

# Of Turtles, Tortoises and Terrapins

By Frederick Boyce

I was feeding the box turtles in the aquarium's outdoor habitat the other day while an older gentleman looked on, and I heard him refer to the box turtles as "terrapins." This was no surprise to me as my father, who also came from a rural part of North Carolina, often did the same thing. This quaint old habit probably comes from the British usage of the word terrapin, which they apply to any freshwater turtle. And while some people think, erroneously, that box turtles are small tortoises due to their terrestrial lifestyle, they are actually much more closely related to our freshwater pond turtles than they are to any tortoise.

True tortoises are entirely terrestrial and do not swim well, though they do enjoy a good wallow in a mud hole. Box turtles, and most tortoises, have high, domed shells which help conserve water so that they can do without it for long periods, and some tortoises can live in very dry habitats, indeed—even deserts. And while they are not particularly adept at swimming, giant Aldabra tortoises have been seen miles out at sea, bobbing along like huge apples, which is how they came to colonize many offshore islands. Tortoises have stumpy, elephantine feet that are like pillars, and they stand up on them as they walk rather than sprawling flat on the ground, while box turtles have feet and limbs that are much more like those of their freshwater relatives, though they are not webbed for swimming.

Box turtles are omnivorous and relish earthworms, insects and carrion in addition to a variety of fruits, mushrooms and vegetables, while true tortoises are mostly dedicated vegetarians, though anytime one tries to make any absolute statement in regard to reptiles, someone is bound to come up with an exception. As it happens, a giant Galapagos tortoise that lived for many decades at the Philadelphia Zoo enjoyed having a little pigeon with his salad. His keepers would spread a bountiful array of produce on the ground, which was full of goodies that the local pigeons also found delectable. This famous tortoise would rise up on his four stout legs like a hydraulic lift and wait for the pigeons, absorbed in their gluttony, to carelessly wander beneath him, whereupon he would suddenly allow his immense bulk to drop to the ground, squashing the birds. Voila—squab salad.

We have no native tortoises in NC—the only one that even comes close is the gopher tortoise, *Gopherus polyphemus*, which inhabits the Coastal Plain from extreme southeastern South Carolina down to peninsular Florida, and along the Gulf Coast to eastern Louisiana. Severely threatened by development and habitat destruction (and federally protected), gopher tortoises dig long burrows that provide shelter for many other species, including endangered indigo snakes.

Meanwhile, confusing the name game even further, there are no true tortoises at all in Australia, where the word tortoise is applied instead to all freshwater turtles, while the name turtle is reserved for sea turtles. The diamondback terrapin, *Malaclemys terrapin*, with seven distinct races inhabiting brackish coastal marshes from Massachusetts to southern Texas, is the only turtle that legitimately bears the name of terrapin, originally an Algonquian word for turtle—especially a tasty, edible turtle. Perhaps no turtle has ever been considered more tasty or edible than the hapless terrapin, an epicurean delight that reached its height of popularity during the Gilded Age (I would be surprised if terrapin stew was not on the first-class menu of the *Titanic*). Terrapin meat was not always so favored, however.

In the 18th century, a wagonload of terrapins could be purchased for a dollar, and in 1797, with slaves in the Tidewater region on the brink of revolt, Maryland passed a statute that restricted the use of terrapin as food for slaves. By the 1850s, however, the price of terrapin had soared to as much as \$125 per dozen. Naturally, such demand soon lead to a precipitous decline in their numbers, and in 1903 the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries, promising "a terrapin for every household," established terrapin farms in Lloyds, MD; Charleston, SC; and Beaufort, NC.

The old concrete grow-out pens for the Beaufort terrapins can still be viewed on

Pivers Island. Terrapins of all seven races from throughout their range were housed at the farm, and when it was finally closed in 1948, they were all released into our local waters—meaning that, even today, some terrapins in our area occasionally display characteristics of subspecies from other parts of their range. The one pictured here, which I found crossing Highway 58 in front of the Inn at Pine Knoll Shores, is colored much like an ornate diamondback terrapin, a subspecies that is normally found only along the Gulf coast of Florida.

Whatever the case, whether it's a terrapin or tortoise, they are all turtles—so you can't go wrong calling them that.

Sources for this article: "The History of Commercial Exploitation of the Diamondback Terrapin (*Malaclemys terrapin*)" by Willem M. Roosenburg, Department of Biological Sciences, Ohio University; Greg Lepera, former curator at Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens and St. Augustine Alligator Farm.

*Frederick Boyce is the staff herpetologist at the NC Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores.*



Terrapin spotted on Highway 58 in Pine Knoll Shores—Photo by Fred Boyce

## Sonny Cunningham Receives Award

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billing program. Partnering with Carteret-Craven Electric Cooperative, citizens of Pine Knoll Shores now receive one bill for both electric and water utilities. Town staff efficiency has been increased by removing decades-old billing tasks.

- Working with the local Council of Governments, Sonny has been singularly responsible for the digital mapping of the entire Pine Knoll Shores Water System—for the first time in the 40 years of the system's existence. Over 648 water valves, 188 fire hydrants and over 26 miles of water mains have been captured for the first time so that public safety personnel and water system operators can access this information on a moment's notice.
- Taking initiative, Sonny recognized the inefficiency of the meters at the town's multi-family units and had them replaced with compound meters to capture high- and low-use periods, resulting in a significant increase in revenues for water usage that had previously gone unmetered.

Sonny has been the town's greatest asset over the past 10 years. In addition to the accomplishments described above, he has demonstrated a can-do spirit that has reflected positively on the entire staff. He is universally held in high regard throughout the town because he cares about the quality of the water that our customers receive through their taps.

If you see Sonny around town, be sure to congratulate him on this well-deserved award—and thank him for his dedication to the citizens of Pine Knoll Shores.