

# PAWPRINTS

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*Seven soft-mouthed spaniels are sniffing out special turtles.*

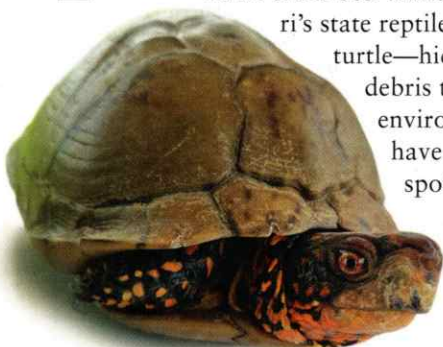
## Shell Game

**F**or nine years, Saint Louis Zoo scientists have been exploring 425 acres that will expand as early as 2026 into the Saint Louis Zoo WildCare Park. Since box turtles—including Missouri’s state reptile, the three-toed box turtle—hide under leaves and debris to blend in with their environment, researchers have a challenging time spotting them.

So the team brought in Boykin Spaniels—with names like Skeeter, Scamp,

Lazarus, and Yogi—to track and retrieve box turtles. The dogs gently carry the turtles to conservationists who swab the reptiles’ mouths and fit them with radio-tracking tags (which are later removed, before hibernation). This helps researchers protect the turtles by learning about their habitats, the size of their home ranges, what they eat, and what diseases are impacting their survival, says Sharon Deem, DVM, Ph.D., director of Saint Louis Zoo Institute for Conservation Medicine.

“We’ve learned just how difficult it can be to find box turtles with just using ‘people power,’ ” she says. “The Boykin Spaniels use their amazing sense of smell to follow the trails along the ground in the path they walk—scents we humans just can’t smell.” —Jen Reeder



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