

# Things to Know About Box Turtles

By Frederick Boyce

The eastern box turtle, *Terrapene carolina*, is the official state reptile of North Carolina.

Forest dwellers that can be found across the entire state from the mountains to the sea (and right here on Bogue Banks), their shells are patterned with shades of brown, black, orange or yellow—and no two are alike. Their patterns blend perfectly with their woodland habitats, making them very difficult to spot, and they are most often out and about on wet, rainy mornings.

Box turtles are omnivores and eat a wide variety of plant food as well as protein, including insects, earthworms, fish and carrion. Berries, especially blackberries and strawberries, as well as watermelon, tomatoes and squash are among their favorite foods, and they greatly enjoy mushrooms of all kinds, even the



Miss Boxie Brown was waiting on the front stoop of our new house the first day we arrived for a look, in the spring of 2014. We took it as a good omen and bought the house—and she has paid us a visit almost every year since. Inset: Miss Brown portrait on April 15, 2017.—Photos by Fred Boyce

poisonous ones. People have gotten sick and even died after eating box turtles made toxic by poisonous mushrooms, so eating a box turtle is *not* a good idea.

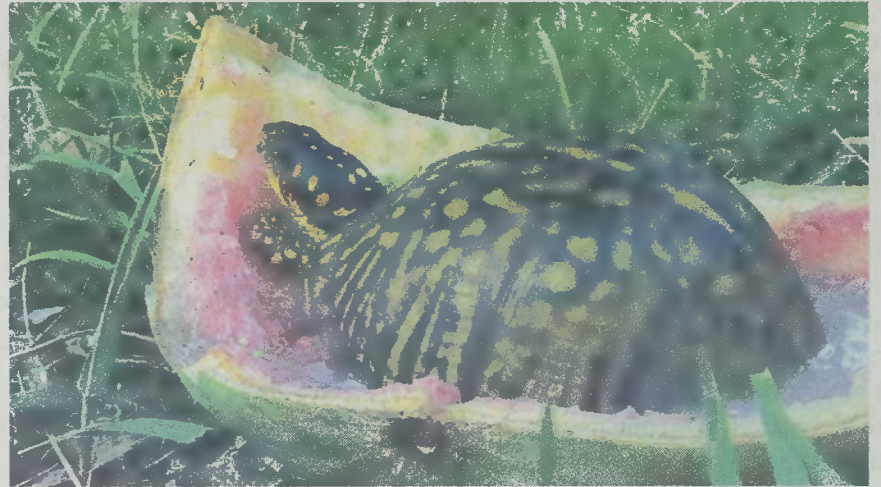
The bottom shell (the plastron) consists of two pieces joined by a fleshy hinge so that the shell can be tightly closed like a small box (hence, the name). No other type of turtle can enclose itself so completely or securely in its shell.

Box turtles are *not* tortoises. They are actually closely related to such common freshwater turtles as cooters and pond sliders, but are adapted to a terrestrial lifestyle.

The box turtle's dome-shaped shell is less suited for swimming than the more flattened, hydrodynamic shell of an aquatic turtle, but is structurally much stronger and helps conserve water. Its sturdy shell can help protect the turtle from predators or from being stepped on by a large animal, but it offers virtually no protection from motor vehicles, and road mortality is one of the most serious threats facing these turtles.

In spring and fall when box turtles are traveling to and from their winter refuges or summer foraging grounds, they must often cross roadways. Keep an eye out for them crossing the roads, especially on warm rainy mornings. If you can safely pull over and help the turtle across, put it well off the road in the same direction it was heading. The best and safest thing to do is just stop and wait for the turtle to cross safely on its own. Those few uncomfortable minutes you may have to block traffic could mean decades of added life for the turtle.

Box turtles are homebodies that become very attached to their small home ranges. They will get lost if taken too far, so they should never be moved more than a mile away. If no suitable habitat is nearby, try to find the closest woods available.



Miss Boxie Brown taking full advantage of a watermelon rind four years later, in May 2018. Female box turtles usually have a more round, compact shape and brown eyes.

Box turtles enjoy soaking in a stream or shallow puddle, but they are not good swimmers and should never be dropped into water as they could drown. Never put *any* turtle in the water. A turtle can be placed close to the water's edge, and if it wishes to enter the water it will do so on its own. They are not like fish and do not have to be in water to survive. Also, any aquatic turtle wandering on land is not lost, but likely a female looking for a place to lay eggs. They should never be picked up and moved unless there is clear and present danger.

If they are not struck by a car or a lawn mower, box turtles can easily enjoy a life span comparable to that of a person, and there are reliable records of them living for over a century.

Turtles are survivors that have been finding their way around very well for over 200 million years. Unless they are in immediate danger, it is best to leave them as they are. Beyond navigating such man-made obstacles as a busy road, they don't much require our help.

**What you can do for box turtles.** Never take a wild turtle home for a pet. If you *must* have a pet turtle, there are rescues and other sources of captive bred ones. *Do your research* and know what you are getting into first. Turtles can live longer than us.

If you live near a wooded area, try maintaining a wildlife-friendly yard with native plants and flowers, a garden, unmowed natural areas and mowed walkways. Box turtles thrive in such surroundings and will benefit from a compost pile, as well as a large pile of leaves or brush under which they can spend the winter. Unraked, unmowed, natural yards not only save money and energy and

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