

## Ornate Box Turtle *Terrapene ornate*

**Habitat Preference:** Sand habitat is very important for nesting and over wintering. Sand dunes need to be open, shifting and unstable. The rest of the year they will use tall grass prairie when available. If only short grass prairie is available they will prefer shrubs in order to keep cool from the sun. They eat fruits such as blackberries, wild strawberries, and wild plums.



### Threats:

- Loss of habitat
  - Conifer plantings on sand prairies
  - Tree encroachment on upland prairie habitat
  - Conversion of prairie to cultivated ground
  - Conversion of prairie to urban development
- Nests are very susceptible to predation from small predators such as raccoons and striped skunks.
- Nest in crop fields are often times disturbed by cultivation and individuals are killed by machinery.
- Many individuals are killed by normal road traffic.
- There is a tendency to collect these turtles and keep them as pets.
  - Remember: Ornate Box turtles are threatened in Iowa and therefore it is illegal to take one of these turtles as a pet.

### Habitat Improvement Guidelines:

- Remove encroaching woody species from sand dunes and adjacent grassland habitat.
- Establish native grassland with a mix of tall grasses for shade and high forb concentration to open up the grass stands for basking.
- Light grazing helps keep grassland areas open and free of brush encroachment.
- Prescribed fire should be done prior to the first week in April or after the last week in September.
- Nest protection
  - Watch sand dunes between May 29 and June 12 from 9 pm-2am for nest building turtles.
  - Place a cage over the nesting female that is 3'W X 3'L X 4" tall made of ¼" mesh screen
    - This will protect the female and the nest while she is building the nest; predators will be waiting for this period.
  - The following morning remove the cage and allow the female to go.
  - Replace the cage and push the mesh all the way into the ground.
    - This will protect the nest while the eggs develop
  - In early April of the following year return to the site and remove the mesh; there should be turtles ready to emerge.

### **NEST PROTECTION SHOULD ONLY BE DONE UNDER WITH HELP AND APPROVAL BY THE DNR**

- Limit cultivation to less than 6 inches deep in areas known to support ornate box turtles, they could be nesting in your field.
- Cease collection of ornate box turtles.
- Be aware of ornate box turtles crossing roads between April and September.
  - Specifically between the first week in May through the second week in June.