

Chelonian Philately: Collecting Turtles and Tortoises on Stamps

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TURTLE HOBBYISTS who are not philatelists are always surprised when they learn how many different stamps have been issued that depict turtles and tortoises or that are in some way connected with turtles and tortoises. As of January 1993, approximately 812 such stamps have been issued by 172 different countries (or other stamp issuing entities such as the United Nations and various colonies and territories). Collecting these turtle stamps can be a pleasant adjunct to one's primary turtle activities or it can be a separate, rewarding hobby in itself.

In this article, the word "stamp" refers not only to individual postage stamps, but to related philatelic items such as postal stationery (envelopes with postage preprinted on them), booklets of stamps with the turtle appearing on the front or rear cover of the booklet, and souvenir sheets, which are illustrated sheets with one or more postage stamps contained within the borders of the sheet.

Turtle stamps fall into several natural categories, depending on the design on the face of the stamp. First, there are stamps with realistic pictures of turtles and the turtle is the primary ob-

ject depicted. With this type of stamp, the turtle is almost always identifiable to species, and often it is identifiable to subspecies, where subspecies exist. The turtles can be identified by direct examination of the stamp, or from literature released by the issuing agency at the time the stamp was issued.

The second general category consists of stamps on which there is a reasonably realistic looking turtle, but the turtle is only a minor part of the overall illustration. Some examples are stamps with paintings on them which depict a number of different animals, including a small turtle or tortoise.

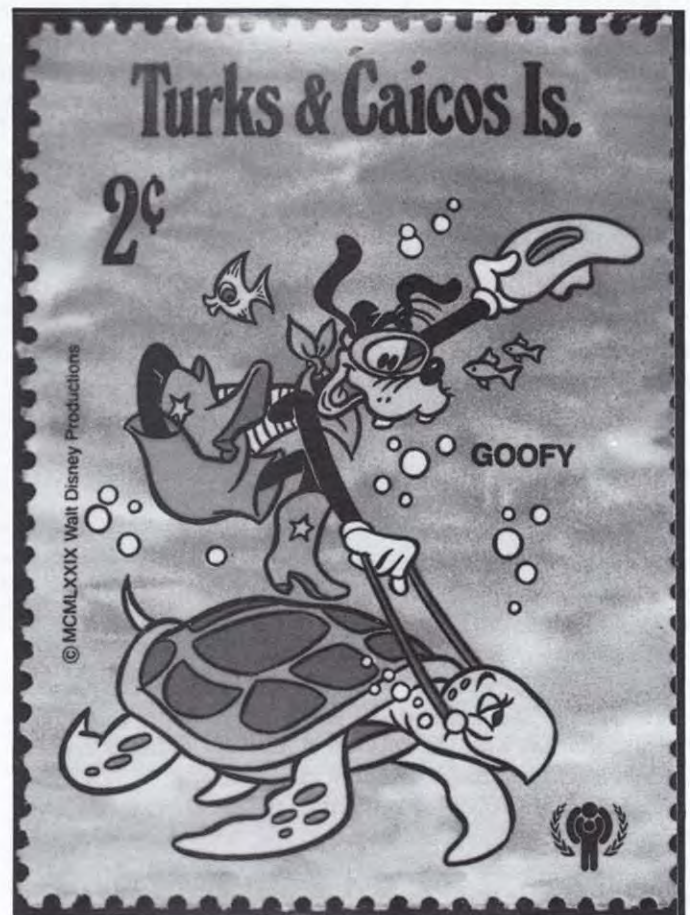
There are also several stamps with pictures of children at play and one of them happens to be playing with a turtle. Three countries (the Cayman Islands, the Seychelles, and the Solomon Islands) have turtles on their coats of arms. All three countries have issued stamps bearing their coats of arms, and these are turtle stamps despite the fact that the turtles are not the central theme of the design. The turtle species depicted on stamps in this category may or may not be identifiable.



Spotted-legged turtle (*Rhinclemmys punctularia*)
on a 125-cent airmail stamp of Surinam, issued 17 February 1982.

The third category consists of stamps whose illustrations were not intended to be realistic or to represent a specific species. Examples include numerous cartoon figures of turtles, toy turtles, and turtles carved of wood or stone. Korea has issued 14 stamps depicting a tombstone in the form of a huge stone turtle. Other examples of this category are fanciful turtles from mythology and highly stylized, modernistic-looking turtles. One stamp, from New Caledonia, has a turtle whose carapace is made up of overlapping postage stamps.

The final category includes a relatively small number of stamps that do not have turtles or tortoises on them at all, but are in some way related to chelonians. For example, Korea has issued a large number of different stamps portraying "tortoise ships." These were 16th century ironclad warships of the Korean navy, associated with an admiral named Li Sun-Sin. Many stamps honoring this admiral show one or more of his tortoise ships. Two other examples of "turtle stamps without turtles" are a Samoan stamp that pictures a sea turtle hatchery and a stamp from Trinidad and Tobago that features the Turtle Beach Hotel.



Cartoon sea turtle on two-cent stamp of the Turks and Caicos islands, issued 2 November 1979.



Twenty-five franc airmail stamp from the Republic of Mali, with a crowned crane and an African spurred tortoise (*Geochelone sulcata*), issued 23 November 1963.



European pond turtle (*Emys orbicularis*) on 50-grozy stamp of Poland, issued 1 June 1963.

Many collectors prefer to collect only stamps from the first category; i.e., stamps on which the turtle is the primary design feature and is identifiable at least to genus, if not to species or subspecies. Such collectors have a wide variety of stamps from which to choose, despite their restrictive collecting interests. To date, 65 different species of turtles and tortoises have appeared on postage stamps. Sea turtles far outnumber other types of turtles and tortoises on philatelic issues. This is no doubt due to the importance or former importance of sea turtles in the economies of many island nations, and to the recognition that sea turtles have recently received endangered species status.

The record is held by the green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*). No less than 55 different countries have issued more than 100 stamps featuring this species. The runner-up is the hawksbill turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*). Forty-five countries have chosen to honor this species on one or more of their stamps. Next in line are the leatherback sea turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*) with 22 countries, and the Aldabra tortoise (*Geochelone gigantea*) with eight countries.

There are no rules for collecting turtle stamps. You can make your collection as personalized and unique as you wish. You can be a purist with nothing but identifiable species in your collection, or you can collect anything remotely related to turtles. You can collect only stamps issued by recognized countries, or you can collect stamps issued by any and all stamp issuing entities, including exotic sounding places such as Upper Yafa, Staffa, and the Dahlak Islands. You can even collect non-postage stamps (often called "labels" or "seals") with turtles on them, issued by such diverse organizations as The National Wildlife Federation,



Green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*)
on a six-cent stamp of Dominica, issued 6 September 1970.

The British Diabetic Association, The Danish Red Cross, the Korean and Rhodesian tuberculosis organizations, and the California Department of Fish and Game.

The oldest turtle stamps of which I am aware were issued in 1932. On December 5th of that year the Cayman Islands issued a set of 12 stamps, each of which has a small green turtle and a small hawksbill turtle near the bottom border. Two years later, on July 2, 1934, Ascension Island issued four stamps showing a green sea turtle superimposed on an outline map of the island. Most turtle stamps are much more recent in origin than these, however. The vast majority have been issued since 1960 and the rate of issue seems to be increasing steadily since the 1970s.

So, if you want to expand the horizons of your turtle activities, you might want to consider starting a turtle stamp collection. Although a few turtle stamps cost in excess of \$100, you can accumulate a very nice collection of stamps costing less than \$10 each and you can buy many of them for less than \$5 each. As you become a more advanced collector, you will want to invest in stamp catalogs, protective covers for your stamps, and other niceties, but you can get started with a very modest investment.

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Spur-thighed tortoise (*Testudo graeca*)
on a 10-quintar stamp of Albania, issued 10 August 1966.