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Box Turtles

By Jane Galetto

Explorer Ponce de León could have saved himself a lot of time on his search for the fountain of youth had he stopped his search with our hard shelled friends. In our area the eastern box turtle has a longevity that is hard to match.

Box turtles commonly live to be 30 years old but are known to live to be 80-130 years. Most of their lives are lived in a radius not much bigger than a football field. In fact, if you have turtles in your yard and have questioned if you are resighting the same individuals you're probably correct.

Box turtles can be aged to a degree by the rings within the scutes or plates on their carapace, or top shell. Adults can generally be sexed by their eye color; males have very orange or red eyes and females have brown or light orange, nearly yellow eyes.

The eastern box turtle's range is from Massachusetts to Oklahoma, south to Texas and east to Florida and most every state in between.

Illegal trafficking of box turtles has threatened the US population. In England it is not uncommon for a family to have a large tortoise that is passed from one generation to the next as a family pet. Reptiles kept in captivity are prone to disease. Sadly hundreds of box turtles lose their lives by being illegally transported for sale in quarters that promote the spread of illness. Because they live in such small territories a relocated turtle risks either contacting or transmitting an infection to a different clan. This is the human equivalent of the colonists having brought small pox to Native Americans. In the United States it is strongly recommended that folks not keep turtles for a variety of reasons beyond the turtle's health. Some illnesses can also be transmitted to humans, salmonella being the most common. In New Jersey and in many other states it is illegal to possess a box turtle with out a special permit.

Motorized vehicles are a real threat and kill many turtles and other reptiles each year. If you assist a turtle crossing the road, the best measure you can take is to move the turtle to the side of the street for which it is headed. Obviously, you should avoid being a road casualty yourself. If you value your fingers, you should know your turtle species,

for the person who unknowingly handles a snapping turtle risks missing some digits. Turtles have many natural predators as well; we often see turtle shells at the base of eagle nesting trees. The most vulnerable time in a turtle's life is after the adult female buries her eggs. Raccoons, crows, rodents, snake and skunks find these nests a regular diner's delight. In fact, the University of Davidson estimates that although a turtle lays hundreds of eggs in her lifetime only 2-3 will ever reach adulthood. So watch your step and pay attention when you drive or mow the lawn; one of our magnificent creatures appreciates mindfulness.