All boxed up

ornate box turtle

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)

eastern box turtle

Photos by John Tucker, Illinois Natural History Survey

What did you find on your outdoor adventure, an eastern or ornate box turtle? Here are some hints to help you determine which is which.

The **eastern box turtle** (*Terrapene carolina*) has a highly variable shell pattern of yellow or orange markings on a dark background. The plastron is uniformly plain and devoid of markings. Habitat can be a quick clue to help identify which box turtle you've encountered: This turtle inhabits forests and forest edges, so if you're walking in the forest in Illinois and see a box turtle, it's probably an eastern box turtle.

The **ornate box turtle** (*T. ornata*) has a dark brown shell with a yellow midback stripe and six to eight yellow lines radiating from the center of each scute. The plastron is patterned with a series of yellow lines on a darker background color. Prairies and open fields in former prairies are the preferred habitat for this species.

Box turtles can be amazingly long-lived in the wild—they might be even older than you! Research has shown a box turtle in the wild can live for 40 years or longer, partly due to its perfect defense system in which it can hide completely inside its own shell, sealed up against would-be predators. Most other turtles lack the ability to completely retract their arms and legs and seal themselves inside their shell. During colder months, box turtles burrow into the ground and do not emerge again until spring when their omnivorous diet of insects, worms, fungi and plants once again becomes abundant.