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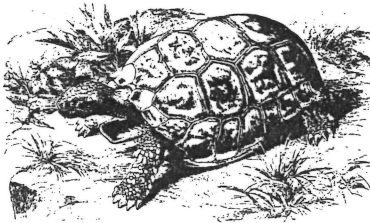
... then and now

From The Indian Hill Historical Society



Buckingham Lodge
1861

The Eastern Box Turtle



This time of year the Eastern Box Turtle (*Terrapene carolina*) is commonly seen on Indian Hill. An intelligent reptile, it is the most widely known of the USA's 4 species of box turtles.

Box turtles are easily recognized by their most prominent feature, a high dome shaped shell (carapace), which is brown, black, tan, or olive and has a pattern of yellow or orange streaks, spots, or blotches. The plate on their underside (plastron) matches the base color of the carapace and has a hinge, which enables the turtle to pull in its head and limbs and close up its entire shell. Their scaly skin is dark brown, black, tan, or gray, often with yellow or orange markings. The overall adult length is 4 to 8 inches, and their weight is 1 –2 pounds. Males have red eyes and females have yellowish brown eyes. Also males have a slight depression in their plastron while the females is flat. Each turtle has a unique pattern of markings on its shell.

These reptiles favor a habitat of woodlands near a source of water. In summer they burrow into soil or soak in puddles to cool off, and then often sun themselves on roadways. They forage for food, search for mates, and wander around during the day and rest at night. Most active in spring and fall, box turtles hibernate during winter, burying themselves deeper as the soil temperature drops. Emerging in April, they breed from May to July, with the female producing 3 –8 eggs after mating. Hatchlings emerge after 75-90 days from a hidden nest (September and October.) Baby turtles are about 1 inch long, and are vulnerable to prey. Full adult size is not reached until 20 years old. Turtles in the wild live for 30 –40 years though some are believed to have reached 100 years of age.

Box turtles are omnivorous. As juveniles they are carnivores, but consume more plant material as they age. Their diet consists of earthworms, slugs, insects, crayfish, and snails, with an occasional fish, lizard, or frog. Adults eat berries, fruits, grasses, and leaves, and thus play an important part in dispersing seeds from the plants they eat. They also can eat wild mushrooms poisonous to humans without ill effect.

Box turtles got their name because they can completely enclose themselves within their shell when threatened by predators. They do not have teeth, but use their beak as a pair of shears to slice food. To determine the age of a turtle, the plastron can be examined, counting the rings on one scale, similar to the rings of a tree.

Throughout history, box turtles have been used by humans for a variety of purposes. Native Americans ate their meat and used the shells for bowls, ladles, and ceremonial rattles. Indians recorded family information by carving on turtle shells, creating diaries for future generations. In Japan, turtles symbolize long life. British colonists ate "land tortoises" daily at Jamestown in the 1600's, and Moravian missionaries in Ohio did so in the 1700's. Even today terrapin stew/soup is a culinary delicacy for sophisticated palates.

Predators of box turtles include skunks, foxes, opossums, otters, raccoons, coyotes, and dogs. Sometimes frosts kill exposed turtles. Their population has declined due to habitat destruction, and many are killed by cars or destroyed by lawnmowers. Some are collected from the wild for sale as pets or for export to foreign countries.

One long time Indian Hill resident remarked that he rarely sees box turtles now, while during his youth they were common. By conserving green habitat, the downward trend in local turtle population may reverse itself, and the Eastern Box Turtle can become a regular sight in the Village again.