

# Outdoor Recreation *is* Outdoor Education

You may have seen our only terrestrial turtle species crossing roads or coming to the surface to drink and forage after being buried during winter. While all of our turtle species may leave the water and travel overland occasionally to lay eggs or travel between water bodies, the ornate box turtle is not dependent on water and can be found in a large variety of habitats.

They are sometimes mistakenly referred to as tortoises, but “tortoise” describes a specific family of turtles (*Testudinidae*) for which New Mexico does not currently have a wild representative.

Box turtles have a domed shell top (called the carapace). The bottom part of the shell (called the plastron) has a hinged door. This species will retreat into its shell when threatened.

Females (the larger sex in this species) may reach six or more inches long. Their skin is dark brown with yellow or orange spots. The head can be green in some animals. The shell can become patternless with age, but the species’ “ornate” name comes from the light-colored lines that radiate out towards the edges of the shell in more brightly-colored individuals.

These turtles are omnivorous, eating both plant and animal matter, and their diet is diverse. Insects are an important staple item, but things like cactus fruit, tadpoles and roadkill are also known to be on the menu.

Box turtles may live as long as 30 years under natural conditions, but are a prey item for many larger species, including backyard dogs.

If you spot these turtles crossing a road or your yard, do not assume they are lost. You can help them across roads - toward the side they were already facing - but do not “rescue” them from the wild where they belong.



Ornate box turtle



New Mexico Department of Game and Fish

[www.wildlife.state.nm.us](http://www.wildlife.state.nm.us)

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