

# BOX TURTLE CARE SHEET

Based on my own experience and a similar care sheet produced by the Rio Grande Turtle and Tortoise Club, Albuquerque, New Mexico

## Introduction

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 its own in your backyard, there are still some things you need to do for it. 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 that 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?

All 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 more or less completely. There are several species of box turtles, each with different coloration and markings, but all of them have hinged plastrons. In New Mexico, there are two native species of box turtle: Ornate Box Turtles (*Terrapene ornata*); and the Desert Box Turtle (*Terrapene ornata luteola*). Due to the pet trade, however, most of the box turtles found in Albuquerque are non-native Eastern Box Turtles and Three-Toed Box Turtles which have escaped from people's yards or have been released into the wild by well-meaning but uninformed people. If you do find a native turtle, perhaps in the bosque or on the mesa, leave it there! Do not collect wild turtles!

## Is My Box Turtle A Male or A Female?

Young box turtles are virtually impossible to sex, and even the adults can be difficult. There are no hard and fast, iron-clad rules about distinguishing males from females. Even mating behavior isn't proof: Juvenile males often practice mating with whomever they can catch, male or female, and sometimes adult males will mount other males in a show of dominance. There are some traits you can use to "guesstimate" whether your turtle is a male or female, but keep in mind that these traits are not 100 percent reliable, and there are always turtles who break these rules:

Adult box turtle males are more likely to have red eyes and brighter skin and shell colorations, than the adult females, who are more likely to have drab coloring that provides better camouflage for them. Some adult males also have a concave plastron. A male box turtle's tail is often longer and broader, with its vent further away from the body, than females.

## How Often and What Sorts of Food Do I Feed It?

Reptiles in general have slower metabolisms than dogs or cats, and don't need to be fed every day like a dog or cat. Adult turtles should be fed several times a week. Baby (hatchling) turtles should be fed everyday. The best time to try feeding your turtle is early in the day, or in the late afternoon/early evening. A new turtle may need time to adjust to its new home before it will eat. Many times, offering strawberries or live, wiggly foods such as mealworms or earthworms will induce the turtle to start eating. Different turtles very definitely have different likes and dislikes. Hatchlings tend to eat mostly insects, worms, and other sources of protein. Older turtles will generally eat more fruits and vegetables than younger ones. Box turtles have good eyesight and a good sense of smell, and use both senses to locate food. Therefore, try offering your turtle brightly colored fruits and vegetables. Fruit that you would consider definitely overripe (especially cantaloupe and banana) is often considered "just perfect" by box turtles.

It is very important to feed your turtle a balanced diet by offering it a variety of foods. However, box turtles are a lot like human children -- they only want to eat the stuff they like (fruit and protein), not the stuff that's good for them (the vegetables). Therefore, use a bit of trickery: Feed your box turtle small

but equal portions of fruit, vegetables, and protein at each feeding. Make sure you chop or grate the vegetables as finely as possible, then mix them with the fruit and protein source you are using. The finely chopped veggies will coat everything equally, and therefore even the box turtle that only eats mealworms, or only eats strawberries has to get at least a bit of veggies along with his favorite.

**Protein sources include:** Live foods such as snails, slug, earthworms, pillbugs (roly-poly bugs), mealworms, waxworms, and beetles; or lowfat dry dog food pellets and/or dry, pelleted fish food (make sure you soak these in a bit of water to soften the pellets).

**Fruits include:** banana, apple, melon (particularly cantaloupe), berries (particularly strawberries), kiwi, peaches, apricots, nectarines, grapes, plums, etc. Box turtles will at least investigate almost any fruit except citrus fruits.

**Vegetables include:** Corn, beans, peas, tomato, carrot, squash, and particularly greens (collard, mustard, dandelion, and turnip). Again, make sure to grate/chop these as finely as possible (especially the greens) so that they coat the fruits and protein.

Add a multi-vitamin supplement made for reptiles or birds to the food at least once a week. Turtles require a lot of calcium to help keep their bones and shells in good shape, so make sure you add powdered calcium lactate, powdered calcium carbonate, or other calcium supplement to your turtle's food three or four times per week. By "adding," I mean that you dust the surface of the food with the supplement, then mix it in well.

### Where Should I Keep My Box Turtle?

**Outside Accommodations:** Box turtles can be little escape artists. They are good climbers -- I've seen box turtles climb over chain link fences and ivy-covered walls -- so make sure you have solid walls or fences that they cannot find "handholds" on. Box turtles are also excellent burrowers, so make sure your walls or fences extend a few inches underneath ground level. You can also pile up dirt against the base of your fence or wall to discourage them from digging out. Make sure that your gates close securely and don't have gaps around or underneath them.

Make sure that your turtle has some sunny areas and some shady areas in its yard, pen, or enclosure. Turtles rely on both sun and shade to regulate their body temperature, and will wander between sunny areas and shade to keep comfortable.

You will need to provide a water dish that is big enough for the turtle to sit in. They will often climb into their water dish, drink and soak for a while, then defacate (poop!) in the dish. Therefore, you will have to empty, scrub out, and then refill the dish at least once daily, and probably more frequently than that during the summer when your turtle is very active.

Most box turtles are shy and will spend the majority of the day hiding in a shallow hole in the dirt, underneath leaves or low-lying plants, in tall grass, or even in hide boxes if you set a few up for them. A hide box can simply be two bricks with a board across them. It should not be much higher than the turtle -- turtles don't like high ceilings! Smaller turtles are extremely shy because they can be easily preyed upon by larger turtles, birds, cats, dogs, etc. They particularly need safe areas to hide.

If you have dogs that will be in the same yard or area as your turtle, make sure that you do not leave the dog(s) unattended around the turtles. Many dogs who would not otherwise harm any living creature have killed turtles by treating them as chew toys.

**Indoor Accommodations:** Even if you keep your turtle indoors, you will still need to make sure that its enclosure is escape-proof. Provide a heat source such as a heat lamp or an under-tank heater, and try to maintain a daytime temperature of 80 to 85 degrees Fahrenheit. There should be a cooler, shaded area in the enclosure as well, so that the turtle can move between warm and cool places to maintain a comfortable body temperature. The heat source should be on a timer so that it turns off at night and allows the enclosure to reach nighttime temperatures of 65 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit. An indoor turtle will also

require a special light to provide it with enough ultraviolet light to replace the sun's rays. Pet supply stores sell special bulbs and fixtures that provide UV light. Indoor enclosures also require a large water dish and a hide box.

You can use a variety of different things to line the bottom of your indoor enclosure, and keep in mind that no matter what you use, it will need to be changed regularly to keep your turtle healthy. Newspaper, hay or straw, dried leaves, moss, or topsoil are cheap and compostable, but need to be changed frequently. (Make sure that none of these have been exposed to chemicals like pesticides or fertilizers.)

Pet stores sell bags of various materials to be used in cages as substrates, but many of these should be avoided because they can cause serious health problems in reptiles. (In particular, **DO NOT** use cedar or pine shavings, orchid bark, ground corn cobs, or ground walnut shells!) Acceptable materials are pressed alfalfa pellets or Lizard Litter™. Pet stores also sell rectangles of indoor/outdoor carpeting for use in reptile enclosures, but these must be scrubbed and disinfected periodically.

Short-term indoor quarters can be as simple as a plastic Rubbermaid™ bin, tub, or sweater box, with a clamp-on heat lamp, water dish, hide box, and a UV light. Longer-term indoor quarters may require more specialized cages or large aquariums.

### **How Do I Tell If My Turtle is 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. Sometimes just the fact that your turtle "just isn't acting right" is the only indication you'll get from your turtle. But if you notice a drippy or bubbly nose, swollen eyes, or a large lump on the side of its head or neck (often on its "eardrum") -- these are all definite signs of illness. A sick or injured turtle should be taken to a competent reptile veterinarian. Any open wounds should be treated and the turtle kept indoors until the wound has healed. Open wounds on turtles left outdoors can become infected and/or infested with maggots, both of which can be fatal.

### **Will My Turtle Hibernate?**

Throughout the warmer days in late summer, you may notice your turtle eating a lot more food. But then as the weather gets colder in the fall, your turtle will start to slow down, eat less food, and spend more time in its hide box or dug into the dirt. These signs mean that your turtle is getting ready to hibernate for the winter. If your turtle is healthy, has not been sick during the summer or fall, and is not underweight, it should be allowed to go ahead and hibernate. Good hibernation places include leaf or compost piles, or gardens where the soil is loose enough and deep enough to dig down into. Some people provide their yard turtles with hibernation pits -- these are pits about 18 inches in diameter and about 18 inches deep. These pits are filled with a mixture of dirt, aged compost, peat moss, leaves, grass clippings, and hay or straw. The mixture is loose enough to allow the turtles to dig down to escape the cold. Make sure that wherever your turtles decide to hibernate has good drainage so that water from rain or snowmelt will not collect and possibly drown your turtle as it hibernates.

If your turtle has been sick, or is not going to hibernate for any reason, then it will need to be brought indoors and kept warm enough that it stays awake and eating throughout the winter. Turtles who are kept warm enough to stay semi-awake, but not warm enough to trigger eating behavior can actually starve to death before springtime arrives. See the discussion above about indoor inclosures and equipment requirements.

### **A Word of Caution**

Virtually all reptiles carry salmonella, just as part of their normal complement of bacteria. Therefore, always make sure that you wash your hands -- with soap -- after you handle a reptile, or anything that has been in contact with a reptile.

## Conclusion

Box turtles (in fact, all turtles) date back to the days of the dinosaurs. If you care for your box turtle correctly, it will enjoy a long life and provide you with hours of fascination as it goes about the routine of its daily life. Always remember that a box turtle, even a captive raised one, is a wild creature and wants space to roam, natural sunlight to bask in, and good food to eat. Keeping a turtle in a small container indoors without access to sunlight and proper diet is potentially lethal as well as horribly unfair to the turtle.

Finally, make sure you check the laws in your state before you adopt a box turtle. In states where the box turtle is considered an endangered or threatened species, it is illegal to keep box turtles as pets, and the local department of fish and game or wildlife can literally show up on your doorstep and legally remove the turtle from your home and care. **Be a responsible reptile hobbyist -- do your research first!**