

Head Start Program for Wisconsin Turtles

The Wisconsin Dept. of Natural Resources (WDNR) initiated a program they call the Head Start Program. The idea of this program is to foster endangered turtles through their most vulnerable predation stage, which is when they are very small and their shells are soft. Out of the 11 turtle species in Wisconsin, 5 are on the endangered list; the remaining 6 are in moderate decline. This program serves several of the turtle species but fosters out the ornate box turtle and the wood turtle, both endangered because of the pet trade.

The DNR turtle expert knows where these turtles lay their eggs. Once they are laid, he scoops up the eggs and incubates them until they hatch and grow to about the size of a fifty-cent piece. At that point, he fosters them out. During this fostering period, they are fed a daily diet of Reptomin® and weight and size is recorded and reported monthly. Generally, the fostering period is between September and May after which they are released in the same location their eggs were taken. The first year, the turtles will lose some weight as they are now foraging for themselves, but the success rate is quite good and the program is increasing their populations.

The wood turtle (*Glyptemys insculpta*) is heavily harvested for the pet trade. As such, we as fosterers are not told where the eggs are found. These guys are 6-9" when full grown and are called wood turtles because of the markings on their carapace. They have growth rings that resemble the growth rings of wood. Being semi-aquatic, their set up for fostering is in a black plastic sheep watering tank. The bottom is filled with rounded pebbles and drift wood. The fostering environment mimics the river and stream habitat they enjoy in nature.

This photo below is of one just before being released.



The ornate box turtle (*Terrapene ornata*) is 4-5" full grown and is strictly land loving. Most of these guys can be found in prairies and oak savannas. Their fostering set up is 2 plastic under-the-bed containers nested one within the other. One is filled with a few inches of water and a heater to regulate temperature. The nestled one is half filled with sphagnum moss, which is where these turtles spend most of their day.

The top photo is a close up of the little ones. The bottom shows how small they are and provides a glimpse of their fostering set up.





We have fostered for a couple of years and enjoy the experience of watching these turtles grow. It's also incredibly rewarding knowing we are ensuring the survival of these species and giving back to the natural environment.

