

Eastern Box Turtle Road Surveys in North Carolina

Eastern box turtles...we know them and love them. As kids, we often brought them home with us as pets when we saw them in the wild. Some of us even risk life and limb, dodging traffic to save them. Sadly, as with many species of reptiles and amphibians, it appears that some populations of eastern box turtles are in decline. Increased road construction and traffic (and thus road mortality), habitat destruction and fragmentation, disease and parasites, overcollection for the pet trade, and higher densities of predators, both wild and domestic, have all contributed to the apparent range-wide decline of box turtles.



In 2006 the 2nd Annual Box Turtle Conservation Workshop was held at the North Carolina Zoo in Asheboro, NC. Many states throughout the range of the eastern box turtle were represented. One conservation initiative proposed at this workshop was to begin monitoring box turtle distribution across its known range, including observations of live or dead turtles. If we can identify “hot spots” of box turtle distribution and movement, particularly associated with roads and railroads, which often serve as barriers to dispersal, we might be able to target conservation efforts in those areas (e.g., install “critter crossings” on roads).

A practical approach to meeting this goal is to encourage herp researchers and enthusiasts alike to keep track of box turtle observations as they are encountered in the field, on roads, and on railroad tracks, which often serve as barriers to dispersal. To do this, we are asking people to take the time to record these observations on a standardized form and submit them via e-mail or via the Carolina Herp Atlas (<http://www.carolinaherpatlas.org>) so they can be compiled and added to state distribution maps.

On the observation reporting form, there are spaces for location descriptions, GPS coordinates, the county, date, and time of the observation, sex of the turtle if it is able to be determined, the type of road, (2-lane, 4-lane, paved, dirt/gravel), whether the turtle was alive or dead on the road (A.O.R. or D.O.R.), and general comments about the observation, such as the presence of eggs (if a gravid female D.O.R. turtle is found) or an estimate of age (number of annuli present) if the turtle is in-hand. Again, these observations include turtles on roads, turtles seen on railroad tracks, and turtles encountered in the field in general. The more location detail, the better, but even a general road description as people are driving is better than nothing. If observations are entered into the Carolina Herp Atlas, a GPS location is automatically generated for each location.

Thanks to all who are interested in box turtle conservation in NC and who choose to participate in this initiative. Please enter data into the Carolina Herp Atlas (<http://www.carolinaherpatlas.org>) or e-mail forms to Gabrielle Graeter, NC Wildlife Resources Commission (g.graeter@earthlink.net).