

Two Turtles of the APPALACHIANS

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WHENEVER TURTLES ARE DISCUSSED, the question that always comes up is: What is a turtle, a tortoise, a terrapin? A terrapin is a turtle that lives in brackish or partly salty water. A tortoise is a turtle that is strictly land dwelling; they eat only vegetation. Tortoises have large stumpy looking legs reminiscent of elephant legs. The Appalachian region has no terrapins or tortoises.

Turtles go into hibernation for five or six months under water in sand or mud. They obtain oxygen from the water through the linings of their mouth. The only exception to this behavior is the box turtle. Box turtles burrow on land to escape the cold.

All turtles come to land to lay and bury their eggs in the soil. When the young turtles hatch they are on their own to find food and shelter.

All turtles are reptiles with a shell. Most can pull their head, legs, and tail into their shell. This is excellent protection from enemies. They are preyed upon by skunks, raccoons, opossums, foxes, and bald eagles. Of course the turtles' greatest enemy is the human. Many, like snapping turtles, are caught and eaten by humans. However, habitat destruction hurts turtle populations most.

Turtles are carnivorous: they eat bugs, plants, and animals. Turtles are toothless; however, their beaks have sharp cutting edges coupled with powerful jaw muscles. They are formidable biters.

Like all reptiles, turtles are cold-blooded. Turtles possess excellent vision and a good sense of smell. All turtles can live to be 100 years old.

Wood turtles are semi-aquatic; they possess legs that can swim or walk on land. Their upper shells are brown with raised pointed plates. The record shell length of a wood turtle is nine and one quarter inches. They are the biggest of the turtles found traveling far from water. However, wood turtles hibernate in water. Often wood turtles are found with missing legs from old predator injuries.

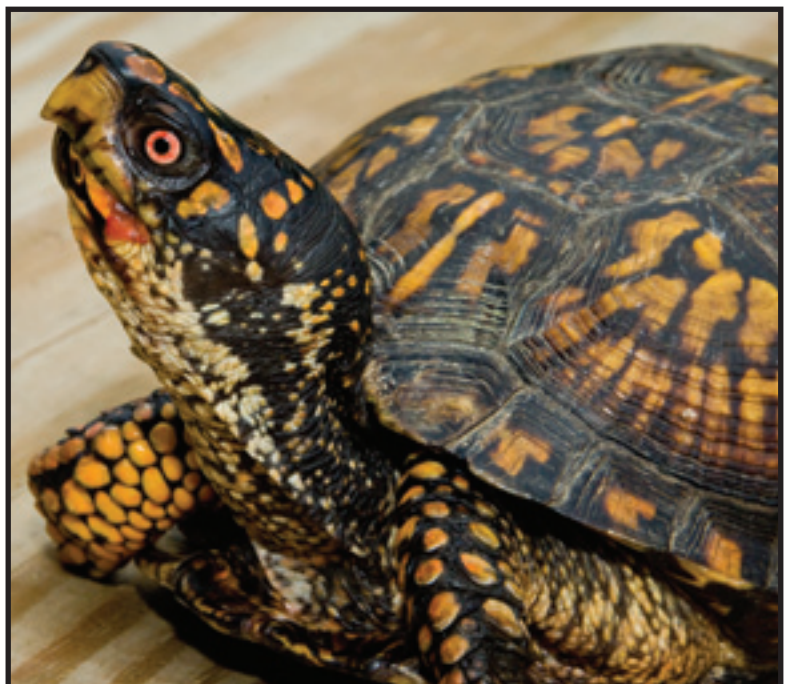
Wood turtles have a naturally sweet and gentle disposition. My son kept a wood turtle for several years. This turtle would come on call all the way across a room for a ripe strawberry. Wood turtles seem to be intelligent and possess excellent memories. And, of course, wood turtles are adaptable to diets and captivity.

Eastern box turtles are probably the most well known of the Appalachian turtles since they are always on land; hence, they are seen more often. Box turtles have the most variety of colors and markings of any of the turtles. Their upper shell is high domed and either black or brown with orange, olive, or yellow lines or spots. Box turtles eat a variety of food from earthworms to bugs like crickets, to fruits and vegetables. The record shell length of an eastern box turtle is seven and three quarter inches.

At one time box turtles were very plentiful, but presently, probably due to habitat and less trapping of predatory, fur bearing animals, their numbers are dwindling.

Eastern box turtles and wood turtles can easily be sexed by the shape of their lower shell which is called a plastron. If this lower shell is concaved inward, the turtle is a male. If this shell is perfectly flat, the turtle is a female. Eastern box turtles have a hinged plastron; this allows them to tightly close up their head, legs and tail for defense within their carapace or upper shell.

Before taking any turtles from the wild as pets, check your local state laws. A much better choice for pets are captive produced specimens. Domestic bred turtles are parasite free, adapted to a pellet diet and come with care instructions. Check your local pet shops and reptile shows for turtle availability.





The Wood Turtle is seldom seen but is distinguished by his bright colors.
Facing page: The Eastern Box Turtle is more common, seen more often and is easier to find.