



Box Turtles

Mudpuppy's

Pond

Migration Mysteries

How many times have you found a box turtle in the yard, or while walking in a field or the woods, and wondered what type of box turtle it was, was it a male or female, what it ate, and how old it was?

In Missouri, we commonly find two types of Box Turtles; one is called the **Ornate** Box Turtle. Ornate means “decorated”, and as the name implies, this box turtle’s shell is decorated with a pattern of gold or yellow on each shell segment (**scute**). This is found on both the upper shell, called a **carapace**, and the lower shell, called a **plastron**.

Our other box turtle is called the Three-Toed Box Turtle. It got its name because this turtle has three toes on its hind feet. The Three-Toed Box Turtle isn’t quite as fancy as the Ornate. Its shell is dust brown.

One thing that makes all Box Turtles special is their hinged plastron. Since a land turtle can’t run very fast, about the only way it has of protecting itself is to pull its head and legs into its shell and close the front and back doors!

You can tell the difference between male and female box turtles by the color of their eyes: a male has red or orange eyes, while a female has brown eyes. Males also usually have more colorful heads and legs and their plastrons are slightly concave.

If you look closely, you’ll notice that the scutes appear to have annual growth rings, as you see when you look at a tree that has been cut down. You can count them to get a general idea of the turtle’s age. Turtles can live a long time; some have been known to live over 100 years!

Box Turtles eat a wide variety of things. They love earthworms and crickets as well as fruits and berries, mushrooms, and other types of vegetation.

Turtles are on the move this time of year in search of a place to hibernate. That’s how they spend the Winter, sleeping in a burrow dug into the ground. Sometimes they dig it themselves and other times they use a hole already made by another animal. When the cold Winter weather is replaced by the warm days of Spring, the turtles will emerge from their Winter hideaways and start traveling again, in search of mates.

If you find one of these fascinating creatures, take the time to look for the things you just read about, but please put it back where you found it. Let it be free to do turtle stuff.

A **migration** is a great **journey**. Many animals move from one place to another to be able to survive. Usually we see flocks of birds in Fall as they move south for the Winter. Then again we look for their return to this part of the world in Spring. Great flocks of ducks or geese or pelicans or grackles or turkey vultures traveling north give us a clue at the end of Winter that Spring is almost here.

Other animals **migrate** too. Bats migrate. Caribou and other land mammals migrate. Monarch butterflies migrate. In Winter they need to be in a warmer place where they can find enough food. In Spring and Summer they like to return to the places where they were hatched, or born, to raise their own young.

Scientists know that animals get signals to tell them when it is time to migrate. The animals know to leave before all the food runs out and Winter comes. Scientists think that birds know its time to get ready to fly south when our daylight hours are shorter in Fall. The birds will eat more than they need on a regular day so they can build some fat in their body to give them energy for their long flight south.

Scientists have studied where the birds travel. Many different kinds of birds follow the same paths. They like to follow water such as large rivers or the ocean **coastline**. They will also follow mountains, especially places where the mountains are close to lower lands. These are places where warm air meets cooler air. This helps birds in their flights.

Scientists still study migrations of birds and other animals trying to figure out how they know where to go. Some think animals can follow their path using the stars. Others think animals figure out their path using the sun. Some animals can find their way by feeling the magnetic pull of the Earth. This is still a great mystery to people, so scientists are studying how the animals know where to go when they migrate.

The animals do know where they need to be. The dates that they arrive in certain places are nearly the same every year. We can know the seasons by watching animals migrate.

JUMBLE--Unscramble these words. (This is hard!)

tsuce _____
roante _____
rtgmaie _____
uroejyn _____

cltosaein _____
rptnolas _____
ceparaac _____
insttscei _____

