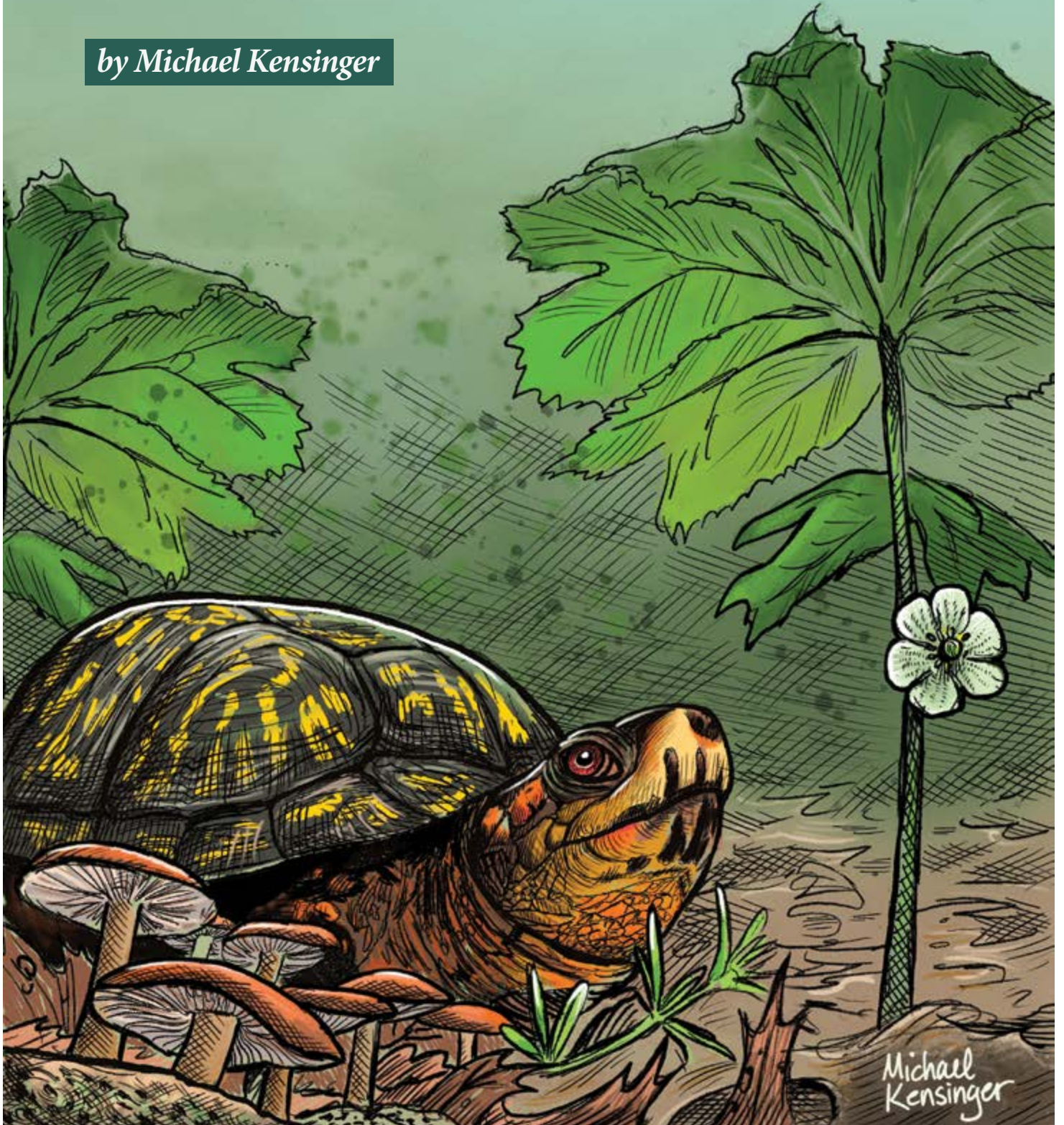




Unboxing the Woodland Box Turtle

by Michael Kensinger



The Woodland Box Turtle is a creature of admiration for anyone lucky enough to cross its path. Adorned in nature's finest colors and most intricate patterns, every encounter with a box turtle invites a moment of reflection. As with all wildlife, though, admiring them from a safe distance—without causing harm or stress—is vital to their well-being. Keeping that in mind, let's continue to “unbox” the Woodland Box Turtle and explore the fascinating life of this remarkable reptile.

Long-lived Survivor

Box turtles are among the longest living reptiles in North America, with lifespans that reach up to 120 years. Fossils of box turtles date back as far as 15 million years, and, their basic form has remained remarkably unchanged, even as the world around them has transformed. This resilience is part of why conservationists must work even harder to ensure that they continue to thrive in today's rapidly changing environment.

Cultural Significance and Symbolism

For centuries, Woodland Box Turtles have held deep cultural and spiritual significance, especially among Native American tribes in the eastern United States. The Iroquois, Huron and Ojibwe tribes associated the turtle with their “Turtle Clan,” viewing it as a symbol of longevity, wisdom and protection. They believed the turtle's shell represented the shield of “the Creator” or “the universe,” offering shelter and safety. In the rich tradition of Native American storytelling, the turtle often plays the role of a “trickster,” using its wit and resilience to outsmart other creatures.

When you observe the unique features of a box turtle's shell, it's easy to see how the symbolism emerged. The hinged shell allows the turtle to close itself off from potential threats, outsmarting predators and reinforcing its cultural representation of protection and wisdom.

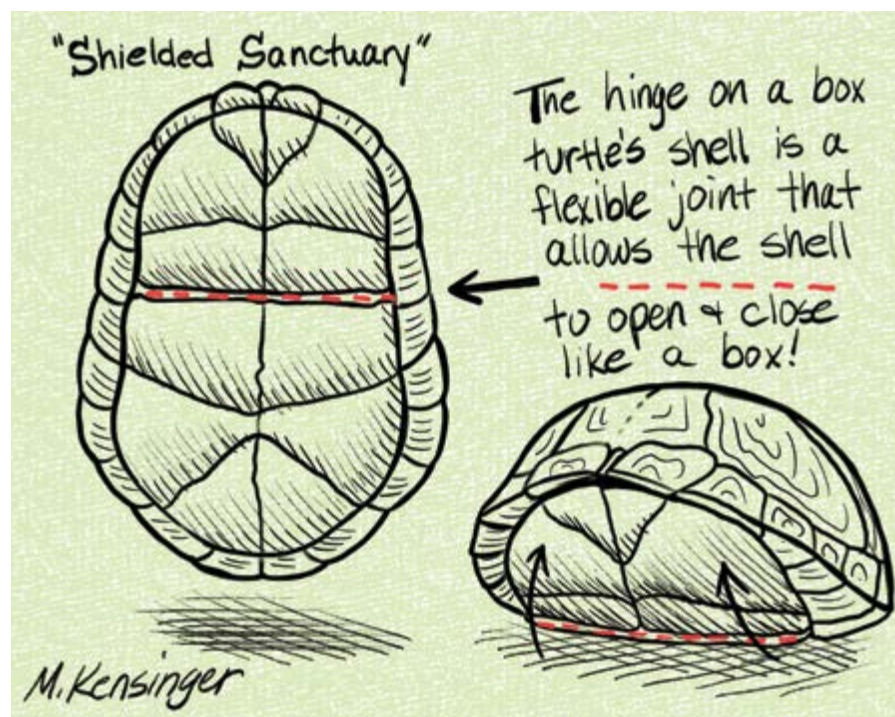
Challenges

Unlike their more aquatic relatives, Woodland Box Turtles are primarily terrestrial creatures. In Pennsylvania, they inhabit the state's forests and grasslands, although their numbers are dwindling. The Woodland Box Turtle is a species of special concern due to habitat loss, road mortality and illegal pet trade. The Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission protects Woodland Box Turtles, and it's illegal to collect or disturb them in the wild.

Remember, turtles are not trophies for people to collect. When removed from their habitats, Woodland Box Turtles often suffer stress including severe disorientation, difficulty finding food and increased vulnerability to predation.

Diet

The Woodland Box Turtle has a highly adaptable diet. As omnivores, these turtles are opportunistic feeders, eating whatever is available to them. In the spring and summer, their diet includes a wide variety of foods—from earthworms and beetles to berries, nuts and wildflowers. As fall approaches, their diet shifts to more hearty and nutritious offerings such as fallen fruit and mushrooms.



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Protection

Despite challenges, there's still hope for the Woodland Box Turtle. With ongoing conservation efforts, increased public awareness and stronger legal protections, we can work toward ensuring these turtles

continue to thrive. The future of the Woodland Box Turtle is in our hands, and we must respect their role in our ecosystems, making sure that future generations will be able to admire this ancient, wise reptile. ☐



photo: PFBC archives

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Author's Field Notes

As a mushroom hunter, I have shared the joy of one of my morel mushroom patches with not one but two Woodland Box Turtles. Over the years, I've encountered these two turtles, almost like clockwork, during my foraging expeditions. This connection has reinforced my commitment to sustainable foraging—leaving mushrooms behind for the turtles to enjoy. Interestingly, when a mushroom has a slug or bug on it, people typically ignore it, but the Woodland Box Turtle relishes the extra nutrients, making them an unintentional partner in responsible mushroom harvesting.



PFBC ON THE JOB

Kathy Gipe

Herpetologist and Nongame Biologist

My family spent time in the outdoors camping, hiking and boating, but it was a summer camp experience I had with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation that solidified my passion for combining my love of nature with wildlife and habitat conservation efforts. Even today, two of my favorite places to be are either hiking trails in Rothrock State Forest or kayaking in the Juniata watershed. Both of these activities give me the ability to be a naturalist—identifying plants, birds and, of course, reptiles and amphibians, which make the outing that much more interesting to me.

During my time as the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission's herpetologist and nongame biologist, I still can't wait for an opportunity to get out of the office



photo: courtesy of Kathy Gipe

and spend time outdoors looking for and working with the species I love. It's also been rewarding to share my enjoyment of the crawly critters with my kids, colleagues and others. ☐