

# You Discover SHOW-ME TURTLES



Three-toed box turtle

## A Mini Field Guide to 10 Terrific Turtles

# Three-Toed Box Turtle



This small land turtle has an olive-green or dark-brown dome-shaped top shell that is plain or marked with yellow streaks in random patterns. The center of the top shell has a raised edge. The bottom shell is hinged and may have faint markings.

**Habitat and Food:** Mature oak-hickory forests and brushy fields statewide across most of Missouri. Young eat mostly insects and earthworms, and adults tend to eat more plants, berries, and mushrooms.



Normally, three-toed box turtles have three toes on the back feet, but some can have four.

## Tough but Sensitive

Turtles are awesomely ancient super-survivors, but they're also vulnerable to habitat loss, pollution, and busy roads. That's why all but three of Missouri's 18 turtle species are protected. Here are three simple ways to help Missouri's turtles:

**Don't collect turtles for pets.** They take a lot of special care, and they often die in captivity. Leaving turtles in the wild ensures all Missouri kids will have cool turtles to find and study.

**Help them cross the road.** *But only if you're completely safe from traffic.* Most of the turtles you see crossing the road are young male box turtles looking for mates or mama turtles looking for a place to bury their eggs. Carry them in the direction they were headed (or they may go back to the road), and release them gently into the grass.



**Protect turtle nests.** If you're lucky enough to see a mama turtle bury her eggs in your yard, cover that spot with a wire cage to keep raccoons and skunks from digging it up.



# Catch, Record, and Release

## Observe and photograph

The best time of day to spot turtles is morning or early evening when the temperature is between 60 and 85 degrees. Carry binoculars to study basking turtles from a distance. Missouri Department of Conservation areas are great places to look for turtles. Find a conservation area near you at [mdc.mo.gov/atlas](http://mdc.mo.gov/atlas).



## Handle with caution

Snapping turtles and **spiny softshells** will bite if provoked, and they can do serious damage to your fingers and toes. Unless they are small, don't try to pick turtles up. Even the harmless box turtle can give your fingers a pinch when they close their shells.



## Release immediately

Most Missouri turtles are protected from collection and hunting. Once you've examined, identified, and photographed your find, please be kind, and release it in the area where you found it.



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# Ancient Adaptations

## Shaped for Success

Different kinds of turtles evolved in different kinds of habitat, and their bodies show it. All turtles have claws so they can climb up on logs to bask or dig holes to bury their eggs. But most water turtles, like the spiny softshell, also have webbing between their toes to help them swim. In general, land and semi-aquatic turtles have domed shells with hinged bottom shells that open and close like a box. This allows them to pull in all their body parts when predators threaten. Aquatic turtles usually have more streamlined shells, no hinge on the bottom shell, and they're not able to completely protect their heads and legs. A flatter shell and webbed toes allows them to swim fast and escape enemies. Whatever their shape, if turtles can survive until adulthood, their shells help them live long, happy lives.



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# Plains Box Turtle



Also known as the ornate box turtle, this small land turtle's domed top shell has yellow streaks radiating from the center and a wide, broken stripe running down the length of the shell. Skin can have yellow spots. The hinged bottom shell has radiating dark lines.

**Habitat and Food:** Missouri's prairie regions and occasionally in the Ozarks. Feeds mainly on insects but will also eat fruits like wild strawberries.



Plains box turtles are known to live up to 50 years.

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# False Map Turtle



This medium-sized semi-aquatic turtle has an olive-brown top shell with two or three raised peaks and a jagged back edge. The bottom shell is mostly cream-yellow with darker scale borders. A comma-shaped yellow spot appears behind each eye, and the legs are dark with yellow lines.

**Habitat and Food:** Mainly along stretches of the Missouri, Mississippi, and Osage rivers. Feed on insects, worms, crayfish, snails, dead fish, and some aquatic plants.



Like all basking turtles, false map turtles sun themselves to raise their body temperature and produce vitamin D.

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# Northern Map Turtle

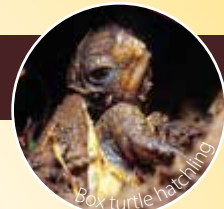


This medium-sized semi-aquatic turtle gets its name from the fine, maplike lines that pattern its olive-brown top shell. A distinct yellow spot appears behind each eye, and skin is dark brown with thin yellow stripes.

**Habitat and Food:** Many Ozark streams and other bodies of water up to northeastern Missouri. Feeds on mussels, crayfish, and some insects.



Map turtles' jaws are adapted to cracking mussel and snail shells.



## Mothered by Earth

All turtles lay eggs, and they all bury their eggs on land. Mama turtles will travel long distances to find just the right place. After digging a hole, laying her eggs, and covering them up, the mama turtle leaves the rest to luck. If a raccoon or skunk doesn't dig up the eggs, they eventually hatch. When? That depends on the species and conditions like time of year and weather.



If a western painted turtle lays her eggs late in the summer, the newly hatched babies will remain underground until the following spring.

## Temperature-Wise

Like all reptiles, turtles are cold-blooded and rely on their environment to stay cool or warm. When the temperature dips below 60 degrees, they seek the sun. When the temperature rises above 85 degrees, they seek the shade. When winter comes, land turtles burrow below the frost line, and water turtles burrow into the mud or sit on the bottom.



River cooters sleep underwater during cold temperatures by slowing down their body functions and absorbing oxygen through their bottom ends.

# Red-Eared Slider



A large red patch behind each ear gives this medium-sized aquatic turtle its name. Its dark-colored top shell has yellow stripes. The bottom shell is mostly yellow with a dark spot on each scale, and skin is dark green with yellow stripes.

**Habitat and Food:** Streams, sloughs, ponds, and lakes statewide except for a few northern counties. Feeds on small animals and plants.



The name "slider" comes from this turtle's talent for sliding off basking sites when approached.

# Alligator Snapping Turtle

Don't touch this turtle! Take a photo from a safe distance, and send it to [Jeff.Briggler@mdc.mo.gov](mailto:Jeff.Briggler@mdc.mo.gov).



This is the world's largest freshwater snapping turtle. It can weigh 150 pounds. The top shell is ridged with five rows of scales. The top jaw is hooked, and the neck is spiky. The long tail has small, smooth bumps.

**Habitat and Food:** Rare and rarely leaves the water. Found only in extreme southern Missouri, the Bootheel region, and occasionally along the Mississippi River. Feeds mainly on fish.



The alligator snapping turtle can lure fish into its open mouth with a special, wormlike tip on the end of its tongue.

# Eastern Snapping Turtle



Approach with caution! This turtle bites.

This large aquatic turtle's top shell is often covered with mud and algae. The top shell also has three large rows of scales and a few raised ridges. The bottom shell and legs are yellowish-white. The spiked tail can be 10 inches or longer. Average weight is 10–35 pounds.

**Habitat and Food:** Ponds, lakes, streams, swamps, marshes, and sloughs statewide. Will eat live animals, but mainly scavenges dead animals and plants.



When they're on land and walking tall, a big snapping turtle looks like a dinosaur.

# Western Painted Turtle



This smallish semi-aquatic turtle's red-orange patterns look like they've been painted along the edge of its dark, smooth top shell. The bottom shell is yellow-orange, bright orange, or red. Dark skin has bright yellow (and sometimes red) lines.

**Habitat and Food:** Marshes, lakes, slow-moving rivers, oxbow lakes, and ponds throughout Missouri's prairie regions. Feeds on plants, snails, crayfish, insects, and occasionally fish.



Turtles have good color vision, and bright colors probably help them recognize members of their own species.

# Eastern Spiny Softshell



Approach with caution! This turtle bites.

Unlike turtles with hard, bony shells, this medium-to-large aquatic turtle (7–17 inches) has a flat, flexible, leathery brown top shell with small spines or bumps along the front edge. A light stripe runs from each eye down the neck.

**Habitat and Food:** Large streams and rivers with sandy or muddy bottoms statewide. Preys on fish, crayfish, salamanders, frogs, tadpoles, snails, and aquatic insects.



This turtle uses its long neck and pointed snout as a snorkel to breathe while it lies buried under mud or sand in shallow waters.

# Eastern River Cooter



This is one of Missouri's largest basking turtles. It has a broad, dark top shell covered with yellow circular stripes. The bottom shell is solid yellow. A yellow "Y" appears on the head below the cheek and eye. Skin is dark and marked with yellow lines.

**Habitat and Food:** South of the Missouri River in large lakes, rivers, and sloughs. Eats aquatic plants and perhaps mussels, crayfish, and insects.



This turtle spends most of its time basking on rocks and logs.