

TURTLE CROSSING PROJECT'S MOWING GUIDE:

HOW TO mow your lawn or field without killing eastern box turtles



Be alert while mowing. Mower operators should be familiar with box turtles. Refer to photos of color and pattern variations, such as yellow (left), orange (right), tan, or mostly dark (small designs).

Lawns should be kept short enough that turtles can be easily seen (< 4 inches)

Fields and brush should be cut when turtles are least active

Avoid mowing when temperatures are pleasant; instead mow when weather is hot and dry. Turtles typically feed and travel across fields and similar sunny upland areas when temperatures are moderate, mostly from May through June. In summer, the highest risk period is the morning hours when there is still dew on the ground. During the hot, dry conditions typical of midday, turtles usually rest in the shady edges of fields or under shrubs. During prolonged hot, dry spells, turtles often aestivate (bury themselves and become dormant) underground.

Brush hog field edges or managed open habitat in the mid to late winter, when ground is frozen or relatively dry. Turtles hibernate underground during winter months.

If mowing when turtles may be active is unavoidable, set height of mowing deck to 6-8 inches. Although adult eastern box turtles reach no higher than four inches with necks extended, under certain conditions 8 inches clearance is wise: if ground is uneven or rocky or if mower has rotating blades such that suction can draw turtles up into the cutting zone. Uneven ground can elevate turtles into harms way. Probability of injury is very high for a flail-type mower with a deck set lower than 6 inches; risk is moderate for a haying cutterbar (attached to side of tractor.)

When closer mowing (lower than 6-8 inches) is unavoidable, we recommend these precautions: Use a hand-held string trimmer, which would not injure a turtle fully within its shell. For larger areas, have someone walk in front of the mower to check for box turtles. Any turtles found should be moved several hundred feet out of the way. Do not relocate turtles off site.

Leave strips or “islands” that are infrequently cut, such as a 3 to 8-foot wide swath of meadow or shrubs between the lawn and the woods edge; beds of shrubs and perennial wildflowers with wood chips; or a meadow-wildflower patch. Turtles will spend more of their time in these areas, feeding on insects and worms, than in the open lawn or field, and they improve the overall habitat quality. Woodchips are a preferred refuge in the heat of the day. Avoid broadcast pesticide use in these areas.

Note that fields over three acres in size are likely to support nesting by rare and/or declining grassland birds species. These are best protected by not mowing at all from May 15th to August 15th.

Developed for the Quinnipiac River Watershed Association's Turtle Crossing Project by ecologist Sigrun N. Gadwa of Carya Ecological Services, LLC, Cheshire, Connecticut. Advice provided by Dan Rosenblatt, Regional Wildlife Manager for State-owned Lands in Long Island, Stony Brook office of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation; herpetologist Hank Gruner; professional mower James Hutchinson of East Haddam; Blake Wilson of Ships Hole farm, Smithtown, Long Island, NY, and others. Photos by Tony Ianello. Layout by Illisa Kelman. January 2007.