

Nebraska Geographic

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Traveling for Turtles

Most people who know even a little about me are aware that I have an abnormal fascination with turtles. I can't really explain it, except for that it began when I was a young child.

Growing up, my parents tolerated an ever-changing menagerie of native Nebraska critters that always included a few turtles. Sometimes, I pushed Mom and Dad's patience by having dozens of short-term turtle pets at the same time. Years later as an adult, my collection of chelonians included species from around the world. Word got around about the Nebraska turtle man. Soon I was tracking turtles through the Sandhills with telemetry equipment, and giving presentations to Boy Scout troops, school students, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission outdoor events, and universities.

With the exception of the snapping turtle that has lived in my kitchen since hatching from an egg that I salvaged from its road-killed mother 18 years ago, my work with turtles these days is mostly limited to moving them out of harm's way when I encounter them crossing roads.

Which reminds me: spring is prime time for seeing turtles crossing Nebraska roads. Please don't run them over, and if you choose to move them off the road, please don't put yourself or other motorists at risk.

Turtles are widespread in Nebraska. Most fishing trips or lake visits are punctuated with at least a sighting of a small, pointed turtle head poking from the water's surface or turtles basking on logs in the sun. You could try to catch one for yourself if you are curious, but there are opportunities statewide for getting closeup views of these amazing creatures without getting wet or dirty.

Ponca State Park, near the community of Ponca in northeast Nebraska's Dixon County, has a nice collection of Nebraska native turtles species clear toward the back of its massive visitor center. I won't reveal everything living in their tanks, but there is a male ornate box turtle in the collection that comes out of hiding when he thinks it is time to be fed.

Another Nebraska Game and Parks Commission facility, Schramm Park State Recreation Area near Gretna, has a collection ruled by something you won't see anywhere else – Big Snap Daddy. This behemoth is estimated to be more than 90 years old. As of last October he tipped the scales at 98 pounds and is believed to be the largest common snapping turtle in captivity. I have gazed at Big Snap Daddy from inside his enclosure, and let me tell you, he is an exceptional specimen.

While there, make sure to check out the stunning, walk-through aquarium exhibit housing other reptiles, amphibians, and fish found in our state.

There are more turtles on display in Nebraska's Metro area. Our capital city is represented at the Lincoln Children's Zoo. I admit, feeding the giraffes there is pretty cool, but to me – and it might seem like a stretch – the African spur thigh tortoise at Lincoln Children's Zoo is head and tails above the rest of the critters. The zoo even has a fake turtle shell that visitors can climb into for photos (yes, I can fit in it).

There are many other turtles species on display, and don't forget to chug along with the zoo train during your visit.

Omaha Zoo has turtles in several areas, so, I'll point out a couple of my favorites. Routinely rated among the world's best zoos, it should come as no surprise to Jane Goodall, Jack Hannah, or Jeff Corwin, that Omaha Zoo also has a world-class turtle collection.

The Desert Dome shines out from afar, but something mysterious lurks in the basement. That's where the Eugene T. Mahoney Kingdoms of the Night exhibit, the largest nocturnal zoo exhibit on earth, houses creatures from near and far. There are alligators, bats, and blind fish in this exhibit encapsulating three-quarters of an acre. One of those alligators is white and is easily seen. There's another reptile here that blends seamlessly into the dark.

The first time I saw the giant alligator snapping turtle in the exhibit I initially thought it was a log – until it stretched out its neck and head to take a breath. Despite popular belief among some in Nebraska, these are not the same snappers found in the Nebraska wild. They can grow to more than 200 pounds. They are not aggressive, but when captured or accosted, can shear the fingers off of anyone who mistakenly gets too close (again, the snappers in Nebraska cannot do that).

They are not speedy predators, preferring instead to lounge on the bottom of a river, while wiggling worm-like appendage in their mouth that lures small fish right in – SNAP! But similar to the common snapping turtles in Nebraska, much of their diet is vegetation.

You can spend a day and then some at Omaha Zoo (just ask my weary family). Next time you are there, make sure to cool off in Scott Aquarium while watching penguins, sharks, stingrays, and of course – the only sea turtles on display in Nebraska (at least until Cabela's decides to put saltwater aquariums in their stores).

Safe travels – and watch for deer (and turtles).