

Shhhh.....they're brumating

Tucked into the coldest corner of the lower level of my house is a storage bin filled with the sandy soil of this central Wisconsin rural county. Each week I tip toe to the bin which is covered with a weighted down old screen. I push my finger into the dirt and if it feels dry, I fill the sprinkling can and moisten the soil. No, I'm not waiting for seeds to sprout or tubers to come to life. I'm keeping my box turtles hydrated during their long winter nap so that, come April, I'll see their green and brown heads poke up through the dirt and know that, once again, nature has come full circle and a new season has begun.

If you've never fallen in love with a box turtle, you probably will have a hard time understanding the fascination, admiration, and, yes, love that turtle fanciers have for the animals in their care. I never thought I'd become so attached to the round package that fell out of my dog's mouth five summers ago when I said, "Drop it." But there it was, a box turtle who had wandered away from its owner, ended up in my yard, and needed my help to survive in a not-so-turtle-friendly environment.

Gordon, as I named him, and I have come a long way since that fateful summer day. I've researched and read and adapted to caring for a turtle and he's eaten and soaked and tunneled and basked while looking cute one minute and handsome the next. I've rebuilt his outdoor summer enclosure to a roomy eight foot by twelve foot area set to have a small pond added this coming summer. And he's been social to our newly adopted female boxie who flew to us this July from the Colorado Reptile Rescue Society.

Box turtles are land turtles, so while they need water, most of their lives are lived roaming prairies or woodlands, depending on the species, and doing turtle things. They tunnel to cool off or to soak in moisture from the earth, they walk around searching for insects, worms, and tasty vegetation and they find turtles of the opposite sex with which to procreate. Box turtles are vulnerable to all kinds of dangers including encroaching development, cars and highways, and, most of all, kidnapers who take the gentle, ancient creatures away from their home territories.

Amazing is the only word that describes these reptiles. Called box turtles for a reason, their bottom shell plate, or plastron, is hinged so that they can draw in their head and legs and close up like, well, a box. They are cold blooded, so their body is the same temperature as the air or substance around them. They survive on what, to warm blooded creatures like us humans, seems a scant amount of food and they dig into the ground and disappear for up to six months of the year without eating or drinking.

Box turtles technically don't hibernate in the mammalian sense; the more correct term, naturalists tell us, is torpor or brumating. Whatever the correct word, Gordon and now Isabella, too, slow down their eating toward the end of September and by the end of October, they have tunneled into the ground for their winter snooze, which, because the frost line goes too deep in this part of Wisconsin, is in that bin in my basement.

I miss them when their gone. I miss their quizzical looks as they stretch their necks to stare up at me towering above them. I miss the beautiful patterns on their shells and the bright yellow and orange of their eyes. I miss that steady gaze when they spot a

cricket or meal worm and then that turtle sprint as they chase it down. They are an odd pet—one you only see for six months of the year. But that’s part of their charm, I think.

There are special instructions left with friends and posted in my home in case something should happen to me during the winter. “Don’t forget the turtles!” the notes proclaim along with instructions of how to locate a proper sanctuary for them. During their awake months, my refrigerator is filled with worms and bugs and I can be seen lurching around the open field catching grasshoppers.

But the best time with turtles is spring. As soon as April has taken over from March, I no longer tip toe to the earth-filled bin. Like a kid trying to wake his parents on Christmas morning, I stomp over to the container, clatter the sprinkling can, and look for signs of life. It’s not long before I’m rewarded. There’s the crack in the soil one day. Then there’s the definite loosened, mounded dirt. Finally, there’s a tip of a nose, a glint of an eye, and my boxies are once more reborn. Along with them, so are my spirits taken to the heights of heaven to see these creatures return to me for the next six months.