

Eastern box turtle (*Terrapene carolina carolina*)

Box turtles are common throughout LRPRA and are often seen crossing the streets. The Eastern box turtle is one of four subspecies found in the United States and the only one found in Virginia. They live in open woodlands, pastures, and marshy meadows, often found near streams and ponds. They may live more than 100 years. If you help one crossing the street, put it on the side it is going to.

Box turtles have a hinged underside that enables them to close their high-domed shell almost completely. Concentric growth furrows can be seen on the shell, although difficult to see on older turtles. When frightened, they retract their head, tail, and limbs into their shell, and clamp it shut, then wait until the perceived threat is gone. While juveniles have several predators, very few species can prey effectively on adults.



Male box turtle (red iris)

John Maher

Males are slightly larger than females and the posterior lobe of their underside is concave. Females' underside is flat or slightly convex. Males have red irises and females have yellowish-brown irises (see photo).

Box turtles are diurnal and scoop out a shallow indentation in which to spend the night. Their preferred body temperature is between 84° and 100° F. In the heat of the summer, they largely restrict their activity to mornings and after rain. When it gets too hot, they hide under decaying logs and leaves, or crawl into mammal burrows, mud, or shady pools to cool off. In the spring and fall, they may be out foraging during all daylight hours, sometimes basking in the sun to get warm.

Box turtles go into hibernation in October or November, burrowing as much as two-feet deep into loose earth, mud, stream bottoms. They may return to the same place to hibernate in successive years and usually emerge in April.

Box turtles usually have a home range with a diameter of 750 feet or less. Home ranges of different individuals overlap frequently, regardless of age or sex and turtles are often found together and show no antagonism towards each other.

The mating season begins in the spring and continues to October. Males may mate with more than one female or the same female several times over a period of several years. A female may lay fertile eggs for up to four years after one successful mating. Nesting occurs from May through July. Nests are usually dug in sandy or loamy soil, using the hind legs. Then eggs are laid in this cavity and the nest is carefully covered up. Females lay three to eight elliptical eggs with thin, white, flexible shells. The female lays several clutches each year. Incubation normally lasts about three months.

Box turtles are omnivorous, eating snails, insects, berries, fungi, slugs, worms, roots, flowers, fish, frogs, salamanders, snakes, birds, and eggs indiscriminately. Their preference varies greatly by season but young are primarily carnivorous during their first five to six years. Adults tend to be mostly herbivorous, but they eat no green leaves. Young often hunt in ponds and streams, but adults usually feed on land.

The Virginia Herpetological Society collects observation data on the Internet.

<http://www.virginiaherpetologicalsociety.com/reptiles/turtles/eastern-box-turtle/boxturtle-reporting/boxturtle-reportingform.htm>

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