

**EASTERN BOX TURTLES (*Terrapene carolina*)
FEEDING ON TV TOWER-KILLED BIRDS**

FRED J. ALSOP III

*East Tennessee State University
Kingsport, Tennessee 37660*

and

GARY O. WALLACE

*Milligan College
Milligan College, Tennessee 37682*

ABSTRACT

The Eastern Box Turtle (*Terrapene carolina*) is a proven scavenger (Anderson, 1965; Carr, 1952; Pope, 1960). Observations in the field have established that freshly killed birds are eaten by this turtle. A search of the literature indicates no prior evidence of avian flesh as being known to constitute a part of this animal's diet in the wild.

THE OBSERVATION

On the morning of 8 October 1969, the authors obtained information which showed Eastern Box Turtles (*Terrapene carolina*) to be feeding on the carcasses of tower-killed birds. The "kill" occurred the night of 7-8 October at the WBIR-TV tower (height, 533.4 meters) atop Zachary Ridge, elevation 395.9 meters, in the northeastern corner of Knox County, Tennessee. This date marked the first tower-kill (death of the birds as a result of flying into the tower structure) for the migration season, which occurred during a night of low visibility and intermittent rain. Between 200 to 300 dead and injured birds were collected the morning of 8 October, which was clear with temperatures about 20°C.

While in the process of searching for the downed birds in the deciduous woodlands immediately surrounding the tower, a male Eastern Box Turtle about 15 centimeters long (plastron measurement) was found near the partially devoured body of a Swainson's Thrush (*Catharus ustulata*). The carcass was so close to the turtle's head that it was felt that the reptile must have been responsible for the missing meat which had been torn away even though the actual feeding had not been observed.

During the course of the collecting, it was noted that many invertebrates, principally centipedes, ants, and beetles, were feeding on the birds. Several other box turtles were also seen as the search to pick up bird bodies in the wooded area continued. However, none was observed near, or feeding on the dead birds until approximately 2 hours after finding the first turtle. At this time a second male of about the same size was sighted feeding on a dead Gray-cheeked Thrush (*Catharus minima*). The appearance of the bird's remains was strikingly similar to that of the first carcass. Sizable chunks of meat, approximately 10-15 mm square, were removed as the turtle ate.

The Eastern Box Turtle is a proven scavenger (Anderson, 1965; Carr, 1952; and Pope, 1960) and is reported as a possible predator on the nestlings and eggs of groundnesting species (Allard, 1948; Barker, 1964). It has fed on frozen bird flesh under laboratory conditions (Rodeck, 1948). We believe, however, this constitutes the first evidence of the Eastern Box Turtle as a scavenger on avian flesh in the wild.

LITERATURE CITED

- Allard, 1948. *Jour. Tenn. Acad. Sci.*, 23:307-321; and, 24:146-152.
- Anderson, Paul. 1965. *The Reptiles of Missouri*. Univ. of Mo. Press, Columbia, Mo.
- Barker, Will. 1964. *Familiar Reptiles and Amphibians of America*. Harper and Row, N.Y.
- Carr, Archie. 1952. *Handbook of Turtles, Turtles of the United States*. Comstock Association Publishers, Ithaca, N.Y.
- Pope, Clifford H. 1960. *The Reptile World*. Knopf Publishers, N.Y.
- Rodeck. 1949. *Copeia*, 1949 (1):32-34.