



Eastern Box Turtles

Terrapene carolina

INTERMEDIATE · 4.5–7 IN ADULT · 30–50+ YR LIFESPAN · DIURNAL · EASTERN US · CHECK STATE LAWS

The turtle from your grandmother's backyard, and the most underestimated animal in this series. Eastern box turtles are small woodland omnivores whose hinged shell shuts like a lidded box. Personable and watchable, they are nowhere near the beginner pet they're sold as. They need humidity most keepers never provide, they're protected in many states, and a well-kept one lives 30 to 50 years or more. Captive-bred, legally sourced, or not at all.

AT A GLANCE	
Difficulty	Intermediate
Ambient (day / night)	75–82 °F / 65–72 °F
Basking spot	85–90 °F
Humidity	60–80%
UVB	Required
Diet	Insects, fruit, mushrooms, greens
Feeding cadence	Every 1–2 days
Adult size	4.5–7 in
Lifespan	30–50+ years



The hinged plastron closes front and back, sealing the turtle inside its namesake box: a defense good enough to outlast most predators.

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01

Not a Starter Turtle

Everyone recognizes this turtle, so everyone assumes it's easy. It isn't. Box turtles are intermediate-level animals with strict humidity needs and a legal file: they're a native species protected in many states, so check your state's laws before you buy, and buy captive-bred. **Never take a box turtle from the wild.** Handle sparingly; this is a watch-and-feed animal, and one that snaps its hinge shut is telling you it's had enough.

02

Housing by Life Stage

Floor space is everything; height is nearly irrelevant. Start hatchlings in a 24×18-inch footprint and scale up slowly as the turtle grows, since this species takes ten-plus years to mature. The real destination is outdoors: a securely walled pen of 4×8 feet or more, walls sunk into the ground, because box turtles dig and climb far better than you'd credit. Indoors or out, furnish densely. A box turtle in an open room is a stressed one.

STAGE	MINIMUM	PREFERRED	NOTES
Hatchling	24×18×12	36×18×12	Very delicate; humidity 70–80% is critical. Shallow water dish only.
Juvenile	36×24×12	48×24×12	Slow grower. Expect 10+ years to maturity.
Subadult	48×24×18	72×36×18	Move outdoors when your climate allows; it's the ideal setup.
Adult	72×36×18	Outdoor pen 4×8 ft+	Protected in many states. Check the law. Deep substrate, dense cover, shallow water.

Enclosure figures are Habitat-OS life-stage guidance; footprint, not height, is what counts at every stage.

03

Heat, Light & UVB

Days run 75–82 °F with a basking spot of 85–90 °F; nights can fall to 65–72 °F. That drop is normal, so don't chase it with more heat. UVB is required, full stop: a quality tube over the basking area, above the screen and replaced on schedule. Glass blocks UVB completely and mesh costs a quarter to half of it, so a sunny window is worth nothing; outdoor sun beats any bulb made. Outdoor animals dig in and brumate come fall; that's natural for this temperate species, but study it before winter.

04

Humidity & Water

Dryness is the classic box turtle killer. Hold humidity at 60–80%. For hatchlings the top of that range, 70–80%, is not negotiable. Get there with deep, moisture-holding substrate and regular misting, not a swamp. Always offer a shallow water dish the turtle can walk into and soak; shallow is the operative word, because box turtles are woodland walkers, not swimmers, and a steep-sided deep dish can drown one.

05

Substrate, Cover & Enrichment

Give them ground worth digging: several inches of moisture-holding topsoil-and-leaf-litter mix, so the turtle can do what it does in the wild (bury to the shell rim and wait out the heat). Layer on dense cover, cork slabs, plants and brush piles; a box turtle crossing open floor feels hunted. Skip loose sand and gravel. Scatter food and move the furniture occasionally. A turtle out patrolling its territory is a turtle doing well.

06

Feeding the Omnivore

Box turtles are true omnivores and committed opportunists. Build the menu around insects and earthworms, then fruit, mushrooms and dark leafy greens; youngsters lean carnivorous, adults take more of the produce. Feed every 1–2 days, dusting insect meals with plain calcium, no D3 and no phosphorus, plus a multivitamin weekly for youngsters, twice monthly for adults. Serve on a flat dish or stone so dinner doesn't come with a side of substrate. Variety is the whole game: patience beats surrender.

07

Health Red Flags

Learn the look of an ear abscess: a firm, one-sided swelling on the head behind the eye. It's the classic box turtle ailment, it usually points back at diet or a too-dry setup, and it needs a vet's hands. No home remedy touches it. Watch for swollen or sealed-shut eyes, bubbling nostrils, soft or foul-smelling shell spots, and a turtle buried for days in warm weather. Any of these means a reptile vet; box turtles hide illness until it's advanced.

Husbandry data: Habitat-OS species library. Structure follows the NARBC show handout series. Every animal is an individual — when in doubt, ask the breeder at the table or a reptile veterinarian.