

Handling and Transport of Turtles



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October 2012
(updated November 2021)

HANDLING

General Handling Tips

Special considerations for Box, Mud, Musk, Snapper and Softshell turtles are described elsewhere in this document.

- DO pick up a turtle using both of your hands, one on each side of the shell, between the front and back legs. A one-handed pick-up is risky. A turtle may free itself with a bit of wiggling, kicking, clawing and biting. Also, some are surprisingly slippery.
- DO hold the animal out in front of your body far enough so that the hindlegs cannot kick against you, using you as a springboard to push out of your grasp.
- DO hold larger turtles facing away from you to lessen the chance that you will be bitten, and never hold a turtle within striking distance of your face.
- DO remember that a turtle's shell is living tissue and is sensitive to touch. Avoid tapping on it, and never strike the shell against another surface.
- DON'T pick up a turtle by the tail. The tail is not designed to bear the weight of the body. This type of handling can dislocate (separate) the bones in the tail, inflicting pain and possibly permanent injury or death.
- DON'T gesture with a turtle in your hand. It is stressful being waved through the air! Also, avoid quick hand movements; move slowly and smoothly.



Wood Turtle (*Glyptemys insculpta*)

- DON'T turn a turtle over quickly. A quick flip or twist can pull painfully on organs and connective tissue. Take two full seconds to turn an animal over, counting "one-thousand one, one-thousand two."
- DON'T hold a turtle with a soft shell by the back edge of the shell. It can cause permanent damage. Note: It generally requires less pressure to get a good grip using a two-handed hold than using a one-handed hold. Support the underside well.
- DON'T complete the circle! When turning a turtle over, don't put the animal through a full 360 degrees of revolution (a complete circle), just over and back the same way. This avoids the possibility of twisting the intestines.
- DON'T keep a turtle on its back any longer than necessary. Such a position is unnatural and stressful.

Box Turtles



The most secure ways to hold a box turtle – (a) Grasp the shell with both hands between the front and hindlegs. (The wine cork was used as a safe way to prevent the turtle from completely closing its shell during a physical examination by a rehabber. (b) Grasp the shell with one hand along the side of the turtle between the front and hindlegs, and one hand at the back end of the shell between the hindlegs.

- Avoid putting your fingers near the beak of a box turtle or putting your fingers between the carapace and plastron where fingers may be painfully pinched if the turtle shuts its shell.
- Be aware that adult box turtles have strong limbs and can push hard to try to gain release. Also, males have sharp claws on the hindfeet that can cut into your skin.
- Box turtles less than about 4 years of age have an incompletely ossified shell. Be gentle in holding and pressing down on the shell.



Box turtles are small enough to be held from the side or back end with one hand but be aware that they can kick and push *strongly* with their feet making this a more risky hold for novices.

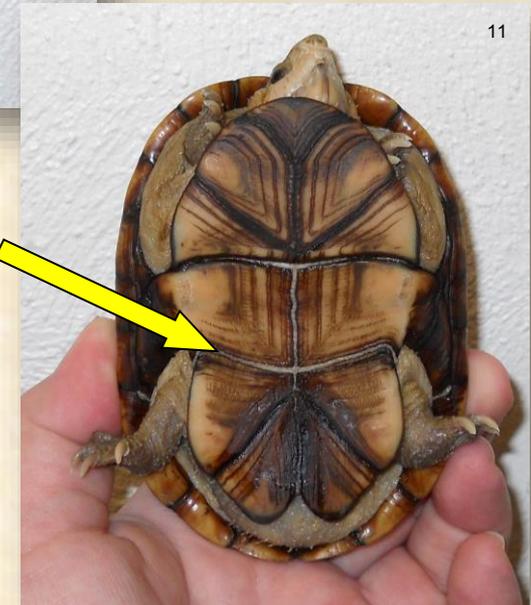
Mud and Musk Turtles



Common Musk Turtle
(*Sternotherus odoratus*)



Eastern Mud Turtle
(*Kinosternon subrubrum subrubrum*)



Posterior hinge

- Mud and musk turtles are small, but they are easily provoked. With a long neck and powerful beak they can deliver a painful bit.
- Mud turtle: Grasp the turtle's shell caudal to the posterior hinge.
- Musk Turtle: Grasp the turtle's shell just cranial to the hindlimbs.

Snapping Turtles



Common Snapping Turtle
(*Chelydra serpentina serpentina*)



Alligator Snapping Turtle (*Macrochelys temminckii*)



- Both Common and Alligator Snappers can feel threatened out of water if closely approached, and can behave aggressively. They have sharp claws set on strong legs as well as a powerful, sharp beak.
- Common Snappers: The neck is long. The turtle can easily and quickly reach back to the middle of the carapace both over the top of its shell and along the sides. However, it cannot curve its neck down to reach the plastron.
- Alligator Snappers: The neck is short and cannot extend out far from the body.

Snapping Turtles

- Inexperienced individuals should not pick up snappers much larger than 6 inches in shell length with their bare hands. Even small ones have aggressive personalities (much like mud and musk turtles) and can deliver painful bites.
- To retrieve an injured snapper, toss a towel over its head to calm it and gently scoop the animal up using a snow shovel or board with a broom or sturdy stick, and maneuver it into a box for transport.
- Healthy snappers found alongside the road should be coaxed farther back, away from the road, using the same equipment mentioned above.
 - Keep your distance; snappers can strike quickly and feel easily threatened when approached out of water.



Common Snapping Turtle
(*Chelydra s. serpentina*)



Snapping Turtles



Common Snapping Turtle
(*Chelydra s. serpentina*)



This information is provided only so you can see proper and improper ways to hold snapping turtles. Snapping turtles should only be handled by experienced individuals.

Common Snapping Turtle

- Small snapper: Hold the turtle firmly by the carapace with hands positioned over the hindlegs, not the backend of the shell. Keep the turtle's head facing away from you and out from your body.
- Small or Large Snapper: Place one hand underneath the plastron to support the turtle while using the other hand to firmly grip the carapace at the edge just over a hind leg. Keep the turtle's head facing away from you and out from your body.

Snapping Turtles



Alligator Snapping Turtle (*Macrochelys temminckii*)

Alligator Snapping Turtle

- Firmly grasp the carapace just behind the head and over the tail or over one hindleg. Hold the turtle facing away from you and out from your body

Snapping Turtles



- Snappers should never be picked up or dragged by their tail; the tail cannot support the weight of the animal despite the tail's robust appearance.
- Picking up a snapper by the tail can dislocate vertebrae and cause serious injury.
 - It can cause temporary or permanent nerve damage that can negatively impact a turtle's ability to swim, walk, and ultimately survive in the wild.
 - It can lead to an ascending necrosis in the spine that can slowly kill the turtle.

Softshell Turtles



Spiny Softshell Turtle (*Apalone spinifera spinifera*)

- Softshell Turtles are more aggressive than Snapping Turtles. The Softshell has a long, flexible neck that can reach more than halfway back over its shell and along the sides. It bites with comparatively more jaw power than a snapper of the same weight.
- The legs are strong and the claws are sharp.
- Softshells should never be picked up by the rim of their shell; it is fragile and easily damaged; also, it is soft and very slippery, offering no secure grip. (See p.12)



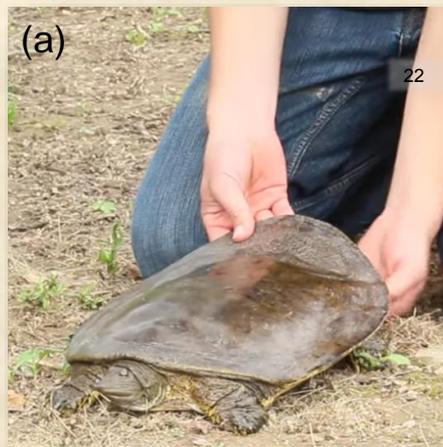
Holding a large Softshell



Holding a Snapping Turtle using a handhold appropriate for a large Softshell

Softshell Turtles

- Large Softshell: Firmly grasp the turtle high on the hind legs (upper thighs); avoid grasping the back edge of the shell. The turtle should be facing away from you and held out from your body. Quickly but gently move it into the intended container to avoid any risk of injury to the animal's joints.
- Small Softshell: (a) approaching from the tail end of the turtle, slip one hand underneath the plastron to support the turtle's weight; be careful NOT to pinch the shell (b) lay the palm of the hand on the lower back of the carapace and lift at an angle to make holding easier. Keep the animal facing away from you and out from your body.



Small Softshell

TRANSPORT

General Guidelines for Transporting Turtles

- Do not direct heated or cooled air directly at the transport container holding a turtle. Avoid putting the container in the trunk where temperatures can be extreme.
 - Do not attempt to heat up a turtle found on a cold day. Ideally, transport temperatures should not exceed the mid-70's if a turtle is injured since higher temperatures will promote bacterial proliferation.
 - If transporting a pet that has been kept indoors, keep the turtle at the temperature of that indoor space.
- Ideally, put the transport box on the back seat strapped in place with a seat belt. The floor makes for a bumpy and more stressful ride for a turtle.
- Keep the transport box out of direct sunlight. Cover the container loosely with newspaper to prevent direct sun exposure.
- Never leave a turtle in the vehicle regardless of the weather; if you leave the vehicle, take the boxed turtle with you! The interior can quickly change temperature and become thermally stressful for the turtle.

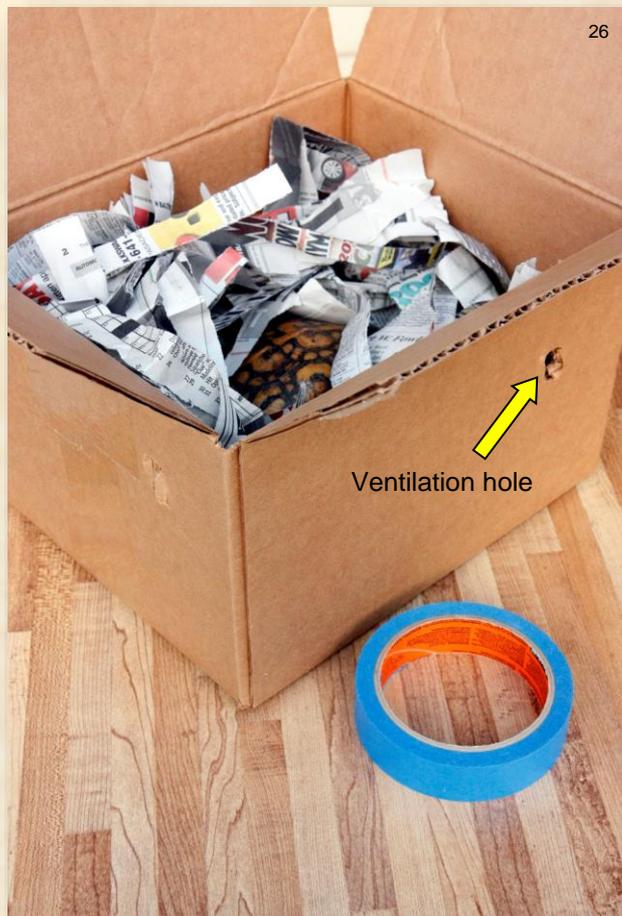


Hatchling/Small Juvenile Box Turtles



- A small plastic sandwich box is ideal for transporting hatchlings / small juveniles. It is too short for a turtle to flip onto its back where it may become marooned.
- Punch or drill several tiny holes in the lid for ventilation. Be sure to punch or drill from the inside to the outside to avoid creating sharp edges inside the container that could injure the turtle.
- Place the plastic box in a larger, lidded cardboard box cushioned with shredded newspaper for extra insulation; punch several pencil-size air holes on each side of the outside box.
- Uninjured turtle – Transport the turtles in moist, squeezed out sphagnum moss, or in moist but well squeezed out paper toweling. Soggy paper toweling can smother a turtle as can moist facial and bathroom tissue.
 - Do not transport baby turtles completely dry but never make the container so moist that water pools on the bottom. A young turtle can drown or aspirate water into its lungs in very shallow water.
- Injured turtle – Transport in slightly moist (not soggy), clean paper towels, never facial or bathroom tissue.

Older Juvenile /Adult Box Turtles



- Put only one turtle in a box regardless of the size of the turtle. Turtles can inadvertently or intentionally scratch and bite one another.
- Use a small, lidded box to restrict the animal's movements. (e.g., shoebox). Ideally, the dimensions are such that the turtle can just fit with its legs and head extended and is not tall enough for the turtle to turn itself over. An injured turtle or one with a respiratory problem could be further compromised if it turns onto its carapace.
- Put just one or two pencil-size holes in the box for ventilation BEFORE putting the animal in the box. More holes are unnecessary and could cause the temperature in the box to change faster than desirable.
- Fill the box with shredded newspaper or clean paper toweling to cushion the animal, absorb excrement, and reduce stress.
 - **EXCEPTION:** If the animal is injured, put a bed of moist, clean newspaper (flat, not shredded) or paper toweling on the bottom before adding the turtle. Add some crumbled newspaper so the animal has less room to move around. Place moist paper toweling over any open wounds, shell cracks.

Semi-aquatic Turtles



A plastic tote that is opaque, well ventilated, and lined with a slightly moistened towel cushion provides a comfortable transport carrier for this adult Northern Red-bellied Cooter (*Pseudemys rubriventris*). The tote can be secured with wire or a cable tie.

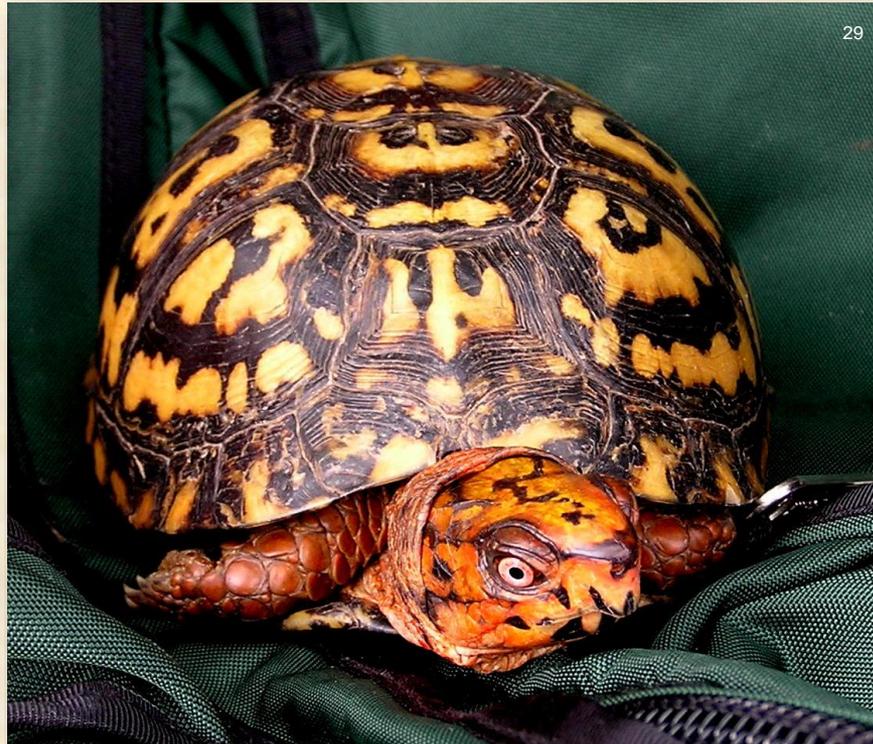
- Transport each animal separately; use an appropriate size tote that just allows the turtle to extend its head and legs.
 - The tote should have a half dozen-plus air holes.
 - Ideally, the tote should be opaque. A transparent transport container is more stressful for a turtle.
- For snappers it is especially important to have some way of securely fastening the lid shut.
- It is especially important to use several layers of cloth towels, or a plastic cushion or life jacket UNDERNEATH a large turtle, although small turtles benefit too from such cushioning. Due to their weight and strength, larger turtles can slap and knock their plastron and carapace edges against the hard surfaces of a container resulting in bruising which can lead to serious shell infections.
 - Towels should be only *slightly* moist; wet towels do not pass air well and can smother a turtle if the turtles becomes buried beneath them. Use a spray bottle to mist the turtle before transporting and occasionally during transit if the trip is long.
 - Remove any loose fibers on cloth towels that could snag claws.
 - Small, moist paper towels can be place over open injuries to prevent desiccation; wounds must stay moist to minimize tissue damage
- Baby turtles can be transported in a plastic box with moist, well squeezed out sphagnum moss, unless they have open wounds or a cracked shell. Place injured animals on slightly moistened cloth or paper toweling.

Semi-aquatic Turtles



Turtles should NEVER be moved in water, whether it is from room to room in your home or in a vehicle. They can drown.

- Although these turtles call water home, *transporting them in water is dangerous* and should NEVER be attempted. Being jostled and bumped around in water that is in a moving vehicle can result in injuries. Also water turtles can develop pneumonia or even drown in just a small volume of water if they get excited and aspirate water into their lungs. This risk is higher than the risk of dehydration. Just keep the turtle out of the sun and sheltered from excessive breeze during transit. Use a spray bottle to lightly mist the turtle occasionally to keep it moist.
- Turtles should never be transported in materials they might swallow (e.g., peat moss, woodchips, packing peanuts); such ingestion can cause obstruction of the airway or blockage in the gastrointestinal tract



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