

HOW TO KEEP YOUR BOX TURTLE HEALTHY, HAPPY AND SAFE!

How Should You House Your Box Turtle?

- As large an enclosure as possible, with high sides to prevent escape, and allow for good ventilation
- Clean soil for digging, several inches deep, so that the turtle has a choice of digging locations
- The soil should be kept moist, but not wet
- Water at all times, clean, with a depth no more than 1/3 the height of the turtle. The turtle should be able to wade into and out of its water easily and safely. It is normal for a turtle to defecate in water.
- A pot or log (more than one) to hide/burrow under; these help maintain humidity well
- Supplemental full-spectrum lighting (14 hour day, 10 hour night); outdoors as appropriate and safe
- A basking area under a radiant source
- Temperature ranges: Daytime 74-80F (23-27C) with basking area of 85-88F (29-31C); At night, temperature should drop to approximately 70F (21C)
- Monitor temperatures and humidity with a quality thermometer/hygrometer; keep a record

Other Tips For a Happy, Healthy Turtle:

- Take your turtle to a reptile veterinarian for a physical examination and an evaluation of diet and environment
- Feed high-quality foods; monitor intake
- Do not feed dog food or cat food to turtles
- Protect your pet well if housed out-of-doors from predators and adverse environmental conditions
- Prevent direct contact with heat or light sources
- Avoid sand, aquarium or pea gravel, ground corn cobs, walnut shells or artificial grasses, also cedar or other wood chips
- Avoid allowing full house freedom; turtles can "disappear" easily and become trapped
- Careful avoidance of dogs, raccoons, other predators
- Avoid temperature extremes
- Avoid exposing your turtle to pesticides
- Avoid loud noises
- Avoid having young children handle your turtle; they can learn a lot from careful observation and discussions surrounding proper turtle care instead

Most Common Disorders of Box Turtles

- Malformation of the beak and/or shell
- Shell, skin disease (including fungal, bacterial infections)
- Eye disease (including Vitamin A deficiency)
- Systemic bacterial infections
- Trauma (shell, limbs, head, body)
- Parasitism
- Respiratory disease (upper airway and/or pneumonia)
- Metabolic/organ conditions (including nutritional secondary hyperparathyroidism/metabolic bone disease)
- Abscesses (including shell, joints, skin, ears)
- Viruses
- Tumors

Many commonly seen conditions are the result of malnutrition and inadequate habitat, and are preventable.

Bringing your box turtle to your reptile veterinarian on a regular basis will help to address any existing conditions and provide for a long future with a fascinating, endearing animal.

For help in finding a reptile veterinarian in your area, contact the Association of Reptilian and Amphibian Veterinarians (www.arav.org) or contact the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners (www.ABVP.com/diplomate).

Additional Resources:

The Box Turtle Manual
by Philippe De Vosjoli and Roger Klingenberg
tortoise.org
chelonian.org
turtleconservancy.org



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Text by Marc Kramer, DVM
Updated by Melissa Kling, DVM, 2011
Updated by Julianne Vickstrom, DVM and
Anneliese Strunk, DVM, Dipl. ABVP (Avian), 2016



BOX TURTLE

There are four subspecies of the Common box turtle (*Terrepe carolina*) native to the United States. They are the eastern box turtle (*T. Carolina Carolina*), the Three-toed box turtle (*T. Carolina triunguis*), the Gulf Coast box turtle (*T. Carolina major*), and the Florida box turtle (*T. Carolina bauri*). There are also two ornate box turtles as well (*T. ornata ornata*, and *T. ornata leuteola*).

While they vary in coloration and pattern, they all have a "hinge" on the plastron, or lower shell, which allows an individual to withdraw its head and front legs completely inside, closing off the outside world. The hind legs and tail are also withdrawn.

A valuable part of the ecosystem, they are plagued by habitat destruction and capture for the pet trade.

Terrestrial animals, box turtles inhabit a variety of habitats, according to each subspecies. Such habitats include woodlands, meadows, marshes, and riparian zones.

Box turtles in captivity require knowledge, care, and willingness to accommodate their specific needs. They do not make good pets for young children.

Your reptile veterinarian or state wildlife agency can advise you on local and federal restrictions that may affect your ownership of a box turtle.

What to Expect from Your Box Turtle

Box turtles are quiet, fascinating animals, adapted to a certain ecological niche. When provided with the right conditions, they shine with personality. They also display healthy, normal behaviors such as burrowing (they need this microenvironment), bathing or wading in shallow water; eating regularly and well, (if appropriate actively hunting prey such as worms), basking, and sleeping.

Box turtles are very rarely aggressive; when threatened, they retreat into their shell. When they feel that danger has passed, they will emerge and reassess the situation. Many enjoy a good neck and under-jaw rub, turning their head this way and that for the best angle.

When picking up a turtle, be sure to support its body fully with both hands, positioning fingers below its feet so that it feels secure. The shell is living tissue, and should never be carved or have holes drilled through for tethering.

Because turtles can transmit disease organisms such as Salmonella to people, hands should be washed after handling any turtle. People with delicate immune systems should avoid handling turtles. Additionally, cleaning of the enclosure or contents should be done away from food preparation areas.



WHAT YOUR VETERINARIAN LOOKS FOR IN A HEALTHY BOX TURTLE

● Clear, open eyes (no discharge)

● Smooth area around ears (no swelling or bumps)

● Hard shell, free of pits, odor

● Closed-Mouth breathing

● Pink mouth and tongue, no mucus or debris in mouth



● Short toenails

● Weighty, solid feel

● Smooth skin free of signs of trauma

● Long nails on back feet of mature adult males



NOTE: Most, if not all, reptiles carry Salmonella bacteria in their intestinal tract and intermittently or continuously shed these bacteria in their feces, so they are unsuitable pets for very young children and those with compromised immune systems. Good hygiene must always be practiced around all reptiles, including box turtles. For more information, please see the handout, Salmonella Information for Reptile Owners at <http://arav.org/special-topics/>.



Is Your Box Turtle a Male or Female?

Males are slightly larger than females, are more colorful, and have thicker, longer tails. The vent position in females is close to the body, whereas in males is further out to accommodate reproductive organs. The plastron (bottom shell) of the female tends to be flat, while in the male is generally concave. Adults of some subspecies may be sexed by eye color: males having bright red irises, females having light brown/dull red irises.

Females that have been bred to males should be provided an appropriate area for egg laying. Some females will lay (infertile) eggs in captivity; they should also be provided an egg-laying area.

What Should You Feed Your Turtle?

Box turtles tend to be omnivores; this may vary a bit with the ornates, so please become familiar with your (properly identified) turtle's requirements.

Feeding is best done when turtles are most active; early morning and late evening. The box turtle appetite is stimulated by visual appeal (color), by smell (ripeness) and also by movement of prey, when appropriate. Salad ideas include sweet potatoes, leafy weeds (dandelions), flowers such as hibiscus, geraniums, and nasturtiums, and fruits such as cantaloupe, strawberries, and blueberries. Prey items can include earthworms, slugs, and snails, all from a pesticide-free source.

Should Your Box Turtle Hibernate?

Successful hibernation requires that a turtle be in tip-top shape, and that all essential conditions are met, which include appropriate daytime and nighttime temperatures, soil conditions and depth. If you are considering hibernation for your turtle, make an appointment with a reptile veterinarian well in advance for an examination and guidance.

Vital Statistics

Body length:

5-6.5 inches (11-15 cm)

Body weight:

200-600 g

Age of sexual maturity:

Females: 5-7 years

Males: 4-6 years

Average life span: approximately 40-50 years (captive box turtles may have shorter lifespans; reports of > 100 years are not uncommon)