

## *Terrapene carolina carolina*

On Saturday, while working to remove invasive honeysuckle at Bull's Run, a box turtle was discovered. We have seen them before but we do not see them often. I decided to learn what I could about box turtles.

Ohio is home to eleven species of turtles. Ah, but what is a turtle? Well, scientific terminology can succumb to colloquial terms. Strictly speaking, *turtles* live in salt water, *terrapins* live in fresh water and *tortoises* live on land. But the animals did not know that and refused to fit tidily into our verbal compartments and so the meaning of the terms has changed. *Turtle* includes all aquatic forms, *terrapin* includes fresh and brackish water forms and *tortoise* forms live on land. But, we still call our common tortoise, with the genus name of Terrapin, a box turtle. Go figure! You are safe to refer to all of them as turtles unless you need to differentiate forms. Anyway, we found one at Bull's Run and it seemed unbothered by our terminology. I've included a picture so you know what critter I'm writing about.



[www.bio.davidson.edu](http://www.bio.davidson.edu)



[www.bio.davidson.edu](http://www.bio.davidson.edu)



[www.peak.org](http://www.peak.org)



[buenavistatownship.org](http://buenavistatownship.org)

I wondered where the turtle was in its annual calendar of activities. We are past the equinox and the weather is getting cooler. Eggs that were laid in the spring hatch in late summer or early fall. Baby turtles are a bit of a mystery because they are seldom seen until they are 4 inches long. The best guess is that they stay well hidden on the forest floor, eating insects and growing. When they are 5 to 6 inches long, sometime between 7 to 10 years, they reach sexual maturity. The male and female somehow find each other and mate. The female can lay up to 6 eggs in a shallow nest which she digs in the woods. Then she walks away and the eggs are left on their own. If they are not eaten by a raccoon or skunk, or otherwise disturbed, the babies will hatch, perhaps right about now, and begin the mysterious cycle again. Meanwhile the rather solitary adults will spend the next 40 years or so taking life as it comes. Being omnivores, they will eat anything that fits in the mouth, be it animal, plant or carrion. Given that the young eat primarily insects, I guess the appreciation of plants in the diet comes with maturity, like some humans I know!

Here are other interesting facts from Davidson College Herpetology Laboratory.

- Although touching a box turtle's head is not recommended, they are generally quite docile and almost never bite.
- Box turtles possess a hinged plastron (bottom of the shell) and are capable of almost completely closing their shell, making them nearly impossible for most predators to eat.
- The age of a box turtle can be approximated by counting the rings on the scutes (plates) of the turtle's carapace (top of the shell).
- Box turtles commonly live to be 30 years old and can probably live much longer than that.
- Female box turtles are capable of storing sperm from one mating for up to four years. This allows them to lay eggs for several seasons without mating.

- Female box turtles can lay hundreds of eggs throughout their life time, but only 2-3 of those offspring will survive to adulthood.
- Box turtle predators include skunks, raccoons, minks, dogs, racers, cottonmouths, copperheads, and rodents, among others.
- Box turtles are capable of eating many mushrooms that are poisonous to humans. In several cases people have been poisoned by eating the flesh of box turtles that had consumed such mushrooms.

One other note: there are two major concerns with box turtle survival, both resolvable by people. One is habitat fragmentation. As we dice up the woods into smaller sections, the turtles have nowhere to go. They need enough woods to live and reproduce. And the babies need space too. Save the woods. The second threat is the careless driver that runs over the turtle that is crossing the road. Unlike deer, turtles don't dart out in front of speeding cars. They are easy to avoid. Do it.

It is always exciting to discover wildlife living in the park and it gives us a sense of encouragement as we continue to steward the land for the enjoyment of people as well as the survival of animals.