

Chapter one

In the late spring of that year, after the snow had melted off the roads and hills, the rains came and the turtles woke up from their long winter sleep. Early in the morning, as the sun rose in the sky, Dad drove to work down the long crooked road called St. Mary's Pike. The rains would flood the nearby creek and the waters often overflowed the road. The air was damp, cool but fresh. This day the road was dry.

As he made his way to work that sunny morning, dad saw a turtle resting in the middle of the road. Turtles die on roads. Dad was worried that the turtle might be hit by a passing car. He stopped and put the turtle to the other side of the road. He went to work.

The next morning while driving back to work, once again he saw a turtle on the road. Dad stopped the car and got out to pick the turtle up. The turtle was warm, even though the air was cold and wet. The paved road was almost hot from the morning sun. The turtle was warming itself on the road in the cool early morning air.

Concerned it might walk back onto the road, Dad rescued the turtle. He carried the turtle back to the car and placed him on the floor. After work, he brought the turtle home to show the children, Katie and Michael. He told the story of how he found the turtle.

Michael and Katie looked at the turtle with excitement. The turtle pulled his head into his shell. He pulled in his legs and his tail as well. Dad said he was called a “box turtle” because the turtle was able to pull all of his body into the shell and close up any opening, as if were a box.

They set the turtle down on the grass. Slowly, carefully, he stuck out his head and looked up at the children. He stared at them for a bit. He was thinking hard, maybe wondering what kind of funny thing these two legged creatures were! He tilted his head and looked up at Michael with one eye. He seemed as curious about the children as they were of him. They named him TRACY. Tracy the turtle!

They made a home for him on the front porch. Using a cardboard box and some grass clippings, a rock and some twigs, the new home was complete. They fed him vegetables like lettuce, tomato, and fruits like banana. He was hungry and seemed happy with the meal.

Chapter 2

Over the next month, as the spring rains filled the creek again and again, the sun would dry and warm the road. More turtles came out of hiding to warm up. Dad collected the turtles and brought them home. Every turtle was different. Some had black shells with yellow dots. Other turtles had black shells with yellow stripes. Some had yellow shells with black stripes and some had black shells with orange stripes or dots or swirls. Some had orange shells with black stripes.

Some turtles had red eyes and some had orange eyes. The children read about the box turtle and learned that the male turtles have red eyes and the female turtles have orange-brown eyes. Some turtles had very round shells and others were more flat. Some turtles were large and some were small. Some were young and others old. Each turtle was so different they just had to name each one. Here are the names they used:

Tracy - a big boy turtle and very strong

Teresa - a girl turtle who blinked her eyes a lot

Tom - a boy turtle with orange stripes

Timmy - a very old turtle who was wise and kind

Tina - a small turtle but a fast turtle

Trixie - a shy turtle

Truman - a funny turtle who loved to eat worms

Tyler - a turtle with a flat shell

Trudy - a girl turtle with red on her cheeks

Tigger - a turtle with yellow and black stripes like a tiger

Todd - a handsome turtle with a very long neck
Tiny – the baby turtle.

Altogether, there were twelve turtles. Twelve turtles with turtle names that all began with the letter T.

You can imagine that no cardboard box was big enough to hold these turtles. Turtles are not used to living so close together. They like big forests and wide fields and creeks nearby to drink from. It was also hard to know if all of them got enough food at feeding time. So, the children decided the turtles needed a new home.

Chapter 3

That summer was a wonderful summer for Katie and Michael. They called it, “The Summer of the Turtles”. Katie was 8 years old and Michael was 5. Because there were so many turtles they tried to rescue, Dad and the kids decided to make an outdoor pen for them to live in. They would need to make a pond too. The pen would need to be partly in the sun and partly in the shade. It would need to have a fence to keep the turtles from wandering away. It would have to be large so that each turtle had space. Finally, it would need to be open so that the turtles could enjoy the sun, the rain, and fresh air.

They picked a spot in the back yard; partly under the deck, to create a shady spot, and partly in the sun, to create a sunny spot so the turtles could warm themselves. Dad got the shovel and he dug a deep wide hole for a pond. He placed a heavy sheet of plastic in the hole. We collected stones from the nearby creek and placed them around the pond. Michael and Katie got the garden hose. Katie held the nozzle. Michael turned the water on. They filled the hole with water.

To make a fence that would surround their new home Dad bought chicken wire. Chicken wire is made of twisted threads of wire. The wire was two feet wide and as long as the driveway; about 30 feet. To make the wire stand like a fence, dad bought thin wooden rods. He placed them in the ground around the spot chosen for the turtle pen and then fastened the chicken wire to the rods with

plastic ties. With a few more stones and an old log, the turtle home was ready.

Chapter Four

It was early June, after the spring rains had fallen. The children lifted the cardboard box filled with turtles and placed it on Michael's wagon. With Dad's help, they took the turtles from the front of the house to the backyard where they had made the new turtle home. They placed each turtle into the turtle pen. Tracy ran into the pond. It would become his favorite place to rest. Old Timothy slowly walked to the far end of the pen; maybe so he could see his new surroundings. Tiny ran to a space under the log. A few of the turtles remained in the sunny part of the pen. Others hid in tufts of grass. Each turtle seemed to find a comfortable place to settle in.

It was a thrilling moment to see so many animals discovering their new home. "Let's feed them," Katie shouted with excitement. "OK", said Dad. "Go get the earthworms, some lettuce, and a banana."

Michael and Katie ran to the kitchen. Like chefs in a fancy restaurant, they prepared a meal for the turtles; a meal of lettuce, kale, banana, tomatoes and worms that were bought at a bait shop. They placed them on a large plate and carried it to the backyard. They placed each food in the middle of the pen. Before all the different foods were placed on the ground, Tracy was already pulling himself out of the pond and heading for the feast. He arrived there first and began to chew off chunks of kale with his beak. Other turtles lifted their heads high out of their shell to smell the food. They also began to move close to the

food to eat. Tracy saw them coming and as if there was not enough food to go around, grabbed a large leaf of kale and wandered off towards the pond. With Tracy now gorging himself in the heat of the day, the other turtles also bit into the banana, the lettuce, and tomatoes. Some had to chase the worms as they squiggled to get out of the sun. In a very short time, the food was gone, the turtles had retreated to their spaces and only scraps were left.

“They love it here”, said Michael.

“It seems they do”, said Dad. “I suppose it is much simpler to eat food when you don’t have to hunt for it.”

“Let’s feed them again,” said Katie.

“Well, let’s see how hungry they are tomorrow,” said Dad.

“Then we will know just how much food they will need each day.”

Chapter Five

For the next few weeks, Michael and Katie watched the turtles for hours every day. They became so used to being fed that when the kids came to visit they eagerly came out hoping for food. They were not disappointed.

Soon, they began to notice that each turtle was different in ways they did not expect. Just like people, each turtle had a special liking for one food over others. Tiny loved bananas the most. Timothy loved to bite into a juicy tomato and let the juices run down his chin. Tracy loved green things like kale, and lettuce. Other turtles loved the worms' best, or carrots. Trudy was a fruit eater and she liked to eat plums and apples.

They often gave the turtles playtime; a time to get out of the pen and walk all over our backyard. Turtles are not fast animals but when you have 12 of them roaming free in the yard they seem to go so far and so fast especially when you are not looking. They might not be fast but once they make up their mind to move, they just keep going.

Dad had the children wash their hands after touching the turtles. Most reptiles, like turtles and lizards, carry bacteria that can cause sickness in people. Soap and water remove the bacteria so that it is not eaten with food or drinks.

Chapter 6

The family learned so much about turtles that summer.

Did you know that turtles do not have ears that hang off the side of their heads like people and dogs? Their ears are flat sheets of skin that lay across the sides of their heads. They hear sounds very well but probably not the same way that people hear sounds.

Turtles do not have teeth. They have a beak and the beak may have small ridges that look like tiny teeth. Turtles have a strong bite for tearing into plant food or biting into insects and worms. Turtles do not chew their food. They pull their food into their mouths with their tongue and swallow it whole.

Turtles have thick leathery skin and each foot has long and sharp claws. The skin is scaly but soft. The claws are used for digging in the dirt to find food, lay eggs or to burrow into the ground. The leathery skin is water proof but not as colorful as the shell.

The most interesting part of the turtle is its shell. It is made of two parts. The upper part is the more colorful of the shell. It is made of many plates and each plate has rings that appear as the animal grows larger. If you count the number of rings in a plate, you will then have a good idea of the age of the turtle. A new ring grows every year.

The lower shell has two hinges at the front and the back end of the animal. The hinges allow the turtle to pull its body into the shell and then close the front and back end of the shell to form a box. The children saw this happen many times. When a turtle was startled or unsure of things, it would pull its legs, head and tail into the upper shell and then pull the lower shell closed tight against the upper shell. This way, the soft parts of the animal were safe from harm.

The male and female turtles are hard to tell apart. But Dad learned that the male turtles have red eyes and the females have orange colored eyes. This must be how the turtles can tell the difference too.

Of all the fascinating things they learned about turtles that summer, the one thing that stayed with them was how the turtles looked at them. With big, round eyes, a stretched out neck and slightly tilted head, these turtles knew the children. The turtles seemed smart and almost wise as though they were thinking very hard.

Chapter 7- The battle

The turtles liked the rain. They liked the sun. They liked to swim. Mostly, they liked to eat.

After some weeks of feeding them, the children noticed that most of the turtles were very careful near the pond. When Tracy was in the pond, the other turtles stayed away. When Tracy was out of water and sunning himself, the other turtles would go to drink or to swim.

Many times when they were fed, the turtles waited to eat. Tracy was always the first to eat. Timothy, the oldest turtle would eat too and then a few others would move towards the food to eat. Some turtles would eat only after Tracy moved away from the food.

It was a mystery and the kids wanted to solve it. So, Michael and Katie and Dad decided that when they fed the turtles next, they would hide behind a large water-maple tree and watch closely to what happened next.

All the turtles lifted their nose to the air and caught the scent of fresh food. Tracey also lifted his head high out of the pond. He marched up and out of the pond to the center of pen. There, Tiny had beaten him to the food and was gorging on banana and kale leaves. Tracy tilted his head to let one eye see what Tiny was doing. When he realizing that Tiny had beaten him to the food, he charge the tiny turtle and with a flick of his head, lifted the tiny turtle flipping him on his back. He continued to push the

turtle to the side of the pen when Timothy turtle charge Tracy. Timothy was the oldest turtle. The many rings in the plates of his shell showed him to be over 40 years old. His face was dry and dusty. The color of his shell was no longer bright. He was not as big as Tracy was but he was strong.

The two turtles faced each other. Both stuck out their necks as far as they could. Tracy bobbed his head up and down. Timothy did the same. This went on over and over. Tracy seemed to tire first. Then he stopped his bobbing and turned around towards the pond. By this time, Tiny was back on his legs. Timothy marched up to the pile of food. Tracy stopped to look back, and then returned to the pond. Timothy had won the battle and Tiny continued to eat. From then on Tracy waited for Timothy to eat. Timothy ate with the rest of the turtles. Tracy would often wait until most of the other turtles had their fill of food.

How strange and wonderful are turtles! Who knew that these little creatures were so complicated and so smart?

Chapter 8 – The Summer ends

Caring for turtles was fun. Saving them from being crushed on the highway was serious business. As September came and the weather cooled the children realized that the turtles needed to be returned to the wild before winter came. Turtles need to store fat in their bodies for hibernating through the long winter. If they do not find a place in the forests or near a creek, they would not live through the winter months. Most box turtles stop eating before they hibernate. They will dig under fallen logs or into wetland muds or bury themselves in leaf litter on the edge of forest floors. There they will stay and sleep until the springtime.

The turtles also knew it was time to hibernate.

One day Tracy was found missing from the pen. The children searched the neighborhood asking the other kids if any had removed a turtle from the pen but no one knew a turtle was missing. Looking in the backyard, they found Tracy in a corner. This happened 4 days in a row and it made no sense. Dad was sure that someone in the neighborhood was letting Tracy out of the pen. Katie said, “Dad, maybe the turtle climbed out!” Dad said, “Turtles can’t climb that way, Katie. Turtles don’t climb fences. Did you ever see one in a tree? After all, turtles were made to creep along the ground.”

Even though he did not believe that turtles could climb, Dad set up an experiment. We were to get up early in the

morning, at the crack of dawn, and go down to the pen and watch. The next day Dad got the kids up early. They went out in the cold September air and watched the turtles as the sun rose. As daylight broke, Tracy climbed out of the pond and circled the cage. He stopped at one corner, cocked his head to look up at the cage, and began to climb. He climbed using his long claws and when he reached the top of the thin wire fence, he pulled his body up with his front legs. Then he tilted his body over the fence and let gravity do the rest. His body fell over the outside of the fence while two claws hung onto the wire. Hanging in the air, Tracy then let go of the fence and dropped to the ground. Michael shouted, "Turtles do climb fences!" Sure enough, they had proven that turtles do climb fences. Tracy began to march to the back of the yard. Dad was amazed. "What a smart turtle," he said.

Chapter 9

It was time to let the turtles go. Summer was nearly over and the turtles knew it was time to prepare for the winter. They would need to fill up on water and clear their body of waste in order to go into hibernation. They would need to find the right spot to burrow into the ground. To make it through the cold, they certainly had stored lots of fat from all the food they were fed. Now, they knew it was time to go.

That Saturday Dad and the children let them out of the pen. All of them turned to the back of the yard and headed down the hill to the woods where there was a creek. Within a few hours all the turtles were out of sight and safely back into the woods.

The children enjoyed the turtles very much while they visited with them. It was good to let the animals go back to the wild though. It is what they wanted and it made the children happy to see them go. They learned so much about them. And yes, turtles do climb fences! The summer of the turtles will not be forgotten.

For Parents:

SCIENTIFIC CLASSIFICATION	
KINGDOM	<u>Animal</u>
PHYLUM	<u>Chordate</u>
CLASS	<u>Reptile</u>
ORDER	<u>Testudines</u>
FAMILY	Emydidae
GENUS	Terrapene
SPECIES	Terrapene carolina

The most common box turtle is the Eastern Box Turtle. The shell is typically high and rounded. The upper shell is the carapace and the bottom shell is the plastron. The upper shell is typically black or dark green with yellow or orange patterns of stripes on it. The carapace is composed of many plates or scutes. The age of the turtle can be determined by counting the rings on the scutes of the carapace. The plastron has two hinges that cover the back and front of the animal's shell making the animal completely housed within. This protects the softer parts of the animal from attack by their predators; skunks, raccoons, minks, other rodents and even snakes. The upper shell is created as an extension of the spine and the ribs of the animal. The lower shell rises from the egg as the animal develops in the egg. All internal organs are protected within the shell.

The animal has no outer ear but picks up sounds very well through a membrane on the sides of the head. The skin is thick and scaly and each foot has long thick claws for digging, climbing and holding down food as it is torn by the animal's beak. The turtle does not chew food but swallows chunks of food whole. Box turtles have no vocal cords but may make a hissing sound when approached by another box turtle that has invaded its territory.

The box turtle is a terrestrial turtle or tortoise. It lives in fields and in forests and never wanders far from its birthplace. The home range of a box turtle is around 750 feet from its birth place. This animal can live, on average, 30 years but some have lived up to 100 years or more. Box turtles stop growing larger when the shell hardens completely at 7 years of age. The shell may thicken from the growth rings each year but this does not add much to the size of the animal. They do not grow much larger than 8 inches and typically grow to 4.5 to 6 inches.

The male turtle's eyes have red irises and the female's are orange. The female can store the sperm from the male for up to 4 years so that it does not have to mate every year to produce fertile eggs. The female may lay 3-8 eggs each year and dozens over its lifetime. Typically, only 2-3 offspring ever survive to adulthood. The female lays the eggs in the summer months. She buries them in a shallow pit and covers them with soil, leaves, and other debris from the forest floor. The young emerge from the shell fully formed and able to fend for themselves.

Turtles eat berries, mushrooms, snails and slugs, fish, frogs, salamanders, flowers, insects, roots, earthworms, and dead animals. They are omnivorous but the young are typically carnivorous and the adults' vegetarians. Some mushrooms that are poisonous to humans are eaten by the turtle without ill effect. The turtle may remain poisonous if it is eaten after consuming such mushrooms.

The animal hibernates in the colder climates from October or November through to spring. They may dig as deep as 2 feet into the forest floor, or use mammal borrows, creek banks, and old stump holes for a borrow. They remain in this state for up to 5 months or until the air allows them to achieve a body temperature of 84 degrees Fahrenheit. The animal cannot endure heat above 100 degrees F and must seek cool shade, shallow ponds or it will dig into cool earth to manage its body temperature. There is only one species of box turtle in North America and it is recognized by 6 subspecies which are geographically isolated.

Eastern Box Turtle,	Terrapene Carolina
Florida Box Turtle,	Terrapene carolina bauri
Eastern Box Turtle,	Terrapene carolina carolina
Gulf Coast Box Turtle,	Terrapene carolina major
Three-toed Box Turtle,	Terrapene carolina triunguis
Mexican Box Turtle,	Terrapene carolina mexicana
Yucatán Box Turtle,	Terrapene carolina yucatana

Today most States protect the box turtle as its habitat is slowly being converted into housing for humans. It is

unlawful to harvest and sell box turtles. Trying to keep them as pets is not recommended and may be unlawful today. The success rate of domesticating a box turtle is very poor. Enjoy them when you see them and get them off the road, if that is the case. But leave them where you find them.