

Chihuahuan Desert Wildlife Rescue, Inc.

Care of Desert Box Turtles

by Bill Howe

While CDWR deals primarily with the rescue and rehabilitation of native wildlife, we also received numerous calls on the proper care of wildlife as pets - both native and exotic animals. We do not encourage keeping any wild animal as a pet but, if they must be kept, this series of articles will help readers keep them properly.

(This article originally appeared in *The Eagle*, the official publication of the Chihuahuan Desert Wildlife Rescue in 1998.)

Hardly a week goes by that we don't receive at least one call on box turtles. These little animals were once commonly found in the El Paso area. Today most of the turtles seen in our neighborhoods are escaped or discarded pets. The species that once was common in our area is the Desert Box Turtle. It is thoroughly adapted to our arid environment. Two other species commonly available in the pet trade are the Ornate Box Turtle and the Three-toed Box Turtle. Both of these come from a much more humid environment and do not do well in our area unless their special needs can be met. Consult any good reptile field guide to make positive identification of your little friend.

Housing

Box turtles are *not* house pets. They must be kept outdoors with access to direct sunlight. If the turtles do not have sunlight they will quickly develop vitamin and mineral deficiencies that will end in illness and, probably, death.

These little guys may look slow and clumsy but, in reality, they are quite fast and acrobatic. They are good climbers and burrowers. You must have a secure yard if you really want these turtles to stick around. A rock or brick wall surrounding the yard is best but do not ignore the gate. A chain-link fence will not keep these little guys corralled as they will quickly burrow their way to freedom. If you do not have a secure yard you will have to construct a pen to confine the animals. The walls of the pen must extend at least 8 inches below soil level and 18 inches above. Situate the pen so that it has both sun and shaded areas throughout the day. Cinder blocks or untreated landscape timbers work well for this.

Dogs and box turtles do not mix. Dogs look on the turtles as wonderful, animated chew toys. Every year CDWR picks up turtles that have had severe shell and tissue damage caused by dogs. It is best to keep these two animals in separate facilities.

These guys love to soak so they must have access to water of sufficient depth to cover their shell. A kitty litter tray, sunk into the ground, makes a good choice. Place a flat rock at one end to help the turtle exit the water. Box turtles will quickly foul their bath water so it must be changed on a daily basis. This also helps prevent the pool from becoming a breeding ground for mosquitoes.

These turtles will hibernate as cooler weather moves in. If allowed the freedom of a landscaped yard they will find a secluded, sheltered area and burrow well below the surface. However, if you keep your animals in a pen it is best that you construct an underground den. Dig a trench about 8 inches deep. Line the sides of the hole with bricks, leaving a sloped entrance on one end. Cover the den with 2-inch lumber and a few inches of soil. Once the turtles have entered hibernation cover the entire area with loose leaves for added protection should our winter be severe.

Avoid using insecticides, herbicides and strong fertilizers in areas where box turtles are kept. They can and will kill your pets. If you must fertilize, do so during the winter months while the animals are hibernating and avoid spreading the material over the turtle den. Also, before mowing the lawn, make a thorough search of the area and temporarily remove any box turtles that could be in the way.



Both turtles shown are juveniles. The black background may fade to a brownish yellow with less distinct markings as the animals age.

Feeding

Box turtles are omnivores - they eat both plant and animal material. If your turtles are allowed the freedom to roam a large, well-landscaped yard, they will probably find enough of both plant and animal food in their foraging. However, it is best to supplement this with additional foods to insure that they are getting sufficient nutrition. A good staple diet is a high quality dry dog food (Purina, etc.) that has been softened with water. Most dry dog foods contain both plant and animal materials. Fruits and vegetables can be added on occasion as a treat. ***Never*** feed iceberg lettuce. Turtles love it but it has virtually no nutritional value. Such foods as romaine lettuce, spinach (in moderation), dandelions, tomatoes, thawed frozen mixed vegetables, alfalfa sprouts, tender cactus pads and fruit (sans spines) make good choices. Many box turtles are picky eaters and will turn up their nose at certain foods. If your turtle is getting most of its diet from the dog food, it should do well.

Place the food in a shallow tray or plate and remove it soon after the animals are finished feeding to avoid spoilage. Feed your animals in the same place and at about the same time everyday. As cooler weather approaches, the turtles will stop feeding. Don't worry about this. It is natural. The turtles are preparing for hibernation and must remove all food from their digestive tract before they begin their winter sleep. The amount a healthy turtle eats is quite dependent upon temperature. They eat less in cool weather and more in warmer weather.

Sex and Breeding

Male box turtles *usually* have red eyes while females are *usually* yellow. However, the opposite can occur. In females, the tail is quite small and slender while the male has a much longer, thicker tail. Hold the turtle on its back and carefully pull the tail straight out. If the anal opening does not extend beyond the edge of the turtle's shell, it is a female. If the opening is well beyond the edge of the shell, it is a male.

Box turtles breed throughout the warmer months. When the females are ready to lay eggs they will dig a burrow and leave their eggs there after carefully covering them. It is not unusual for the eggs to hatch in the fall and the baby turtles may not emerge from the ground until the following spring.

Baby box turtles have a soft-shell, are about the size of a 50 cent piece, and are quite vulnerable to predation. Some birds, particularly grackles, will kill and eat these tiny animals. Cats, too, will carry them off. It is best to give these little fellows some form of protection during their first year of life.

Disorders

Most illnesses and disorders in box turtles can be traced to two culprits - lack of direct sunlight and improper diet. Given a good diet and access to sunlight, box turtles can live many decades. It is not the purpose of this article to provide detailed information on diseases and other problems. It is best to consult your veterinarian if problems do develop.

When turtles come out of hibernation they frequently suffer from eye problems due to a lack of vitamins. This will usually clear up on its own in a few weeks as the turtle begins basking and taking in foods rich in these nutrients. However, if this problem persists for more than a few weeks after the turtle has emerged from hibernation, consult a veterinarian.

Finally

Box turtles are hardy animals provided they receive proper care. If, for some reason, you must give up your pet, *never* release it back to the wild. Call the CDWR (or other wildlife rehabilitation group) to help you place the animal. Long-term captive turtles frequently can not adapt to the wild. Captive box turtles are often carriers of infectious diseases that can devastate wild populations of turtles and tortoises. Released pet turtles and tortoises are believed to be the cause of the respiratory disease that has almost wiped out native populations of tortoises in California and Florida. The American Tortoise Rescue has taken the position that **no** box turtle that has been held in captivity for any length of time should be release to the wild. It's too risky.