



General Turtle Information

AND CONSERVATION TIPS

Massachusetts has ten native freshwater turtles and tortoises and seven of those are listed under the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act (MESA). In addition, Massachusetts has one widely-distributed, introduced (non-native) species.

1) Why are turtles in trouble?

Adult turtles live a long time, for example Box Turtles are known to live longer than 100 years. However, because turtle eggs and juvenile turtles have so many predators and must face so many other survival difficulties, only a very tiny percentage of turtles ever reach adulthood. Therefore, the survival of adult turtles which have been fortunate enough to surmount these obstacles is very important. For this reason a turtle must live for many years and reproduce many times in order to replace themselves in their population. Losing any adult turtles, and particularly adult females, is a serious problem that can tragically lead to the eventual local extinction of a population. Most turtles require multiple types of habitats to fulfill all of their survival needs. For example, the Blanding's Turtle overwinter in permanent wetlands, often move to vernal pools to feed, nest in open gravelly upland areas, and move among marshes, shrub swamps, and other wetland types throughout the summer. In order to access all of these resource areas in a season, they will often have to cross roads. Roads are one of the most prominent threats to turtles. The number one threat is habitat loss, fragmentation, and degradation due to residential and commercial development. Other threats include collection as pets (both commercial and incidental), disease, increased levels of predation in urban and suburban areas, and succession of nesting and other open habitats.

2) May I collect a wild turtle?

All but three species of turtles in Massachusetts (Painted Turtle, Stinkpot, and Snapping Turtle) are protected and can not be captured and kept. It is still illegal to possess a Spotted Turtle even though it has recently been delisted.

3) May I possess a turtle as a pet?

You may possess any turtles purchased from a pet store (pet stores should not be selling state-listed species) www.masswildlife.org. However, these turtles should never be released into the wild; they may harbor diseases (e.g. respiratory disease, salmonella), that can be transmitted to our native wild turtles.

4) What should I do if I already have a protected species of turtle that came from the wild?

Do not release it into the wild if it has been kept with any other turtles or if it has been in captivity for a long period of time! It could transmit a disease to other wild turtles. In these cases contact the Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program. Otherwise, individuals returned to the wild should be set free at the same location where they were found. That's where they know where to find food, shelter, and mates.

5) What should I do if I see a turtle on a road?

First and foremost, do not risk getting hurt or causing harm to others by unsafely pulling off the road or trying to dodge traffic. However, if the opportunity to safely move a turtle occurs, move it in the direction it was heading and off the edge of the road. It is trying to get to habitats and resources it needs. Do not take turtles home or move them to a "better location". See question 8 for directions on how to move a Snapping Turtle. Report rare species to Natural Heritage using the Rare Species Observation Form (www.nhesp.org).

6) Is the turtle lost? Should I move a turtle to a better location?

Turtles that are found on roads, in backyards, and in other unexpected areas are trying to move to other habitat and or to resources they need. Don't take them to a "better place"! Turtles have strong homing instincts, so if you move one to "better" habitat, it is very likely to try to return home and in the process cross many roads. Where you find them is the area that they are familiar with; they know it intimately because they have grown up in the surrounding area. Moving them also increases the risk of spreading disease to other wild turtles and road mortality.

7) What should I do with an injured turtle?

Turtles with minor injuries (e.g. a hurt foot or damage to the outer rim of the shell) should be left where you found them. They are very resilient and will likely heal just fine on their own. When injuries are major (e.g. large open wound), you should contact a local wildlife rehabilitator, veterinarian or wildlife clinic. Always call first to make sure they treat turtles! Not all veterinarians or wildlife rehabilitators will accept turtles. You can obtain a list of licensed rehabilitators and veterinarians that treat injured native turtles on the NHESP General Turtle Information and Conservation Tips webpage. (<http://www.masswildlife.org>). If you're not sure if you have a state-listed species, contact the Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program.

8) What should I do if I have a large snapping turtle in my yard?

The best thing to do is to leave them alone and they will typically move off within a few hours. Your house may have been built in an old nesting area. If you must move a snapping turtle, use a broom and a plastic tub (or box) to capture them, by sweeping them into the tub. This is the best method because snapping turtles are fast and have very powerful jaws (can sever fingers).

An alternative method is to pick them up by grabbing the tail and then sliding one hand underneath the turtle to support the body. Lift it like a platter, steering with the tail. A snapping turtle can reach your hands if you lift it by the sides of its shell, but they cannot reach your hand directly under the shell. Do not lift them only by the tail; that can injury their spine.

Once captured take them to the nearest body of water (e.g. vernal pool, pond, stream, etc.). This should not be very far.

9) What else can I do to help turtles?

- a) Educate others about the conservation needs of turtles!
- b) If mowing farmland or fields, restrict mowing times to September 15th through May 15th. Wood Turtles and Box Turtles feed in fields during the summer months. This avoids the peak times turtles are found in the fields. If that's not possible, raise the mower blade to a height of 7 inches.

In addition, if you know you have Wood Turtles on the property or nearby you should mow by starting with the section of the field furthest from the river or stream. If you know you have Box Turtles on the property or nearby you should mow by starting with the center of the field and working out. Most turtles hang out along the edges of the field and this allows them time to escape.

- c) Report occurrences of state-listed species to Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program using a photograph of the turtle and filling out the Rare Animal Observation Forms on our website (www.nhesp.org).
- d) Identify turtle habitats in your town.
- e) Ride ATVs only in areas designated for ATV use. ATVs can run over turtles and crush nests. If you see these activities in undesignated areas call the Environmental Police at 1-800-632-8075.
- f) Don't leave food outdoors for other animals if you have turtles on your property. This attracts small mammals such as raccoons, fox and skunks, which prey on turtles of all ages.
- g) Be more aware of turtles on the roads during May, June, July and October.

For more information contact: Lori Erb, Turtle Conservation Biologist at 508-389-6357, lori.erb@state.ma.us

Web Links:

- NHESP Rare Species: www.nhesp.org
- Massachusetts Turtle Atlas: www.turtleatlas.com/
- Native Turtles of Massachusetts: <http://gallery.cs.umb.edu/gallery/turtles>
- Turtles in Trouble: www.umass.edu/nrec/pdf_files/turtle_trouble.pdf
- New England Turtle Conservation Project: www.newenglandturtles.com/
- Pet Turtle Rescue: www.maturtleterescue.org
- Vernal Pools: www.nhesp.org

