

# Box Turtle Interview

**Goals:**

Students learn all about box turtles and then conduct an imaginary interview with a box turtle.

**Grade Level:** 3-8**Subject Areas:**

science

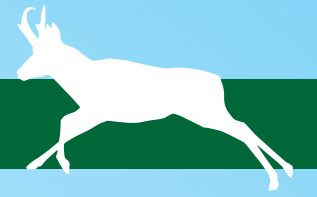
**Materials Needed:**

- Copies of the Box Turtle Interview Worksheet
- Copies of the "Turtle in a Box" article

**Time to Complete:**

30 minutes

Students should read the article "Turtle in a Box" (starts on the following page) and then imagine that they are interviewing a real box turtle about its life. Students can use the information in the story and/or online resources to help them write the turtle's responses to the questions.



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## Turtle in a Box

By Gerry Bishop

Who's looking at you? It's an amazing little creature called a box turtle. You may have seen one in a nearby woods—or maybe even in your own backyard. But how much do you really know about box turtles? Read on!

### How did they get the name “box turtle”?

The answer is a simple one. They're among the few turtles in the world that can completely close up their shells—like a box.

A box turtle first pulls in its head, legs, and tail. Then it shuts two hard flaps on its bottom side. In an instant, it's all boxed up in a tough suit of armor.

The turtle holds its flaps shut so tightly that they're almost impossible to pry open. That's why most predators, including the weasel, are no threat to a grown-up box turtle. (But staying safe is a very different story for the babies, as you'll soon find out.)

### Where do you find box turtles?

Two species—the eastern box turtle and the western box turtle—live in the United States. Two other species live only in Mexico, and ten species live in Asia. (This story is about the U.S. species only.)

Other kinds of turtles spend lots of time in the water, but eastern and western box turtles spend almost all of their time on land. You might find a box turtle walking around in almost any woods or meadow.

### What do they eat?

Box turtles will eat just about anything they can find. Some of their favorite foods are insects, earthworms, slugs, berries, and mushrooms—even the kinds that are poisonous to people. Box turtles will also munch on flowers, roots and dead animals.

### How can you tell a male from a female?

There are different clues you can look for, but these two are the easiest ones:

*Eye Color:* A female's eyes are usually dull orange or brown; a male's are usually red or bright orange.

*Shell Shape:* The bottom side of a female's shell is flat, while the bottom of a male's is slightly curved in.

### How do box turtles have babies?

Like all other turtles, box turtles are egg-layers. After mating, a female finds some soft soil in a sunny place and starts digging with her hind legs. Into the hole she lays four to six eggs. Then she covers the eggs with soil and walks away, never to return.

As the summer sun warms the nest, the little turtles grow inside their eggs. After a couple of months, the babies break through their shells. In cold climates, the hatchlings stay underground until the next spring. But in warm ones, they dig up and out of the ground right away.

Baby box turtles are on their own right from the start. They hatch knowing how to find food. But they still have a hard time surviving. Their tiny shells are soft and bite-sized for skunks, raccoons, minks, weasels, snakes, and other hungry animals. The little turtles are careful to keep themselves hidden under fallen leaves on the forest floor. Even so, very few of them live to see their first birthday.

### How long can box turtles live? What's the record?

A box turtle's shell doesn't completely harden until the animal is about seven years old. If it survives that long, it may enjoy a very long life. It's no big deal for a box turtle to live to be 30 or 40 years old. A few reach the age of 100, and one—the oldest on record—made it to 138!

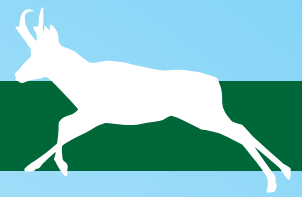
If you find a box turtle, you may be able to figure out how old it is: Look closely at one of the big scales on its top shell. Then, starting at the center, count the number of rings. Like a tree, a box turtle adds a new ring of growth every year. (After about 20 years, a turtle grows so slowly that the rings are too close together to count.)

### Where do the turtles go in winter?

Like all reptiles, box turtles are “cold-blooded.” That means their body temperature varies with the temperature of the surroundings. That's not a problem in summer, because the warm sun keeps the turtles at a comfortable temperature. But the only way for box turtles to survive during cold weather is to find a sheltered place and hibernate.

In the fall, a box turtle digs down into soft soil or a thick bed of leaves until completely covered. Its breathing and heartbeat slow way down,

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and its temperature drops. Parts of its body may become completely frozen!

Then, months later, the box turtle pokes its head out into the warm spring sun. It won't waste a minute in marching off to find something to fill its empty belly!

## Are they endangered?

The good news is that box turtles are not in danger of becoming extinct. The bad news is that they're not doing all that well, either.

Their biggest problem? The loss of habitat—the places they need for finding food and shelter and for laying their eggs. When people turn woods and meadows into towns and shopping centers, it's big trouble for box turtles. The turtles are not only robbed of their homes, but also many are killed by bulldozers and mowers. And every road that's built can become a box-turtle death zone.

When people move in, so do lots of raccoons. The raccoons thrive on the garbage people create. When the raccoons aren't eating garbage, they may be digging up turtle nests to chow down on the eggs.

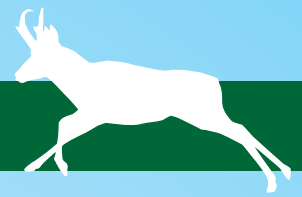
Turtle thieves are still another problem. People who find box turtles often take them home as pets. Others collect turtles to sell to pet stores. Either way, this can wipe out box turtles in many places.

## How can kids help box turtles?

1. Never take a box turtle home as a pet or buy one from a pet store. Box turtles belong in their natural habitat.
2. If you see a turtle in the road, move it to where it was heading. Always be careful of traffic, and always wash your hands afterward.

*From Ranger Rick, June 2009, p. 6-12.*

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## Box Turtle Interview Worksheet

After you read the article “Turtle in a Box” imagine that you are interviewing a real box turtle about its life. Use the information in the story to help you write the turtle’s responses to your questions.

**You:** Hello, turtle! Thanks for coming out of your shell to answer some questions for me. First, what’s your name, and how old are you?

**Box Turtle:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**You:** Could you please describe your home?

**Box Turtle:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**You:** What are your favorite foods?

**Box Turtle:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**You:** Tell me a little bit about your childhood.

**Box Turtle:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**You:** What’s the worst thing that ever happened to you?

**Box Turtle:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**You:** Describe a perfect day in your life.

**Box Turtle:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**You:** \_\_\_\_\_  
(write your own question here)

**Box Turtle:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_