



## **Ornate Box Turtle (*Terrapene ornata ornata*)**

*Tear-ah-peen or-not-ah*



**Description:** 4 to 5 ½" carapace length. The ornate box turtle is a small, terrestrial turtle with a highly domed carapace ranging in color from black, dark brown, to grayish with yellowish to light brown streaks, dashes, and flecks radiating from each scute. The plastron is usually a pale yellow with an intricate array of dark brown to reddish brown zig zags and lines, and is distinctly hinged. The skin on the head, neck, and limbs ranging from blackish to grayish or brownish with yellowish, reddish, to orange scalation on the forelimbs.

### **Taxonomy and Classification:**

**Life:** All living, physical, and animate entities

**Domain:** Eukaryota

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**Kingdom:** Animalia  
**Phylum:** Chordata/Vertebrata  
**Class:** Reptilia  
**Order:** Testudines  
**Suborder:** Cryptodira  
**Family:** Emydidae  
**Genus:** Terrapene  
**Species:** *Terrapene ornata*\*

*\*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

**Similar/Confusing Species:** Blanding's turtles (*Emydoidea blandingii*) have only a partially hinged plastron, and distinctive yellow chins and throats.

**Etymology:** Terrapene- Native American word for turtle. ornata-fancy or embellishment.

**Subspecies:** Plains Box Turtle (*Terrapene ornata ornata*).

**Range & Habitat:** Ranges primarily in the unglaciated "driftless" region of southwestern Wisconsin and isolated locales in south central Wisconsin. Ornate box turtles prefer open, deep sandy soiled habitats within this range including sand prairies, open oak savannahs, old fields, and oak barrens. They may also be found on open, adjacent bluff prairies as well.

**Habits & Natural History:** The ornate box turtle is a small, primarily terrestrial turtle requiring deep sandy soil for burrowing, seeking refuge, and overwintering. Once common and widespread in southern Wisconsin, ornate box turtle populations have been reduced substantially due to habitat loss and fragmentation, as well as unlawful collection and exploitation for pets and other uses. These turtles require relatively large, intact parcels of suitable habitat in order to maintain viable populations. Like other box turtle species, the ornate box turtle is a shy and inoffensive turtle with a strongly hinged plastron that it uses to withdraw its head and limbs when disturbed. Ornate Box turtles emerge from overwintering in April, and from May through June, construct nesting sites along the edges of sand blows and dunes. Ornate box turtles are primarily omnivorous species, feeding on insects, slugs, earthworms, carrion, and various grasses, fruits, and fungi such as mushrooms. Male ornate box turtles can usually be distinguished from females as having reddish irises and concave plastrons, while female's irises are usually tan or brown, and lack a concave plastron.

**Phenology:** Ornate box turtles will begin emerging from overwintering and mating as early as early April through May, and remain active throughout the year through September or October (or sometimes even later in the year if warmer temperatures persist or otherwise permit). Many Wisconsin turtles begin moving over land and are often encountered during May through early July as they search for sandy nesting sites.

**Conservation Status:** WI State Endangered. Regulated by WI DNR. IUCN Red List Least Concern/Near

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Threatened (LC/NT).

**Contact**

Authored by Eric Roscoe. For any additional questions, comments, and/or concerns regarding this species, group of species, or this informational sheet, please email and contact the Madison Area Herpetological Society at [info@madisonherps.org](mailto:info@madisonherps.org)

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