

Helpful Hints



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EMERGENCY INCUBATION HINTS

The first rule to remember is: TREAT EVERY EGG AS IF IT IS FERTILE. Turtles and tortoises can retain fertile eggs up to 5 years after losing its mate. If you bought a turtle from a pet shop, chances are that she could be carrying fertile eggs. Second rule is: BE PREPARED!

Gather your supplies and get them ready or at least put them all in one place. Usually box and water turtle eggs can be left in the ground where they were laid. Keep the soil moist at all times and then protect the nest from birds, etc. near hatching time, three or four months later. Eggs laid on top of the ground tend not to be fertile, but bury them anyway just to be safe. Sometimes we get a lazy mother turtle. Bury the eggs about 4 or 5 inches deep.

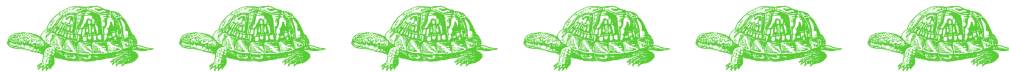
Artificial hatching methods can be simple and effective. Keep box and water turtle eggs warm and moist (not wet). Use damp sphagnum or green moss which it is sometimes called. Or you

can use moist and crumbled paper towels to place the eggs on. You can use an aquarium, a flower pot, a plastic bag, a plastic shoe box or even a large can. Do NOT turn the eggs at any time and after placing them in your incubator, do not disturb them for any reason.

Tortoise eggs generally do better incubating artificially. Dig the eggs up, being careful not to turn them and keep them warm and dry, however, a cup of water in the incubator (either professional or home-made) will add some needed humidity. I always add extra wet sponges "near" the eggs when it comes close to hatching time.

Some tortoise eggs hatch on the 56th day (Hermann's). Others take 5 months or more. Box and water turtles hatch from 2 to 4 months later, so don't be impatient! Do NOT EVER break open an egg. Eggs kept between 75 and 90 degrees F., if fertile, will usually hatch in the normal amount of time for that species.

The above are emergency measures that work. I'm the first to admit that I am never prepared for those first eggs of the season! GOOD LUCK TO ALL.



THOSE DISGUSTING MAGGOTS

Sooner or later the problem of maggots will show its ugly face if you are the owner of turtles or tortoises. If not gotten rid of, these

nasty pests will eat their way through the insides of the turtle and kill it.

Where do maggots come from? They are fly larvae. If an animal has a wound and is left outdoors, the flies will immediately descent on the victim and lay eggs in the wound. The maggots grow large inside and they feed off of the turtle's flesh. Signs of maggot infestations are holes in the turtle's skin or shell out of which is oozing a black fluid. When you see this, a queasy feeling will come over you.

Maggots in the flesh can usually be pulled out with long-nosed tweezers. Flush the wound with peroxide or mild salty water. It may take several days or even weeks to remove all of the maggots. When they are all gone, the hole will close up and when completely healed, the turtle can be allowed to play outdoors again.

An oozing hole in the shell presents a problem. How can you get the maggots out? You can't see them. You can only see their residue. Nothing will make them come out so you can grab them and dispose of them. It is a turtle fancier's nightmare.

A member of my club found a simple solution to maggots under the shell. All you need is a small piece of gauze, a piece of duct tape and a sharp needle. Place the gauze over the hole in the shell and apply the duct tape over it so that it sticks to the turtle's shell without leaving any air space. Maggots need air!! After awhile, (have the needle ready), quickly pull off the tape - and there is the maggot - poking its head out of the hole trying to breathe.

Pierce the maggot with the needle and pull it out. Then discard the maggot where it will not be able to go back into the turtle's shell. Repeat the procedure several times a day until the maggots are gone. Cleanse the area with a Betadine solution or mild salty water and when the hole is healed, the turtle may go outdoors. A piece of tape could be placed over the hole but check it periodically while healing.



RECOGNIZING SIGNS OF ILLNESS IN REPTILES

Reptiles, unlike many other animals, often show signs of illness in very subtle ways. Many illnesses, particularly those related to nutrition or bacterial and parasite infections, occur insidiously. It is not unusual for an illness to be present for weeks, months, or even years before a reptile demonstrates obvious signs of a problem. Therefore, the earlier that abnormalities are recognized, the greater the chance of resolving the problem in an individual and preventing the problem in a collection of animals.

Below are some generalities that can act as guidelines for detection of illness in reptiles.

Lack of appetite

1. Decreased activity not related to hibernation (reptiles do not 'hibernate' at room temperature)
2. Nose, eye, mouth discharges: coughing and sneezing

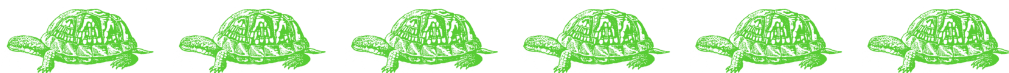
3. Vomiting or diarrhea; foul smelling feces
4. Red spots on scutes
5. Inability to submerge
6. Any swelling or lump, including generalized swelling of body or limbs
7. Cloudy or swollen eyes or lids
8. Absence of defecation greater than two weeks
9. Flaking skin or blisters
10. Weight loss, even if appetite appears healthy
11. Sitting out all night (Team ed.)

Many reptile illnesses can be prevented by good husbandry techniques. Seek out as much information on your particular species as you can before a problem begins.

If you do have problems or questions, ask for help from reptile veterinarians, herpetological organizations, and quality reptile suppliers.

These guidelines were provided, in part, by Camelwest Animal Hospital, Glendale, Arizona

Reprinted from The Carapace, newsletter of the National Turtle and Tortoise Society, May/June 1996



MORE ON STRESS

Stress has a negative effect on turtles and tortoises. You might first think that constant handling is stressful and indeed it is and should be avoided. A turtle doesn't urinate the moment it is lifted up because it is happy! If a giant being lifted YOU into the air, probably the same thing would happen.

The other stress I would like to discuss is more subtle. Your turtle is outdoors in his pen, or loose in the yard. He has a shelter, perhaps two, several rocks, a dish of water, a bush here and there. Everything is perfect from his point of view. One day you decide to move the "furniture". (Maybe the doghouse will look better if it is on the other side of the enclosure?) (This rock doesn't belong here) (Let's get rid of this old piece of wood, etc.) Soon after the changes are made, you may notice changes in your turtle's personality. He may begin to pace back and forth. Is he digging holes trying to escape? Is he sleeping in strange places where he has not slept before? Has he lost his appetite? Reason? Obvious. **STRESS!** They simply do not tolerate changes in their habitat once it is established. They become accustomed to objects and can orient themselves in their own secret way to rocks, plants and pieces of wood. Never move their water dishes! This causes extreme duress.

On the other hand, there seems to be no problem with adding objects to their environment. They seem to truly enjoy a new log to hide under or climb over and a new plant to hide under with its fresh dirt to snuggle into. So by all means, add to your heart's content, but once it is there, leave it alone. Your turtle or tortoise

will remain content and he will continue his daily activities undisturbed.



TURTLE SUICIDE: Was it an accident or was it intentional?

Almost every one of us has lost a turtle or tortoise now and then. Many people carry a terrible burden of guilt over this. I'm writing this article in order to show that perhaps the death was not entirely your fault. These animals were never meant to be in captivity. We were never meant to witness their demise. Many incidents have happened in my yard which I have felt very guilty about, but when giving it a lot of thought, these may not have been accidents at all.

Suppose you come home and find your turtle or tortoise dead. Was it an accident or was it a suicide or was it your fault? Here's what I have observed over the years.

DESERT TORTOISES - OTHER EXOTIC TORTOISES

Dead at the bottom of a swimming pool - suicide

Upside down - suicide

Tangled in weeds - accident

Just dead in the sun - suicide

BOX TURTLES

Upside down in the sun - suicide

Cooked in sun in an upright position - suicide

Drowned - accident

Drowned and cannibalized - suicide

Tangled in weeds - accident

WATER TURTLES

Out of water all night - suicide (wanting to be eaten by a predator)

Cooked in sun - suicide

Drowned - suicide (was probably sick)

Cannibalized in water - suicide (was weak and sick)

With turtles and tortoises, it is the survival of the fittest that rules. Accidents DO happen and they happen to people too. Sometimes there is no shade available so the turtle or tortoise will broil in the sun, therefore, have shade available in many places, even have chairs placed on the lawn every couple of feet so the tortoises can find quick cover from the hot sun. Keep your bermuda grass clipped short because tortoises and turtles become easily tangled in it and do not know how to back up out of the mess. Sometimes your neighbors have sprayed poison along the fence line or into their trees and the resulting fumes can kill your turtles and tortoises very quickly. Tortoises can be flipped over by other tortoises or even the family dog. Remember not to have any poisonous plants in your yard.

ALL HATCHLINGS have a naturally high death rate. Once they pass three years of age, their survival rates get much better.

Here's what to look for in hatchlings which are not good signs:

Desert tortoises - become soft

Box turtles - dry up and also become soft

Water turtles - don't grow and become soft

Exotic tortoises - do not grow, eyes closed, become soft

The above means that they are not thriving and it may not be due to anything that you are or are not doing. It is genetics. Don't beat yourself up over it. Mother Nature is smarter than you are.

I hope the above article is helpful. If you see your tortoise at the bottom of the family swimming pool, it quite possibly was a suicide, especially if the tortoise was a long term pet. Tortoises will walk around and around a table, never falling off. They have good depth perception, unlike a box or water turtle who will dive off of a 10 foot building in the blink of an eye. A tortoise will try to prevent himself from going upside down because he knows that this is not a good position to be in. It is also a good way to die, so they have been known to purposely climb in order to turn over and die when they feel their time has come. They live in a secret world of their own. We, their keepers, have to be constantly alert to stay one step ahead of them. Sometimes we are not good enough. And I am truly sorry when this happens.

