

Reptile, Eastern Box Turtle ^[1]

State Reptile: Eastern Box Turtle

by Steven Case, 2007; Kelly Agan, 2016, Amy Kemp, 2017
NC Government & Heritage Library.

See also: [North Carolina State Symbols and Official Adoptions main page](#) ^[2]; [Eastern Box Turtle](#) ^[3]; [NCpedia State Reptile activity sheet](#) ^[4]



Eastern box turtle, image from NC Wildlife Resources Commission. ^[3]The General Assembly of 1979 designated the box turtle (*Terrapene carolina*) as the official State Reptile for North Carolina. (*Session Laws*, 1979, c. 154).

Selection as the State Reptile

The bill to adopt the Eastern Box Turtle as the official state reptile was sponsored by Rep. Chris Barker of New Bern. Barker began his campaign at the house committee in February of 1979, where he distributed turtle lapel pins and memberships in the Turtles International Association. He claimed the turtle was the best representative of North Carolina because it's a useful creature that controls insect levels, clears ponds and lakes of impurities, is edible, and is the ultimate example of patience and North Carolina's unrelenting pursuit of goals. Though Barker's initial bill was on behalf of all turtles, his fellow representatives convinced him to select a single species. Barker selected the Eastern Box Turtle because it is common to all parts of the state.

The bill then moved to the House of Representatives where it came under considerable debate. Male alligators, lizards, and snakes were proposed as alternatives by various congressmen. Rep. Horace Locklear of Robeson County took the floor to give a tribute to the turtle on behalf of the state's Native American population, who historically used the turtle for pets, medicine, musical instruments, and food. The bill eventually passed in the house with a vote of 102 to 4.

The bill was approved by the senate committee in March of 1979 after a turtle demonstration by 12-year-old Sid Mitchell of Cary, who brought two of his seven pet Box turtles to share with the legislators.

The bill was in the senate with little fanfare, though one senator voted no because he didn't think the turtle was a good representation of North Carolina's Progressiveness. Nevertheless, the bill became law on March 19, 1979.

About the Eastern Box Turtle

Box Turtles are found all across North Carolina from the mountains to the coast, although they are not common on the Outer Banks. They are generally small with a distinctive domed shell that can be brightly colored, and they can live up to 25 to 30 years. We see them from forests to fields and often in our neighborhoods. The Box Turtle got its name from its ability to box itself into its shell when it senses danger. See also [Eastern Box Turtle](#) ^[3].

North Carolina Session Laws

§ 145-9. State reptile.

The turtle is adopted as the official State reptile of the State of North Carolina, and the eastern box turtle is designated as the emblem representing the turtles inhabiting North Carolina. (1979, c. 154, s. 1.)^[5]

In the [preamble to the bill](#), ^[6] the General Assembly listed a number of qualities of the Box Turtle that led to its adoption as the emblem of the state's reptile populations:

"Whereas, the turtle is a most useful creature who serves to control harmful and pestiferous insects, and acts as one of nature's clean-up crew, helping to preserve the purity and beauty of our waters; and

Whereas, the turtle is derided by some who have missed the finer things of life, but in some species has provided food that is a gourmet's delight; and

Whereas, the turtle, which at a superficial glance appears to be a mundane and uninteresting creature, is actually a most fascinating creature, ranging from species well adapted to modern conditions to species which have existed virtually unchanged since prehistoric times; and

Whereas, the turtle watches undisturbed as countless generations of faster hares run by to quick oblivion, and is thus a model of patience for mankind, and a symbol of this State's unrelenting pursuit of great and lofty goals; and

Whereas, the woodlands, marshes, and inland and coastal waters of North Carolina are the abode of many species of turtles; Now, therefore. . ."

More information about the Eastern Box Turtle is available in the [Eastern Box Turtle](#) [3] article from the NC Wildlife Resources Commission.

Additional Resources:

Associated Press. "Turtle wins final approval as state reptile." *Wilmington Morning Star*. March 17, 1979. 7-C. <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=XsksAAAAIBAJ&sjid=MxMEAAAAIBAJ&pg=4868%2C3697108> [7] (accessed October 7, 2013).

Bond, Sharon. "Turtle Gets The Nod From State House." *The Dispatch* [Lexington, N.C.]. March 1, 1979. 12. <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=Y1UcAAAAIBAJ&sjid=p1EEAAAAIBAJ&pg=7138%2C6079886> [8] (accessed October 7, 2013).

Harden, Leigh Anne. "Meet our State Reptile, the Eastern Box Turtle." North Carolina Herpetological Society. 2006. <http://ncherps.org/state-herp-symbols> [9]/ (accessed October 28, 2014).

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