



Ornate Box Turtle

Terrapene ornata



Photo: Michael Smith

What do they look like?

These turtles have a domed top shell (called the carapace) and a flat bottom shell (the plastron) that is hinged so that when threatened the turtle can withdraw into the shell and close the two parts of the plastron. The ground color of the shell (above and below) is very dark brown to nearly black. The bigger scutes (the plates covering the shell) of the carapace have yellow lines radiating out in a sort of starburst pattern. The dark plastron has yellow lines as well. There is also a broken yellow line running down the middle of the carapace. Adults have a carapace length of 4 to 5 inches. Older males may have a plain greenish head and males generally have red eyes. The front legs have large scales on the more exposed surface, and the scales may be yellow or may be colorfully marked in red or orange. Each digit ends in a tough claw. There are almost always 4 toes on each hind foot. There is a short tail which is longer and thicker in males.

How do they defend themselves? Can they hurt you?

Their primary defense is to withdraw and close the shell, protecting the softer body parts. However, dogs or other larger animals can often chew the edges of the shell and potentially kill the turtle. When humans pick them up, individual box turtles vary widely in how they respond. Some close up and remain closed for long periods, while others actively try to push themselves free with their legs and may bite. That nip may break the skin and hurt, though it's unlikely to do serious damage.

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Where are they found?

In Texas, these turtles have historically been found through most of the state. West of the Pecos River, they often have lighter shells and used to be called Desert Box Turtles (*T.c. luteola*). Ornate box turtles range westward to southern Arizona, south into northern Mexico, north to South Dakota and southern Wisconsin, and eastward to Louisiana and to Indiana. They do well in arid or semiarid grasslands as well as open woodlands

What do they eat?

Ornate box turtles relish insects, earthworms and other invertebrates, and also eat carrion. They will break cow dung open and eat dung beetles. They also eat berries, cacti and some other plants.

How do they reproduce?

Box turtles take a long time to reach sexual maturity, up to eight years for this species. Females lay small clutches of eggs, often 4 to 6, which produce dark hatchlings with traces of the yellow pattern that they will develop.

What conservation problems do they face?

Box turtles, including this species, are facing widespread declines across the country. Loss and fragmentation of habitat is one of the chief threats, along with being run over on the road, collection by humans, and other issues. NatureServe lists them as vulnerable in Texas, secure in Kansas, Nebraska, and Missouri, and imperiled or critically imperiled in several other states.

Sources of information:

Dixon, J.R. 2013. Amphibians and Reptiles of Texas, 3rd Edition. College Station: Texas A&M University Press.

Dodd, C.K. 2001. North American Box Turtles: A Natural History. Norman: University of Oklahoma.

NatureServe Explorer, <https://explorer.natureserve.org>

Texas Turtles (website) <https://www.texas turtles.org/ornate-box-turtle>



Photos of a female, showing the carapace (left) and plastron (right, with turtle facing toward the right)



<https://livesinnature.com>