

# THE RACE TO SAVE TEXAS BOX TURTLES

## What You Can Do

People in many parts of the country remark about how scarce box turtles have become, and where they have been studied, these turtles are usually shown to be disappearing. In Texas, the prairies and woods and other places where they live are being developed, roads cut across the landscape and become death traps for them, imported fire ants attack them, and they are collected for pets. It is not unreasonable to think box turtles may disappear from much of Texas.

There *are* some things that we can do that would help. But we don't have any time to lose. Once they are gone, we probably cannot bring them back. We must act to save the wild box turtles that are out there now.

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Who are we?

The Box Turtle Partnership of Texas is composed of Texas citizens and groups who are willing to contribute time and effort toward saving Texas box turtles.

It began with the Dallas-Fort Worth Herpetological Society and grew to include people within the Austin Herpetological Society and elsewhere. Our mission is:

*The Box Turtle Partnership of Texas advocates the preservation of box turtle populations in their native habitats through education, research, and protection from overharvesting.*

Do you want more information? Have some time to contribute as a volunteer? We would love to hear from you.

Michael Smith  
DFW Herpetological Society  
[www.dfwherp.org](http://www.dfwherp.org)  
P.O. Box 540892  
Grand Prairie, TX 75054-0892  
[michael@cricket-frog.info](mailto:michael@cricket-frog.info)

Tim Cole  
Austin Herpetological Society  
[www.austinherpsociety.org](http://www.austinherpsociety.org)  
Austin Reptile Service  
[www.austinreptileservice.net](http://www.austinreptileservice.net)

Deb Sydney  
[deborah.sydney@broadwing.com](mailto:deborah.sydney@broadwing.com)  
Austin Herpetological Society  
[www.austinherpsociety.org](http://www.austinherpsociety.org)

## Saving Texas Box Turtles: Why We Should Be Concerned

### *What is the problem?*

Box turtles, a familiar and charming part of Texas wildlife, seem to be declining. Commercial collection for the pet trade may substantially harm box turtle populations. From 1999-2002, data collected by Texas Parks & Wildlife show that 1,878 three-toed box turtles have been sold in Texas, along with 2,005 desert box turtles and 7,333 ornate box turtles. There is relatively little commercial trade in captive-bred adult box turtles, so this means most of these turtles were taken from the wild.

Once collected for the pet trade, box turtles are often kept in filthy conditions, stacked on top of one another and often without access to food and water. It is estimated that up to half the box turtles die before being sold, and box turtles sold from pet stores and flea markets often suffer from malnutrition, dehydration, and infection. It is probably safe to say that being collected for the pet trade is a death sentence for most box turtles.

Turtles have been here in something like their present form since before the age of dinosaurs. An individual box turtle may outlive you or me. It seems terribly shortsighted of us to waste such remarkable animals, turning them into disposable pets just for a few dollars.

### *Isn't habitat protection more important?*

While protecting habitat is extremely important, we cannot ignore the harm that commercial collection does. Box turtle populations can decline if overcollection occurs, even when those populations live in undeveloped habitat. Data from Louisiana showed significantly reduced turtles from a collected area compared with similar areas that were protected from collection.

### *Why does collecting them do so much harm?*

Their reproductive strategy makes each individual adult very important. A box turtle may have to survive for upwards of 10 years before it can mate and lay eggs. Females lay relatively few eggs, and many of the nests are dug up and eaten by raccoons and other predators. The babies are very vulnerable for their first few years and are often eaten. And so, the box turtle produces very few babies that survive to adulthood. Why haven't they died off? Because over a long lifespan they have many chances to



enter the reproductive lottery. Box turtles often live for 50 years and sometimes much more. A female box turtle may be able to lay many clutches of eggs over her lifetime. Even though most of the eggs are eaten and most of the babies die, she may have produced a few adults by the time her life is over.

What if our female box turtle is run over on the road, or picked up by a collector? She is now out of the reproductive lottery, and that may take away 40 or more years of reproductive activity. Each turtle that is taken out of the population removes a significant part of the reproductive potential of that population much more significant than removing a snake or a lizard, for example. When the population is thinned beyond a certain point, adults are unlikely to find each other for mating. This means not enough babies can be produced for the population to survive. The remaining adults may be seen for quite a long time

(since they live long lives). That leads people to think that box turtles are still around and maybe doing OK, when the population is reproductively dead. When those individuals are gone, there will be no more.

### ***What are we doing about it?***

A number of people have asked that the commercial collecting, buying, and selling of wild box turtles in Texas be stopped. Several years ago, Louisiana passed a law prohibiting the commercial collection of box turtles. We need a similar law or regulation.

Currently, Texas requires dealers to have a permit to buy and sell box turtles, but no limit is placed on the numbers that can be taken. We must do more than that. Because box turtles can be harmed so much by the removal of a limited number of adults, we must stop the commercial harvest of wild box turtles if we are to protect this part of our Texas heritage.

We encourage people to write letters to TPWD and to their Texas legislator. We think personal letters are best, putting into your words your concern that box turtles are in trouble and that they are worth saving. Write to:

Chairman, Texas Parks & Wildlife Commission  
4200 Smith School Road  
Austin, Texas 78744  
<http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/>

Mr. Robert Cook, Executive Director  
Texas Parks & Wildlife Department  
4200 Smith School Road  
Austin, Texas 78744

A law prohibiting commercial collection of wild box turtles would require action from the Texas legislature. You can write your Texas Representative or Senator, or send him or her a copy of the letter you write to TPWD. You can find your state legislator at: <http://www.capitol.state.tx.us/>

### ***Why not wait for studies to be complete?***

We believe that decisions about wildlife conservation should be grounded in scientific knowledge. However, not much is known about the current status of box turtle populations in Texas. The studies that would give us more information are mostly not being done and there is little funding to support such studies. If we wait for the research to prove that commercial collecting is not sustainable, it may be too late. Box turtle populations could be seriously thinned by then, and they may not be able to recover once their populations drop too far. The scientific evidence that we do have about how box turtles live points solidly and clearly to the need for these animals to be protected.



### ***For further information***

Belzer, B. 2002. A nine year study of eastern box turtle courtship with implications for reproductive success and conservation in a translocated population. *Turtle & Tortoise Newsletter*, 6:17-26.

Dodd, C.K. 2001. *North American box turtles: A natural history*. Norman, University of Oklahoma Press.

Smith, M.A. 2004. *Box Turtles in Texas: A Review of Natural History and Call for Conservation Action*. (Available from Cricket Frog Press, P.O. Box 173283, Arlington, TX 76003-3283)

## Thinking about getting a box turtle?

1. Box turtles are long-lived animals that could outlive you if given good care. Getting a box turtle just to have a fun pet for a few months or a year is not a good decision. What will happen to the turtle then? Will you have someone who will take the turtle then and give it good care?
2. Box turtles require some specific kinds of care, and without that care they gradually waste away. They don't show that they're sick right away, and can linger on while pathetically ill. A commitment to care for a box turtle means being committed to providing an area with water, space to dig in, places to get sunlight (a cardboard box or an aquarium definitely won't work), and a suitable temperature range. It means providing a varied diet (lettuce and hamburger is a death sentence). Baby box turtles are delicate and should be attempted only if you have studied their needs carefully.
3. You can get a box turtle without harming wild populations of turtles if you contact a breeder or someone who rescues and adopts out turtles that have been found or donated. Adult box turtles in pet stores or flea markets or such places have almost always been taken out of the wild. Please don't support this.
4. There are some good books, websites, and other media that show how to take care of box turtles. If you plan to get a box turtle, please spend some time learning how to take good care of them, and you may have a charming and long-lived companion.

## If You Find a Box Turtle ...

### *Things You Can Do To Help the Traveling Turtle:*

1. Try not to hit it with your car! (If you can do so safely)
2. If you stop for the turtle, please do so carefully and avoid any accidents. Pull off the road, and then do not walk into oncoming traffic to save the turtle
3. Pick up the turtle and move it off the road *in the direction in which it was heading*. (If you put it off the road on the wrong side, it may come back out onto the road.)
4. Don't move the turtle down the road to better habitat unless the present location is unsuitable for turtles (such as neighborhoods, shopping malls, or being bulldozed). Turtles try to find their old "neighborhood" and don't do well if moved away from home.
5. Don't collect the turtle for a pet. There are other ways to get a turtle. If you take the turtle home, it hurts the population of turtles just as if the turtle had been killed.
6. If you find the turtle out in the field or in the woods, admire it, photograph it, enjoy it, linger over it as an experience you may not have so easily in the future, count yourself lucky but please, please do not move it or take it home as a pet!

### ***Also***

Consider adding to our knowledge of how box turtles are doing in Texas. If you find a wild box turtle in Texas, please send us some information about what you saw. The information will be shared with Texas Parks & Wildlife and with researchers studying wild populations of box turtles. (Your information will be shared without specifically identifying you). Please see the next page, and feel free to make copies ...

Ornate and desert box turtles have lower, flatter top shells and may have spotted or yellow-greenish heads. Ornate box turtles and some desert box turtles have very dark shells with yellow dashes or lines on them. Three-toed box turtles have somewhat higher, rounded top shells that tend to be plain brown or lightly spotted, and their bottom shells are plain yellowish. The three-toed box turtle may have a top shell with a keel - a slight raised ridge - running down part of it. All box turtles have bottom shells that are hinged across the middle so that the two sections can be pulled closed. The top shell of an adult box turtle is about 4½ inches front to back. If you take a photo and send it to us, this would help confirm identification (please send digital photos if possible, as we *cannot* return any materials sent to us).

### Report of Box Turtles Seen in the Field

When you find a box turtle in the wild, please do not collect it and do not transport it to another location unless absolutely necessary. Please record this information and include a photo if you can.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Approximate time: \_\_\_\_\_ County: \_\_\_\_\_

Other landmarks (highway number, GPS, etc.) \_\_\_\_\_

Box turtle species (write the number seen, for example 12, or 3, or 0, for each option):

\_\_\_\_\_ ornate box turtle \_\_\_\_\_ desert box turtle \_\_\_\_\_ three-toed box turtle \_\_\_\_\_ cannot be sure

In the area ***immediately*** around the turtle (within about 15 feet), please check all that were present:

\_\_\_ road/highway \_\_\_ grassland/prairie \_\_\_ woods \_\_\_ water (pond, creek, etc.) \_\_\_ other (please describe)

In the ***bigger area*** around the turtle (within a hundred yards), please check all that were present:

\_\_\_ road/highway \_\_\_ grassland/prairie \_\_\_ woods \_\_\_ water (pond, creek, etc.) \_\_\_ other (please describe)

Please provide your name and contact information: \_\_\_\_\_

Please send this to BTPT, 4500 Williams Dr., Suite 212-113, Georgetown, TX 78628 or  
deborah.sydney@broadwing.com. ***Thanks!***

### Report of Adult Box Turtles in the Pet Trade

Anyone wishing to assist with this kind of information ***must*** do so in a completely legal and polite manner that does not violate the rights of anyone to legally sell turtles (even if we disagree with it). This means not arguing with salespeople, not causing any disruption to sales operations, and not threatening to get anyone in trouble. If you cannot follow these guidelines, then please do not try to help with monitoring.

If you see one or more ***adult*** box turtles being sold at pet stores, flea markets, expos, or other public sales venues, it will be helpful if you can tell us what you saw. If no one asks, there is no need for you to mention what you are doing - but if you are asked, do not lie. You can politely say that you are assisting in the collection of information about turtles in the pet trade.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ City: \_\_\_\_\_ County: \_\_\_\_\_

Store name/place where turtles seen (optional): \_\_\_\_\_

Box turtle species (write the number seen, for example 12, or 3, or 0, for each option):

\_\_\_\_\_ ornate box turtle \_\_\_\_\_ desert box turtle \_\_\_\_\_ three-toed box turtle \_\_\_\_\_ cannot be sure

Did these turtles have imperfections such as healed cracks in the shell, patches of white exposed bone on the shell, or other scars or injuries? \_\_\_\_\_

Were any of the turtles dead or have swollen eyes or fluid coming from the nose? \_\_\_\_\_

Please provide your name and contact information: \_\_\_\_\_

Please send this to BTPT, 4500 Williams Dr., Suite 212-113, Georgetown, TX 78628 or  
deborah.sydney@broadwing.com. ***Thanks!***