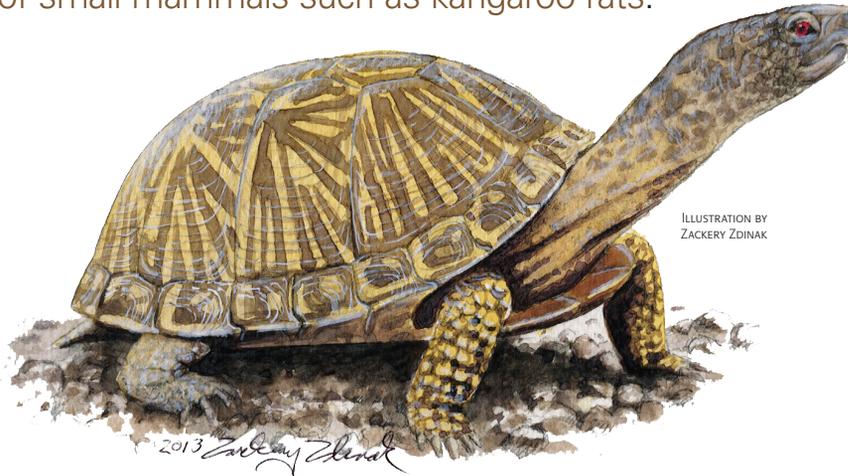


Desert Box Turtle

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SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Terrapene ornata* is a member of the semiaquatic pond and marsh turtle family, Emydidae. *Terrapene* is derived from an Algonkian Indian word meaning “turtle.” *Ornata* is derived from the Latin *ornatus*, meaning “ornamented, bedecked and splendid.” The desert box turtle (*T. o. luteola*), one of two recognized subspecies of the ornate box turtle, occurs in Arizona. *Luteola*, Latin for “yellowish,” refers to the drab yellowish color of the carapace (top of the shell).

DESCRIPTION: Desert box turtles are Arizona’s smallest native turtle, growing up to 5.75 inches long. The high dome-shaped carapace is dark, marked with radiating yellow lines. The plastron (bottom of the shell) is hinged, which allows them to completely close their shell when provoked by predators. Males have a bluish head and red or orange eyes. As males age, their shell loses color. Older individuals become uniformly straw-colored to light greenish-brown. Females have brownish-yellow eyes and generally retain their coloration.

DISTRIBUTION: The ornate box turtle is found throughout the central and western United States. The desert box turtle subspecies is limited to the southeastern corner of Arizona, east through central and southern New Mexico and southwest Texas, and south into northern Sonora and Chihuahua, Mexico.

HABITAT: In Arizona, desert box turtles mainly inhabit semidesert grassland but can also be found in Chihuahuan desertscrub, Madrean evergreen woodland and Sonoran desertscrub.

BIOLOGY: Desert box turtles are terrestrial and spend much of their time aestivating in burrows, either self-created ones or those of small mammals such as kangaroo rats. They hibernate during the cold months (October through February) and aestivate during the hot months (May through June), with their activity triggered by spring and monsoon rains. They are diurnal, emerging in the morning to bask and after a rain and in the evening to forage.

Desert box turtles are omnivorous, feeding primarily on insects (including worms and beetles), but they also eat carrion and many kinds of vegetation (including cactus pads). They detect prey by both sight and smell, with moving prey chased down until captured. Once caught, the food item is held down by the turtle’s front feet and ripped apart by its jaws.

Desert box turtles can reproduce after they reach 7–8 years of age, and females lay an average clutch of two to three eggs in a soil nest during the monsoon. The young hatch in August and September; some remain in the nest until the following spring. Hatchlings are round, dark in color and marked with yellow spots and a yellow stripe down the center of the shell. They measure up to 1.25 inches.

STATUS: The desert box turtle is thought to be in decline in Arizona, possibly as a result of habitat destruction and fragmentation, and over-collection from the wild. The Arizona Game and Fish Department lists it as a “species of greatest conservation need.” It is also a protected species in Arizona. It has been illegal to collect these turtles from the wild since 2005.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: Desert box turtles are best managed by ensuring suitable habitat remains intact and undisturbed. They are a very secretive species and are often in small, fragmented populations, making them particularly difficult to study. To acquire information, Arizona Game and Fish created the Ornate Box Turtle Watch. We ask the public to report encounters with box turtles. For information and observation forms, visit: www.azgfd.gov/boxturtlewatch. 🐢

■ Cristina Jones coordinates the Turtles Project for the Arizona Game and Fish Department.