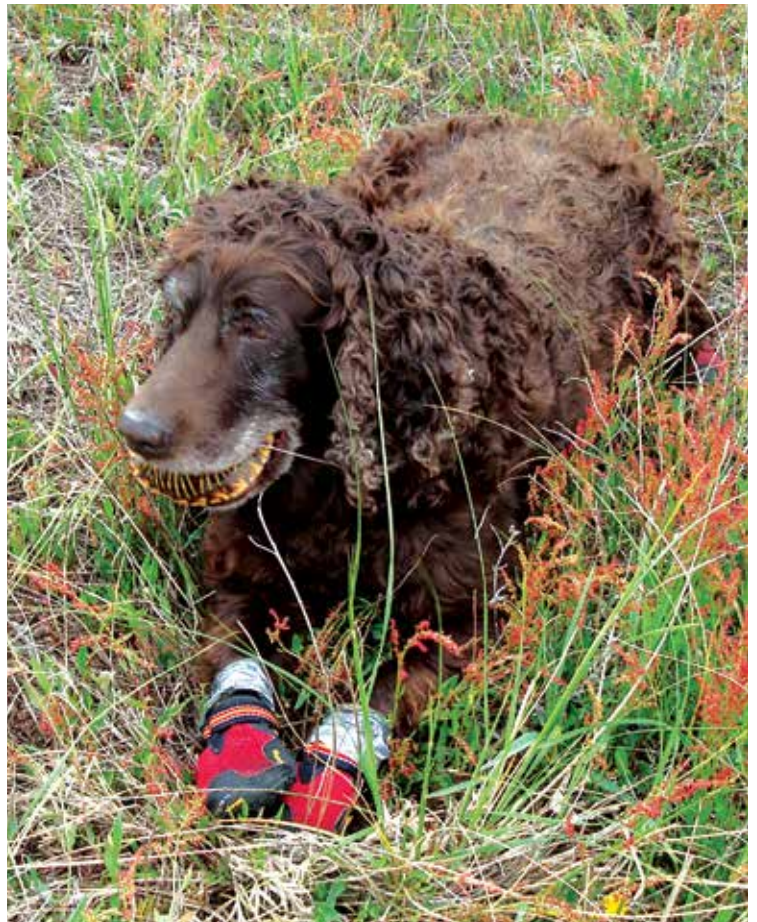


Turtle Dogs Play the Shell Game

By Pamela Eyden



One of John Ruckers' Boykin spaniels poses with the hi-tech footwear to protect against painful run-ins with prickly pear cacti. Can you spot the turtle in this picture? (Ed Britton)

Ornate box turtles have boxy shells with yellow patterns radiating out of a dark green background. They're more vivid than most turtles, but that doesn't make them easy to find on a sand prairie. On a mild day in May, when temperatures at ground level can be well over 100 degrees, turtles don't sit in plain sight. They hide in grass or patches of prickly pear cactus. Finding them is slow, hot work.

That's why Ed Britton, Savanna District manager of the Upper Mississippi River Wildlife and Fish Refuge, who's been studying ornate box turtles on sand prairies for three years, hired some unusual specialists to help out this year: five Boykin spaniels and their trainer John Rucker. His spaniels have made a name for themselves as turtle dogs par excellence. Hailing from eastern Tennessee, they've participated in many turtle conservation projects in the southeast and northeast United States. Rucker's dogs gave

Britton's box turtle project a big boost this year. They found 85 turtles on seven northwestern Illinois sand prairies in 10 days, while human searchers found just 12.

After locating the turtles, researchers measure them and mount a small radio transmitter to their shells, so

Turtles leave a scent trail when they move, and it's this trail the dogs pick up.

their movements can be tracked. Ornate box turtles are listed as a threatened species in Illinois, mostly due to loss of habitat. More than 90 percent of the sand prairie in Illinois has been destroyed for farming or development.

Ornate box turtles move around

quite a bit. From tracking 33 turtles in past years Britton has learned that they cover several miles and lead relatively solitary lives, although their home territories overlap.

"They must have GPS in their heads," Britton laughed, "because they often come back to hibernate in the exact same site they used the year before."

Britton said the spaniels searched between 100 to 200 acres a day, working only in the morning or evening.

"Heat affects the turtles' movements. If they don't move, we can't find them." Turtles leave a scent trail when they move, and it's this trail the dogs pick up. For some reason the dogs can't smell a turtle if it's not moving — even from a couple of inches away.

Boykin spaniels were bred for hunting and have a keen sense of smell. Rucker's dogs were originally trained to hunt birds, which they continue to do when Rucker takes them



Boykin spaniels were bred from assorted retrievers and spaniels to have compact, rugged builds, to travel well in boats and to retrieve on land and water. They are known as "the dog that doesn't rock the boat." (Ed Britton)

hunting every year in Montana and North Dakota.

Rucker's first turtle dog discovered his talent when he was about a year old, Rucker reported on a website devoted to Boykin spaniels. One day they were walking through the woods and found a turtle eating a mushroom.

"Buster, what's that?" Rucker asked, letting the dog sniff the turtle.

A little farther down the trail Buster took off and brought back a different turtle, closed up tight, in his mouth. After that, Buster became a skilled turtle dog, and Rucker became fascinated with turtles and the challenges they face.

They travel in a big 1992 Venture van with more than 350,000 miles on it, outfitted with dog cages and living

space. It's a home away from home for Rucker and his five dogs, who live a nomadic life for a season or two at a time.

"The dogs are very controlled in their search for turtles," Britton said. "John stayed close by because when they find a scent their search mode changes. When you see one with its nose on the ground and its tail wagging, that's an indication. We all focussed on one dog then. We want-

ed to make sure we returned it [the turtle] to the exact spot where it was found, so we stayed close by. We also used GPS."

Nonetheless, the cross-trained dogs sometimes had a little trouble keeping turtles in mind. Rucker had to reinforce their goal by reminding the dogs, "Turtles, find turtles." Meanwhile, researchers were told not to say the word "bird," so as not to confuse the dogs. 🐾



John Rucker rests during a day in the field with his turtle dogs. How many dogs are in this picture? Hint: Count the tongues. (Ed Britton)



About Box Turtles

Most people never see an ornate box turtle, unless it's in a terrarium or lying at the side of the road after being hit by a car. They are one of the few turtles that can withdraw completely inside their shells. The bottom shell (plastron) is hinged, so it closes tight as a box to keep coyotes, foxes, raccoons and other would-be predators out.

Unlike most turtles of the Upper Mississippi, ornate box turtles don't need to live near water. They are land based, and get their water from eating plants. On sand prairies, they eat prickly pear cactus for water, and berries, crickets and carrion for food. They hibernate for six months of the year, usually buried three feet deep in the sand.

Left: A turtle sports a radio transmitter. (Ed Britton)