

CHELONIAN CHAT

Hunting for Box Turtles!

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Well, it's been a long time since I've written a "Chelonian Chat" article. In fact, the last time was when the LGCHS was still mailing paper copies of our newsletter. However, the study of turtles can still be enjoyed in the great outdoors as always and that's what I'd like to reminisce about today. You see, it's early spring now, the season I feel is the best to go "Hunting for Box Turtles!"

When winter is retreating and summer hasn't conquered southern Louisiana yet, it's prime time for encountering our native *Terrapene Carolina* species. Sure, you could probably find a box turtle somewhere in any month of the year, but the best time for me is March through May. My reasons for this are as follows: When traversing actual habitat (and I mean walking through wooded areas, not only on trails or driving roads around woods) the early spring time provides an easier view because much of the undergrowth hasn't sprouted back up again. You can see much better what's on the forest floor while the leaves are still dead on the ground. Also, when turtles come out of hibernation in the spring they are hungry and thirsty, so they will be out and about. Later in the heat of the summer they'll bury down most of the day, only to appear early in the morning or after a cooling downpour. Another reason why you'll probably see more *Terrapenes* is because males are looking for mates. Although this instinctual drive is present almost year-round, it is strongest in the spring. Several times I have found pairs chasing each other or copulating in an early spring puddle. Another good reason for you to go looking during the spring is the weather. The closer it gets to summer, the hotter and more unbearable it gets to be outdoors. The heat, humidity and bugs become so much of an aggravation that it takes the fun out of turtle hunting, and replaces it with impatience and frustration.

So now you know when, what about where to find box turtles? Well, if you are just hunting them to take photos, you could try state parks, wildlife management areas or refuges. Just remember not to take any of these turtles home. Their unprotected habitat is disappearing exponentially, so let them be in their protected habitats. Also, keep in mind that you will have to pay admission to parks, and management areas require you to have an additional license before entering. However, I have noticed that the bigger the area, the more spread out the turtles will be. This is great for the turtles, but not for viewing chances. Instead, some of my best multiple sightings and collecting trips (pre-2000) have been in undeveloped suburban areas that have become surrounded by previous development. As neighborhoods and shopping strips pop up, they leave some lots untouched for several years. Whether box turtles migrate to these areas to avoid the bulldozers, or they are just the original inhabitants, is unknown. These areas are good to collect from because they will eventually be plowed under in the future. Even if they

move ahead of the bulldozers again, they probably won't make it if there is no adjacent wooded areas nearby. Thus, they become roadway fatalities. So, go ahead and collect up to four box turtles from these pocket habitats since the turtles are doomed in the long run.

There are very few islands of "woods" left in East Jefferson, but there are still many left on the Westbank. Remember, you should have permission from the land owner to search on his property first. Inside these wooded areas there are prime places to find box turtles in the spring. Look for openings in the tree canopy. That is a place where sunlight directly hits the forest floor. This is sometimes where a large tree has fallen over. Before Katrina, these areas were much less common than they are now. The sunlight attracts turtles and provides for thick undergrowth that provides both security and food opportunities. Undergrowth often contains blackberries, a favorite fruit. Many times in the spring I have found box turtles with purple-stained chins. This natural source of vitamin A and C helps to keep their eyes and noses clear. Sometimes hibernation weakens box turtles, and these vitamins are essential to staving off respiratory infections. The down trees also provide food for grubs, worms and beetles as they rot. These insects are also readily consumed by hibernation-hungry box turtles.

How do you get to these areas? I always wear thick blue jeans, long sleeved shirts, rubber boots and a hat. The jeans help protect your legs from the briars and thorns you will encounter. The long sleeves protect you from insects and poison ivy exposure. The hat takes sunbeam glare out of your eyes so you can see into the dark undergrowth. The boots let you walk in the muddiest areas, cross flooded low spots and you can rinse the poison oak sap off with warm soapy water later. One other item necessary is a walking stick. An old mop or broomstick handle is perfect. Sometimes, to get where you want to go, you have to hack away branches, briars and giant spider webs.

Of course, anyone that lives in South Louisiana knows you might need bug repellent and a canteen. If you are planning to collect any turtles remember that you must have a current LA fishing license on you. A breathable collection bag made of cotton, canvas or burlap will come in handy. Just keep in mind that turtles often defecate after being bagged, so don't throw the bag over your shoulder. If you are taking pictures try to snap them before you pick up the turtle and scare it. You may need a zoom lens to do this, but natural pictures are the coolest. If you've already frightened the boxie and he won't come out, you'll just have to wait. Sometimes, dragging a turtle backwards and forwards on the ground will entice the critter to pull its head and limbs out. This may not work on every turtle, especially those just caught.

If you take the turtle home (assuming you know how to care for it and have a place set up for it) try soaking it in shallow water. Use a tub tall enough that it won't climb out, but expect him to try to climb out for hours. Leave him in a warm but shaded area so he'll feel more secure. Take note of the fecal matter that he passes. Besides seeing what it's been eating, you'll also see if he has a parasite problem. Most wild caught box turtles pass scores of worms right after they're caught. Don't be too concerned, but definitely quarantine any wild-caught turtles for as many months as you can. One month is a minimum, six months is much safer. A group of four wild-caught

turtles from the same area can be quarantined together in their own pen, but be sure to isolate any one turtle that has a high worm/ parasite load.

That brings us to the disclaimer section. If you really want a “pet” turtle, talk to the turtle keepers in your area. Whether their turtles are L.T.C. (long term captives) or have been raised from hatchlings, you know you’re getting an animal that has been acclimated to captivity and will be a better “pet”. In fact, I’d rather box turtles be only collectable by licensed breeders in limited numbers, so that they could sell only captive-bred hatchlings. The wild box turtles have less and less habitat, and don’t need to be indiscriminately collected. If you do collect some, please write down where and when you collected it. That’s so if you exchange turtles with someone else in the future, they’ll know a little bit about its original habitat. Pictures are also a good way to document the appearance of turtles from certain areas, as their looks differ plenty from one another.

Good luck, have fun and watch out for snakes, too.