Illinois researchers working to save ornate box turtles

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Dog handler John Rucker collects an ornate box turtle that one of his Boykin spaniels located and brought to him Thursday, May 6, 2021, at the Nachusa Grasslands, near Franklin Grove in Lee County, Ill. A team of researchers and veterinary students from the University of Illinois Wildlife Epidemiology Laboratory located and did health assessments in the field on the threatened turtles. (Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune via AP)

A team of Illinois researchers is using dogs to track down a threatened species of turtle.

Researchers believe ornate box turtles, once living in half of Illinois' 102 counties, are found in less than 10.

One known home for the species is in Lee County, and a team from the Chicago Zoological Society and the University of Illinois spent Friday surveying the 3,800-acre (1,500-hectare) Nachusa Grasslands.

A team paced through the grasses trying to spot the small turtles, aided by a group of Boykin spaniels that can sniff out the turtles' trail. When a human or a dog located a turtle, researchers made notes about the reptile's eyes, ears, nose and took physical measurements along with a blood sample.

Ornate box turtles' shells have distinct yellow markings in a sunburst pattern. They typically weigh about a pound and are 3 or 4 inches (8 to 10 centimeters) in length, said Dr. Matt Allender, the Chicago Zoological Society clinical veterinarian and director of the University of Illinois Wildlife Epidemiology Laboratory.

The health study is in its 15th year. The data collected during Friday's survey will be added to previous years' findings to help researchers determine what is threatening the environment and health of the ornate box turtles.

"Ornate box turtles are sentinels of environmental and ecosystem health, so they utilize both land and water sources, just like humans do in this environment," Allender said. "And so the health of the ornate box turtle is a reflection of the health of the environment that we draw our natural resources on."

An ornate box turtle is found Thursday, May 6, 2021, at the Nachusa Grasslands, near Franklin Grove in Lee County, Ill. A team of researchers and veterinary students from the University of Illinois Wildlife Epidemiology Laboratory located and did health assessments in the field on the threatened turtles. (Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune via AP)

Dog handler John Rucker directs his Boykin spaniels in the search for ornate box turtles Thursday, May 6, 2021, at the Nachusa Grasslands, near Franklin Grove in Lee County, Ill. A team of researchers and veterinary students from the University of Illinois Wildlife Epidemiology Laboratory located and did health assessments in the field on the threatened turtles. (Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune via AP)

Boykin spaniels lead the search for ornate box turtles with Matt Allender, Chicago Zoological Society clinical veterinarian and director of the University of Illinois Wildlife Epidemiology Laboratory, on Thursday, May 6, 2021, at the Nachusa Grasslands, near Franklin Grove in Lee County, Ill. A team of researchers and veterinary students from the University of Illinois Wildlife Epidemiology Laboratory located and did health assessments in the field on the threatened turtles. (Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune via AP)

An ornate box turtle is held after being found Thursday, May 6, 2021, at the Nachusa Grasslands, near Franklin Grove in Lee County, Ill. A team of researchers and veterinary students from the University of Illinois Wildlife Epidemiology Laboratory located and did health assessments in the field on the threatened turtles. (Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune via AP)