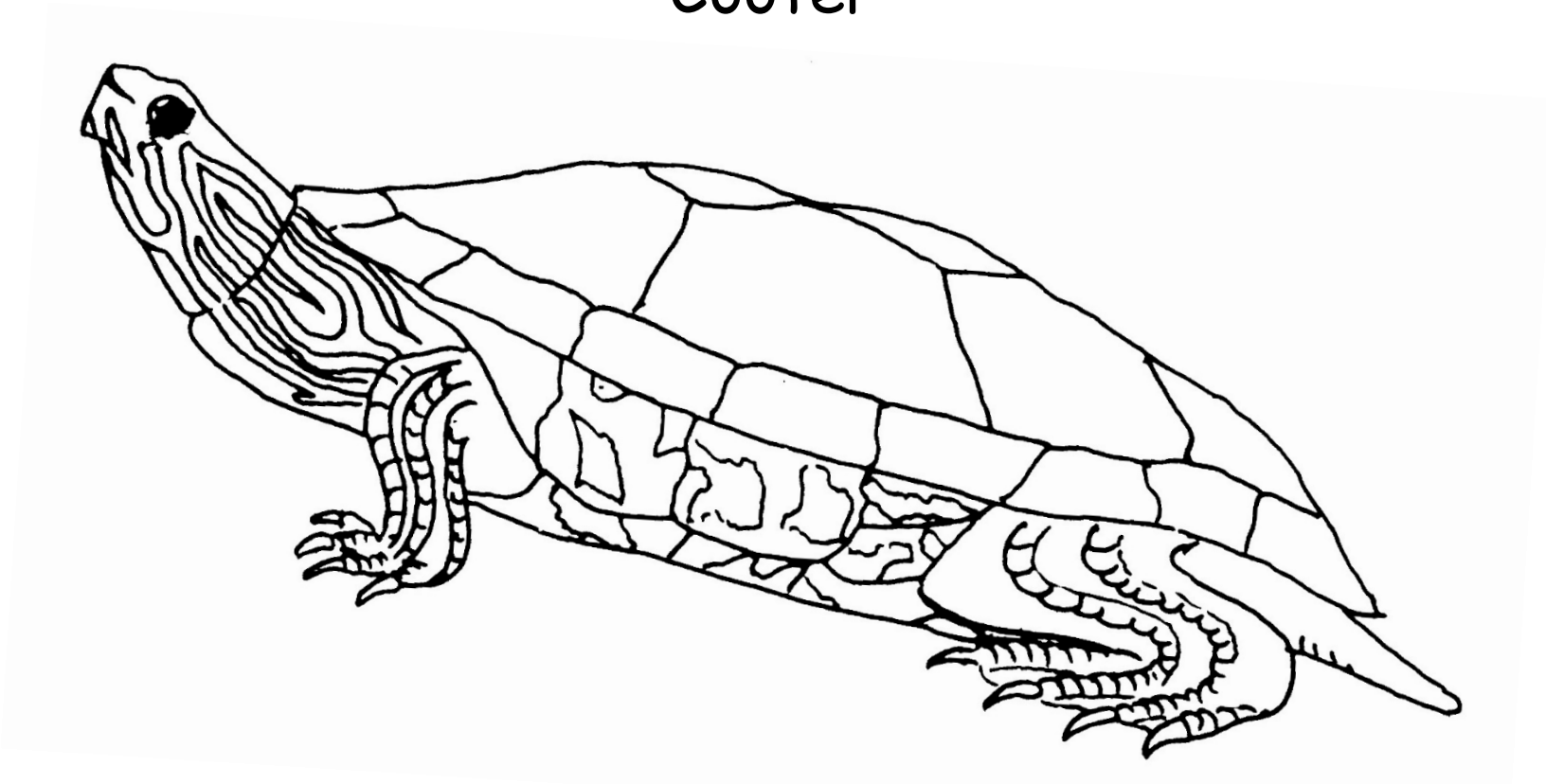
PA's Amphibian and Reptile Coloring Series

Northern Red-bellied Cooter



All About Me: Hello! I am a Northern Red-bellied Cooter. We are alert and active turtles, but at the same time, we are shy. One of PA's threatened species, we are a victim of destruction of our habitat. We are large turtles that grow to an upper shell length of 10 inches to 12 inches. Our carapace (upper shell) varies from brown to black and often has a mottled pattern of red- brown. Several vertical red bars run from the center of our shells to the outer edge. Our lower shell (plastron) can be yellow, coral, or even red. There is a prominent notch at the tip of the upper jaw, and an arrow-shaped stripe runs atop our heads between the eyes to the snout. We were known, at one time at least, to have inhabited the lower Delaware River, the lower Susquehanna River and a portion of the Potomac River Basin, which reaches into a small section of southcentral PA. Today, we are found primarily in PA in the lower Delaware River Drainage and at one known location in the Potomac River Basin. We like large waters. Deep ponds, lakes, rivers, and streams can be homes for us. We need dense aquatic vegetation in our waters. Where we still exist, we can be seen basking on a favorite sun-drenched rock in company with much smaller painted turtles, close cousins of ours. We are mostly vegetarian, but we also eat snails, crayfish, and tadpoles.