


2002

Book Review - North American Box Turtles: A Natural History

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Recommended Citation

Bernstein, Neil P. (2002) "Book Review - North American Box Turtles: A Natural History," *The Journal of the Iowa Academy of Science: JIAS*: Vol. 109: No. 1-2, Article 9.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.uni.edu/jias/vol109/iss1/9>

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REVIEWS

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North American Box Turtles A Natural History. C. Kenneth Dodd, Jr. 2001. The University of Oklahoma Press. Norman, Oklahoma. 231 pages. ISBN 0-8061-3294-9. \$59.95 cloth.

While I have only studied box turtles for four years, from the beginning, I was quickly impressed at the many studies and observations that had been published on North American box turtles. At the same time, I was also frustrated by the lack of syntheses of the material. For the beginning researcher or interested layperson, organizing the studies into a cohesive whole was daunting, and I attempted my own loose compilation that took me most of a summer. However, there is now a new book that provides the background and overview that I sought. C. Kenneth Dodd, a longtime researcher on box turtles in Florida, has produced an admirable and useful book that not only summarizes over 100 years of published reports, but also does so in a readable work.

While a synthesis on this large topic could be hundreds of pages of detailed reiteration of published works, Dodd wisely summarizes the overall information with just the right amount of factual detail. The chapters were subdivided into specialized subsets of the major theme, and it was easy to move from one topic to another while gleaned the essential information presented. Citations are provided in the text, and a reader who wished more detail could refer to the original publications. Of great value, each chapter ends with a section on "Future Directions" which suggests areas of future research needed to elucidate questions that still exist.

Topics covered include evolution, habitats, habitat requirements, movements and orientation, behavior and senses, courtship and reproduction, foraging, demography, predators, parasites, and disease. The final chapter also discusses factors important to conservation of box turtles along with threats to their future. Each chapter is carefully written, and Dodd's admiration and love of box turtles is frequently apparent.

The book has many illustrations, including 48 small, but clear color plates. At least according to the cover notes, the color plates illustrate all the species and subspecies of box turtles in the United States. However, given the wide range of individual and geographical variation, I would not like to rely on these photos as a field guide. The photo of the ornate box turtle female (Plate 28) has a color pattern only rarely seen in our studies, and the only other ornate box turtle plate is that of an adult male plastron.

The remaining black and white figures and maps are clear and useful summaries of material in the text; however, I did note two errors. Figure 8-1 depicts carapace lengths of the population of males, females, and juveniles of Florida box turtles on Egmont Key, Dodd's main study area. However, the bars for juveniles seemingly did not print in either the graph of the figure legend. In addition, Map 5, The Distribution of *Terrapene ornata ornata* and *T. o. luteola*, is highly inaccurate with regards to the distribution of *T. o. ornata*, at least in Iowa and Wisconsin. Indeed, within the text, Dodd states that "there are a few locations in Iowa" for ornate box turtles. While there are scattered populations of ornate box turtles throughout eastern Iowa, southern Iowa, and along the Loess Hills in western Iowa,

Dodd's map only shows a population near the junction of the Cedar and Iowa rivers, the Louisa County population, a population in extreme southwest Iowa, and a population somewhere near Dickinson County. If there is a record from the area of Dickinson County, there certainly are no populations in that area now, and, in my opinion, there probably never were. Wisconsin researchers also tell me that there are inaccuracies in the depicted Wisconsin distribution of *T. o. ornata*. It would seem that contacting researchers in the field might have produced more accurate range maps than relying on distributions published years ago, and accurate range maps are important details for a book that is the benchmark for box turtle research.

The book also contains several useful "appendices." There is an identification key to *Terrapene* species and subspecies that initially identifies what is not a box turtle or the superficially similar Blanding's turtle. There is also a species accounts section that contains the pertinent taxonomic and range details, but, as noted, the range for the ornate box turtle in Iowa is inaccurate. The glossary, literature cited, and index are well done and useful.

I greatly enjoyed reading *North American Box Turtles* and I know that I will be referring to it frequently. Despite the errors, I think this is a valuable and important work. While the price will be daunting to some, royalties from the sales of the book are donated to the Chelonian Research Foundation, a nonprofit foundation for the conservation of turtles. To anyone interested in turtles or the natural history of these interesting reptiles, this book will serve as a key resource for many years.—NEIL P. BERNSTEIN, *Department of Biology, Mount Mercy College, Cedar Rapids, IA 52402.*

Prairie Birds. Fragile Splendor in the Great Plains. Paul A. Johnsguard. 2001. University of Kansas Press. Lawrence, Kansas. XVII + 331 pages. ISBN 0-7006-1067-7. \$29.95, cloth.

Paul A. Johnsguard has established himself as one of the most prolific natural history writers in the recent past. Indeed, before I could finish reading *Prairie Birds*, the University of Kansas Press sent me *The Nature of Nebraska*, also by Johnsguard. These works follow closely after *This Fragile Land, A Natural History of the Nebraska Sandhills* (1995), which I favorably reviewed a few years ago, also about the Great Plains. It goes without saying, that there is a fair amount of overlap in these works, both in the subject matter and the illustrations. Rather than criticize the overlap among these books, I will focus on the *Prairie Birds* and assume that Johnsguard's intent is to provide a diversity of resources on Nebraska and the Great Plains that will appeal to a variety of individuals.

Among Johnsguard's many books on birds, he published *Birds of the Great Plains: Breeding Species and Their Distribution* in 1979. As he points out in the Preface to *Prairie Birds*, a great deal of information has accumulated since the 1979 work, and he chose a different, more readable, format to present the updated material. *Prairie Birds* is partially a more enjoyable read than Johnsguard's compilations. The first two chapters, "An Ancient Sea of Grass" and "The Biotic Communities of the Central Plains," are summaries of the natural history of the Great Plains, and they provide a good overview without technicalities.

The third chapter, "Lessons in Survival," is a compact chapter covering a diversity of topics, all dealing with impacts on breeding birds. A small amount of space is allotted to discussing some of the natural impacts on breeding birds in the section "Long-term Survival Lessons: Climate, Fire, and Drought." However, more is devoted to