

Chihuahuan Desert Wildlife Rescue, Inc.

Aquatic Turtles in Captivity

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. While the C.D.W.R. does not recommend keeping any wild animal in captivity, the organization does feel that, if wild animals MUST be kept as pets, they should be kept properly.

Next to box turtle calls, the next most common reptile rescue calls the Chihuahuan Desert Wildlife Rescue receives concerns the finding of or keeping of aquatic turtles in captivity.

A few decades back millions of baby turtles were sold in pet shops and neighborhood Five and Dimes for less than a buck each. These unfortunate little guys usually lived no more than a few weeks in captivity. Thankfully, this practice ended about 30 years ago when the sale of turtles less than 4 inches in length was outlawed under the guise of protecting the public from salmonella poisoning. Larger turtles are still found for sale in some shops and some baby turtles are smuggled in from abroad. Others are taken from the wild.

The most common species of turtle taken as a pet is the red-eared slider, also called pond sliders. They are native to the southeastern quarter of the United States and can frequently be seen by the dozen sunning themselves along lakes and rivers. Adults grow to over 12 inches in length. They are a truly aquatic species and cannot survive long without water. However, people frequently find these turtles while on vacation and bring them home, hoping to turn them into living lawn ornaments. In our desert climate of El Paso, they rarely live more than a day or so before they shrivel and die. They are *not* box turtles and they are *not* tortoises. They are aquatic turtles and must have water to survive. They do not make particularly good pets and are better left to live a life in the wild. However, if you *really* feel your yard would not be complete without a few turtles around, please do the animal the service of providing proper care.

If you are uncertain if you have a terrestrial or aquatic turtle, please consult a good field guide for reptiles. Generally, aquatic turtles do not have a hinged shell as do box turtles. They also have thin skin on the legs rather than the thick, scaly skin of the box turtle or tortoise. Aquatic turtles also have wide, webbed feet for swimming, another feature not found in terrestrial species.

Females are usually larger than males as adults. The tail of the female is thin and short, with the anal opening not extending beyond the edge of the shell. Males have longer, thicker tails and the anal opening extends well beyond the margin of the shell.

Housing

No turtle, aquatic or terrestrial, is a house pet. They cannot be kept indoors as they require access to direct sunlight. Without natural, unfiltered sunlight any turtle will quickly

develop a calcium deficiency which will manifest itself as malformed limbs and shell. Turtles without natural sunlight will usually die within a few months. An aquarium is not a suitable home except for the smallest of turtles. Even so, the turtles must have access to that all-important sun.



Two adult red-ear sliders sunning themselves on a rocky ledge above their pool.

The best place for these turtles, next to a river, pond or lake, is an outdoor pool. The material of construction for the pond is not important. However, if a pond is newly constructed of concrete it must be well seasoned to prevent the turtle occupants from receiving serious chemical burns from lime that will leach out of the new concrete. *Always* fill and empty the pond several times before introducing any animal. Test the water for pH with one of the test kits available at pet shops or swimming pool centers. Once the water has a pH of neutral, refill the pond and let the water sit at least a week. Test the water again and do not add animals until the pH remains in the range of 7 (neutral.) Large plastic pools and pool liners are commonly available today which eliminate much of the back breaking work of dealing with concrete. Install the pond according to instructions.

Make sure your pond is installed so that the rim is at ground level. Also make sure your pool is deep enough to prevent it from freezing to the bottom in winter. This is rarely a problem in El Paso where winters are relatively mild. In El Paso a depth of 8 to 12 inches is sufficient. Make sure that the rim of the pool is not too high and steep to prevent the turtles from exiting the water to sun bathe. You may need to add rocks or bricks to make a platform that will ease the turtle's exit from the water.

A filter and pump is a necessity to prevent the water from stagnating. If the pump and filter is of the submersible variety, make sure it is well anchored to the bottom of the pool with rocks or bricks to prevent the turtles from relocating it.

The pool should be fenced to prevent your turtles from wandering off in search of better quarters. If the turtle cannot find its way back to the pool, it will quickly die. A good fence will also keep dogs out.

If you live in a mild climate (such as found in El Paso) the turtles will remain active year round and will not hibernate. Even in the dead of winter they will be somewhat active and often come out of the water to sun. On the coldest days and nights, they will head for the bottom of the pool and remain there until conditions improve. Turtles breathe air but can also absorb oxygen through their skin. When water temperatures are low, the turtle's metabolism slows so much that it can survive for weeks totally submerged in water. It is not unusual to see them swimming below an inch or two of surface ice. During the winter the pump becomes critical if the pool freezes over for more than a day or two. The cascading water will usually leave a small portion of the surface ice-free so that the water can absorb oxygen. Remember, keeping turtles outside during the winter applies *only* to native species that are acclimated to colder temperatures. Tropical species will probably not survive winter outdoors in the United States and many native species will not survive winter in areas that have an extremely cold climate.

If you plan to introduce turtles to a fish pond or fish to a turtle pond, you are headed to disastrous results. Fish are a part of a turtle's natural diet and they cannot coexist for long in a small pond where the fish has no where to hide. Likewise, turtles also eat plants so forget about a lovely waterscape. Turtles love to eat certain plants and also love to dig in the sand at the bottom of a pool so will quickly uproot many plants.

Feeding

Most aquatic turtles are omnivores – they eat both plants and animals. In captivity they also require a varied diet. Good choices for feeding are the fish pellets available in many feed stores for feeding game fish or koi. A low-fat, dry dog food is also readily taken by most turtles. Soak the dog food to partially soften it. Make sure it does not have a high oil or fat content or the water will become fouled very quickly. Turtles also enjoy leafy lettuce, such as romaine. Do not feed iceberg lettuce as it has little nutritional value. Raw fish is also accepted but avoid oily varieties as they will also foul the water. Earth worms are another good choice as are small goldfish or minnows.

Feed the turtles once per day and remove whatever is uneaten after 10 or 15 minutes. Lettuce can remain as it generally does not cause fouling problems. In cooler months the turtles will not eat so don't bother to even offer them food. Once the weather warms the turtles will become more active and will usually begin feeding.

If the pond water does become dirty, pump the water out and replace it. It is wise to replace at least a third of the water on a weekly basis – especially in areas with high

evaporation rates. The water, as it evaporates, will leave behind minerals that will concentrate over time and, possibly, cause a hazard to your animals.

Finally

Do *not* mix turtles of disproportionate sizes in the same pool. Baby turtles will quickly be killed and eaten by adults. Provide baby turtles with their own quarters until they are of a size that will allow them to defend themselves.

Given proper living conditions and diet, aquatic turtles can live for many decades. However, if you find you cannot keep your turtles any longer in captivity, do *not* release them back to the wild. After a long period in captivity turtles may lose their ability to live and forage in the wild. They also tend to lose their fear of humans and become easy targets for those who would do them harm. Captive turtles may carry diseases and parasites to wild populations that could be devastating to native populations. Also, the species you have may not be native to the release area and could pose a problem with introducing a non-native species.