18°26'41"N 64°26'23"W); 28 October 2004; collected by Jim Egelhoff; MCZ R184120. Both verified by Joe Martinez. Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University.

These are the first records of this widely-distributed species from the British Virgin Islands (BVI). The pond at the J. R. O'Neal Botanic Gardens in Road Town, Tortola (<100 m², <1 m depth), was constructed in the early 1980s. It is one of the few permanent bodies of fresh water in the BVI. Adult sliders were first noted there soon after construction was completed, and excavations and nests were first observed in the vegetation surrounding the pond in the mid-1990s. Hatchlings were first sighted and captured in 1998, and the population grew to 15-20 adults by the late 1990s (Arona DeWindt, pers. com.). Seining of the pond in 2003 produced 12 adults and approximately 20 juveniles. This indicates the presence of an established, reproducing population on Tortola. Additional capture efforts produced further adults and juveniles in July and October 2004, but were not sufficient to eradicate the population. A second species of freshwater turtle, *Pseudemys nelsoni*, has also been found in the same pond (Owen et al., 2006).

Trachemys s. elegans has been introduced around the world, including the Caribbean, as a result of its prevalence in the pet trade (Lever, 2003; Emer, 2004). Staff at the O'Neal Botanic Gardens observe visitors releasing turtles into the pond several times per year (A. DeWindt, pers. com.), and the chief source of these animals is presumably the pet trade (the two pet stores on Tortola report importing

baby sliders for at least the past 20 years). In addition to direct releases by owners, at least 10 turtles donated to the Humane Society on Tortola in recent years have been released at the Gardens (Tessa Gunter, pers. com.); it is also reported that sliders are occasionally “released” into the sea).

No additional breeding populations are known from the BVI, and few suitable habitats exist. The Virgin Gorda specimen does not appear to be part of a population, but rather an escaped pet. It might have originated on Tortola, either bought at a pet store or from the O’Neal Botanic Gardens, whose staff report that visitors occasionally capture and remove juveniles, presumably for pets. At least one of these is known to have escaped elsewhere on Tortola (A. DeWindt, pers. com.). Additional turtles originating in pet stores in the British and US Virgin Islands have been released on Jost Van Dyke, according to multiple residents interviewed in 2006. Unconfirmed reports of “pond turtles” at the concrete freshwater retention ponds near the airport at Beef Island probably reflect the presence of this species there as well. We expect further spread into agricultural ponds and other artificial water bodies to eventually take place. However, scarcity of suitable habitat will likely restrict range expansion of this species in the BVI. Ecological impacts remain unstudied, but are likely to be small because of the localized nature of the invasion and the artificial nature of the habitat.

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References

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