



Letters to Nature Kids

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Finding Turtles

Dear Nature Kids,

I like turtles. Maybe you do too. It's fun to hear some stories and facts about them. For example, the biggest freshwater turtle in North America can be found in the Trinity River, near where a lot of us live. It's the alligator snapping turtle, and it spends a lot of time underwater in rivers and other wetlands. One that was found here in Texas weighed 211 pounds. That's heavier than the average human being.

As it sits quietly at the bottom of the river, an alligator snapping turtle looks like a big rock or part of an old log. The turtle holds its mouth open and wiggles a little part of its tongue that looks like a worm. It is a lure, and a passing fish or crawdad might come nearer to eat the "worm." Once the fish gets within those big, sharp jaws, the turtle bites down and gets the fish.

Most turtles are much smaller than snapping turtles. The common musk turtle could fit in the palm of your hand. They are found in much of east and central Texas in ponds, creeks,



Turtle researcher Viviana Ricardez with an alligator snapping turtle caught and released as part of the permitted activities of Texas Turtles, a 501(c)3 organization (photo courtesy of Viviana Ricardez)

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(Above:) common musk turtle or "stinkpot" (Below:) a hatchling beside a dime (hatchling photo courtesy Texas Turtles)



and rivers where they might swim past an alligator snapping turtle. When it hatches from an egg, a common musk turtle is about the size of a dime.

These little musk turtles will bite to try to defend themselves, but being a little turtle, they can only bite so hard. The other way that they can defend themselves is to smell really bad. They have glands that can release the smelly stuff, and it's pretty awful. In fact, the other name for the common musk turtle is "stinkpot."

My favorites are the box turtles. Have you seen one? If you find one, I hope you'll let it go, because in most places they are disappearing. Sometimes they are run over on the road, and sometimes people pick them up and take them home. Box turtles are not that easy to keep healthy, and if people turn them loose, the turtle wanders around looking for home and often does not survive.

One kind of box turtle is the species known as the ornate box turtle. These are more often found in fields and prairies, and they have almost black shells with pretty yellow dashes. The other species in our part of Texas is the three-toed box turtle (the back feet usually – not always – have three toes). You might see one in woodlands and grassy clearings in east Texas. Their shells are some shade of brown and sometimes there are some markings on the shell. Three-toed box turtles can have very pretty colors on the front legs, neck, and head.

This is especially true for males.

How do they defend themselves from predators? The bottom part of the shell (called the "plastron") has a flexible hinge so that the turtle can pull its head and legs inside the shell and fold the plastron up against the top shell (called the "carapace"). When the turtle is closed up inside the shell, most predators like raccoons will give up and leave the turtle alone.

Many years ago, I would see a lot of box turtles on spring mornings after a rain. Maybe it was the rain and maybe it was how the wet ground brought out the



(Above:) ornate box turtle (Below:) Three-toed box turtle (both are males)



things that they ate, like earthworms and insects. The turtles would wander before it got too hot. Unfortunately, a lot of them wandered out onto highways and they were killed.

When I was young and did not know better, my parents would often stop and let me take one that we saw at the side of the road. They are beautiful and less likely to bite than some other turtles, and I wanted

An ornate box turtle turned upside-down so that you can see the bottom shell or plastron with its hinge



The turtle's head is facing this way → and the white arrow shows where the hinge is

to see all of them. And it's OK to see them *if you then let them go on their way*. It took me a long time to learn that.



A female ornate box turtle's head. Turtles don't have teeth. They have a hard beak for biting off pieces of food. Notice her ear-drum covered with skin just behind her jaws.

I hope you get to find turtles – box turtles, red-eared sliders, musk turtles, even snapping turtles if you don't get too close. Watch how they move, see how patient they are, and how fast some of them can go. We see fewer and fewer of most species, so I hope we can admire them without hurting them and take good care of the places where they live. If you want to learn more, have a look at the website of my friends at Texas Turtles (<https://texasturtles.org>).

✍ Michael

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