Eastern Box Turtle

Hi! This is Barbara O’Hare from the Eastern Shore Master Naturalists. Today I want to talk to you about an animal you may well have seen in the woodlands or marshy meadows here on the Shore – the Eastern Box Turtle. This reptile belongs to an order that has been around for 220 million years, with little change. It is one of 24 species of turtles found on the Eastern Shore.

The Eastern Box Turtle has a high-domed top shell (called a carapace) that is dark-colored with brown, yellow and orange color splotches. Its underside (called a plastron) ranges from brown to yellow and is hinged, which allows the turtle to completely withdraw into its shell for protection. Males can be identified by their red eyes, but the key to identifying them is their concave or indented underside or plastron.

An adult box turtle is about 4 to 6 inches in length and lives in the wild to 30 to 40 years of age. While not an endangered species, this turtle is believed to be declining across the state of Virginia. Like many other animals, it suffers from loss of habitat, road kill by vehicles, and collection for the commercial pet trade. In suburban areas, disease may also be a threat. The Department of Conservation and Recreation is facilitating a study at Savage Neck Dunes Natural Area Preserve to monitor the population of box turtles, studying their numbers and condition.

Box turtles are omnivorous – that is, they eat both a wide variety of plants and other small animals such as fish and insects.

These turtles range over an area equivalent to several football fields, and can travel up to 50 yards a day. They are most often found in moist areas, buried in brush or leaves and can be difficult to detect. They hibernate during the winter months, often just a few inches into the leaf litter.

We can all help with the conservation effort to protect these peaceful and interesting animals. Here are some things you can do:

1. If you rescue a turtle from the road, please be safe when you stop to do so. Then, always place the turtle on the side of the road toward which it was heading – they are very directional and will turn back into the roadway if you disrupt their planned direction.
2. Do NOT remove one from the wild. Leave the turtle where you found it. Once a turtle is held captive for a period of time, it cannot adapt to the wild again.
3. Discard fishing line and other dangerous trash appropriately.
4. Grow native plants on your property to provide habitat.
5. Be careful mowing tall grass, especially during their active period from May through

October.

To learn more about this interesting animal, google them, look them up on the Department of Wildlife Resources website or join the Virginia Master Naturalists!