

Box Turtle Care Sheet

Prepared by the Rio Grande Turtle and Tortoise Club

Box turtles can be hardy and fairly easy pets to care for, but you must take proper care of them. Even if you intend for your turtle to be on his own in your back yard, there still are some things you need to do for him. Turtles aren't as outgoing and loving as dogs, but they do learn who brings dinner and they'll eat from your hand if you're patient. They can live a long time; some turtles have lived 100 years in captivity. Remember, there is no such thing as a "free turtle": at some time, you will spend some money on this turtle if you're going to take proper care of it.

How Do I Tell If It's a Box Turtle?

Box Turtles have two "hinges" (frequently, only one hinge is noticeable) on their plastron (lower shell). These hinges allow them to pull their head, legs and tail inside the shell and close their shell completely. A very fat box turtle may not be able to do this and a very tame one may not be scared enough to do so. A turtle's shell is its backbone and ribcage. A turtle cannot come all the way out of its shell (no matter what you see in cartoons!) There are several species of box turtles, one of which (*Terrapene ornata luteola*) is native to parts of New Mexico, roughly south and east from Albuquerque. Different species of box turtles have different care requirements, particularly regarding their environment, depending on where they are native to. Most of the box turtles found in Albuquerque have escaped from someone's yard and are non-native turtles. As Albuquerque grows, it will be expanding into areas where native turtles could be living. If you find a native turtle, perhaps in the bosque or on the mesa, leave it there! Do not collect wild turtles!

What Do I Feed It?

A new turtle may need to adjust to its new home before it will eat. Turtles like to eat early in the day and sometimes again in the late afternoon. Young turtles eat mostly insects, worms and other protein sources. As they get older, they switch to eating more fruits and vegetables. Different turtles have different likes and dislikes! It is important to feed your turtle a balanced diet by offering a variety of foods. Try live food: snails, slugs, earth worms, roly-poly bugs, meal worms, crickets and beetles. Fruits: try most fruits; melon and berries seem to be favorites. Vegetables: most box turtles are more interested in fruits than vegetables, but try tomato, grated carrot, Romaine, green leaf lettuce, collard greens, turnip greens, squash and yams. Chopping and mixing everything helps keep the picky eater from being as picky. Protein: moistened dry dog or cat food (dry is preferable to canned as it has less ash and does not spoil as quickly), moistened trout chow. Any dog or cat food you use should be the "lite" or "low fat" variety, as regular food is often too high in fat for box turtles. Adding vitamins (Rep-cal or MinerAll) and calcium carbonate to their food several times a week will help keep your turtle healthy. Use calcium with D-3 if your turtle is kept indoors. Ripe strawberries are frequently a favorite food, useful for persuading a box turtle to start eating.

Feed adult turtles several times a week and feed hatchlings daily.

Never feed your turtle any plant or animal products, snails or slugs that came from an area that has been sprayed with any of the following: insecticides, fungicides, weed killers, snail poison, or rodent poison. Also, thoroughly wash any plant products that were grown with "safe" pesticides or chemical fertilizers.

Where Should I Keep My Turtle?

Turtles are good at escaping! If you're keeping them outdoors, be sure they cannot dig under the fence anywhere, or climb over the fence. Determined turtles can climb chain link fences or up plant covered walls. Be sure they cannot get to the gate or be sure the gate is always kept shut. Remember that a box turtle, even a captive raised one, is a wild creature and wants space to roam. Keeping it in a small container indoors is not fair to it.

You will need to provide a water dish, big enough that the turtles can sit and soak, drink, eliminate and easily climb in and out. Clean and refill the water dish regularly. This may be daily or, in the summer, even more often.

Most box turtles are shy; they like to hide in the dirt, under the leaves, under low plants, in the tall grass, maybe in the hide box you prepared for them. A hide box can be simply two bricks with a board across them. It should not be much higher than the turtle. Turtles don't like high ceilings! Small turtles are extremely shy. They need safe places to hide from other turtles, birds, dogs, people. When outdoors, your turtle needs an area where it can sun itself and warm up. It also needs a shady area so that it can cool off.

If there are dogs that will be around your turtles, make sure the dog will not hurt them. Many dogs do not hurt turtles, but some do want to chew on them, injuring or killing them! In any case, a dog and a turtle should never be left together unattended.

Turtles enjoy sprinklers. You may see your turtles out in the "rain" and getting a drink. Be careful that your sprinkler heads won't suddenly shut off and hurt them.

If you keep your turtles indoors temporarily, be sure their quarters are escape-proof. Provide heat with a ceramic or incandescent heat lamp in order to reach a daytime temperature of 80 to 85 degrees. There should be a cooler area in the pen as well as the warm area. Night time temperatures can be as low as 65 to 70 degrees. An indoor turtle will also need a light to replace the sun's rays. You can get this at a pet store - ask for a UVB full-spectrum light (These are florescent tubes.) Indoor turtles need a water dish, a place to hide and are dependent on you for food.

Short-term indoor quarters can be as simple as a plastic tub or sweater box with a clamp-on heat lamp, water dish, hide box and a Reptisun lamp or equivalent. For a short time, newspaper is O.K. for the substrate. For a longer stay, dirt (not sand) or a 2/3 soil to 1/3 sand mixture is good. Little ones need moist moss or ground coconut husk (Bed-A-Beast). The advantage of a plastic tub is that it is easy to scrub clean and provides greater air circulation.

How Do I Tell if It's Sick and What Do I Do Then?

The best way to tell if your turtle is sick is by knowing how it usually behaves and looks. A drippy or bubbly nose, swollen eyes, a large lump on its head or neck (often on his "eardrum") are all signs of illness. Sometimes your turtle just isn't acting right and you suspect he's sick. A veterinarian who is familiar with treating turtles should treat a sick or injured turtle. Open wounds should be treated and the turtle kept indoors until it heals. Open wounds can become infested with maggots, which can be fatal if left untreated.

The Rio Grande Turtle and Tortoise Club (see contact information below) has a list of veterinarians in the metropolitan area who treat turtles and tortoises. RGTTTC does not recommend any particular veterinarian.

Will It Hibernate?

As the weather gets colder in the fall, most box turtles will want to hibernate. If they are healthy, have not been sick during the summer or fall and are not underweight, they should be able to safely hibernate. In late summer and early fall, turtles eat a lot in preparation for hibernation. As the weather cools, they eat less and start to spend more time buried in their favorite place. Good hibernation places include leaf or compost piles and gardens where the soil is loose enough to dig down in. There should be good drainage so your turtles will not be in a puddle of water when it rains.

If your turtles live indoors, or you don't want them to hibernate, keep them warm and indoors. The above discussion of the indoor turtle applies. You need to keep non-hibernating turtles warm enough to keep them awake and eating, although they may not eat as much or as often as in the summer. Turtles who are kept awake but too cold to eat are in danger of starving.

Is it Male or Female?

Young turtles are hard to sex. In adult box turtles, males are more likely to have red eyes and brighter coloration. Some adult males have a concave plastron (lower shell). A male's tail is often longer and broader, with the vent closer to the tip of his tail. Juvenile males often practice mating with whomever they can catch, male or female. Sometimes adult males will try to mount another male to establish dominance. If your turtle lays eggs, she's a female.

A word of Caution

Always wash your hands thoroughly after handling turtles or anything that has been in contact with turtles. Turtles can carry Salmonella.

A Parting Word

Enjoy having your box turtle come and grace your life. These are critters that pre-date the dinosaurs and they can be fascinating to watch.