

Turtle identification chart

Six regional examples | Eastern United States, with a Mid-Atlantic focus | Online Field Guide

Compare shell shape, texture and visible head markings. Leave turtles undisturbed; do not lift them for an underside view.

1. Eastern box turtle

Terrapene carolina



High domed shell with variable yellow-orange marks

Adult; high domed shell

2. Painted turtle

Chrysemys picta



Smooth dark shell; red edge and yellow head marks

Painted turtles basking together

3. Snapping turtle

Chelydra serpentina



Large head; long tail with a jagged upper ridge

Adult; front view

4. Eastern musk turtle

Sternotherus odoratus



Small high shell; two pale head stripes

Adult; pale head stripes

5. Northern red-bellied cooter

Pseudemys rubriventris



Dark pond turtle; reddish shell marks; striped head

Adult; dorsal view, belly not shown

6. Wood turtle

Glyptemys insculpta



Sculptured ridged shell; orange-yellow neck and legs

Adult; sculpted shell and orange legs

1. Andrea Kautz
2. Donald Davesne; CC BY 4.0.
3. Christina
4. Kevin Barnes
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Comparison notes and photo credits

Turtle chart companion | Original layout and wording by Online Field Guide

Turtle	Habitat clue	Identification level	Seasonal activity
Eastern box turtle	Moist woods, edges and adjacent meadows	Regional box-turtle candidate	Spring through fall
Painted turtle	Ponds, marshes and slow water; basking logs	Species group; subspecies unresolved	Spring through fall
Snapping turtle	Ponds, lakes, marshes and slow streams	Species candidate	Spring through fall
Eastern musk turtle	Slow freshwater with soft bottoms	Species candidate	Spring through early fall
Northern red-bellied cooter	Ponds, rivers and freshwater wetlands	Cooter candidate	Spring through fall
Wood turtle	Clean streams and nearby wooded or grassy ground	Species candidate	Spring through fall

Activity is broad regional guidance. Weather and basking conditions affect sightings. A turtle on land may be an aquatic species moving to nest; its current position does not establish its usual habitat.

Photo credits and original file links

- 1. Eastern box turtle:** *Terrapene carolina carolina* - iNaturalist photo 516885510, by Andrea Kautz.
- 2. Painted turtle:** *Chrysemys picta* - iNaturalist photo 504619155, by Donald Davesne. CC BY 4.0.
- 3. Snapping turtle:** *Chelydra serpentina* - iNaturalist photo 377285223, by Christina.
- 4. Eastern musk turtle:** *Sternotherus odoratus* - iNaturalist photo 156803323, by Kevin Barnes.
- 5. Northern red-bellied cooter:** *Pseudemys rubriventris* - iNaturalist photo 7389534, by cwwood. CC BY-SA 4.0.
- 6. Wood turtle:** *Glyptemys insculpta* - iNaturalist photo 292297362, by Brian Henderson. CC BY 4.0.

Identification references: Eastern box turtle; Painted turtle; Snapping turtle; Eastern musk turtle; Northern red-bellied cooter; Wood turtle.

This chart compares regional examples; it is not a complete species key.