

Freshwater Turtles in the Central West Care and Handling

supplementary notes by
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Long-Necked Turtle
rescued, rehabilitated and released by Len & Christine Riding

The only Turtle you are likely to encounter in the Central West is the Long- (or Snake) necked Turtle, *Chelodina longicollis*. Until recently it was called the Long-necked Tortoise but this has caused confusion, especially in regard to diet. Generally Turtles are aquatic and Tortoises are land-based. However, Freshwater Turtles will travel across land, particularly when it has recently rained.

Assessment

The majority of Turtles come into care because they have been run over by a vehicle. Occasionally you might get one that has been attacked by a dog. The first thing to do is examine the shell for injuries. Hold the Turtle firmly as they may try to escape and will scratch you with their sharp claws (4 claws on each foot, although they have 5 toes). They do not bite but they may give a faint hiss. Keep the Turtle well away from yourself as often when they are frightened they will exude a very unpleasant smelling liquid (musk) from around their legs, which is difficult to remove from clothing! Sometimes the Turtle has obvious injuries to its shell but other times you may have to look carefully for fine cracks.

Examine the carapace (back), bridges (sides), and plastron (underneath). If there are fine cracks you can paint on a weak solution of iodine once a day. However, if it has larger cracks you will have to take it to a vet for further assessment and possible antibiotics. Their shells do **not** grow back if pieces are missing, and healing of cracks is fairly limited. If the Turtle has many cracks on the shell, with 'floating' pieces, it is kinder to have the vet euthanase it. Similarly, if one or both bridges are badly cracked, it may need to be euthanased. If you examine the diagram of the Turtle skeleton (next page), you will understand why. Its backbone is attached to the carapace and if the bridges are cracked, you can assume that some internal organs will have been crushed.

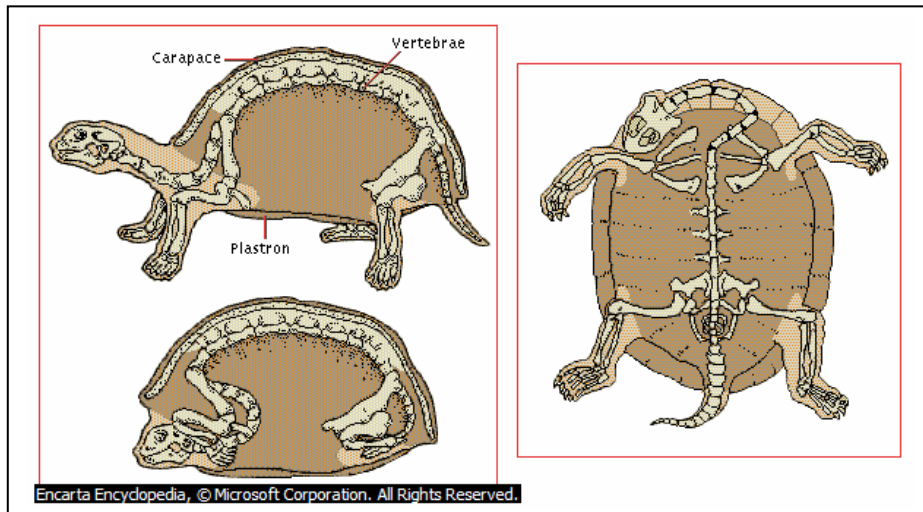


Illustrator: Linda Dennis

Re-drawn from *Caring for Australian Wildlife* by Sharon White, Australian Geographic

Unfortunately for the Turtle, they have a slow metabolism and can live for a long time with injuries. As they don't appear to show any sign of pain, this can be misleading. The vet may offer to wire or fibreglass the cracks but we have found with experience that this is not often very successful. Gluing the cracks may be attempted after the wounds have stopped bleeding and have been cleaned up. Wiring the cracks hasn't often been successful as removing the wire can cause the cracks to open up again. If the wire isn't removed before release, the wire may snag and the Turtle could become trapped.

The average Turtle that has come into our care weighs between 500 grams and 1 kilogram, with a carapace length of around 15 - 20 centimetres. This can vary enormously of course, and we have encountered Turtles weighing over 2 kg. As a Turtle can be in care for several months, weigh it regularly to ensure that it is not losing weight.



Housing

Quarantine from any other animals you may have in care initially. The Turtle may be in shock, and like most injured animals, needs somewhere quiet and warm (but not hot). We have found that a dry aquarium/vivarium with a heat lamp at one end is suitable for short-term care. Line the aquarium with leaf litter, sand, soil or small round pebbles. (Not sharp stones as these might scratch the plastron which can cause further health problems). They like to burrow, hence the leaf litter. At one end place a large flat dish of water, preferably sunk into the soil or pebbles for ease of access. If the cracks in the shell are fairly large, the vet may advise keeping the Turtle out of water initially, but always provide some for it to drink.

If the Turtle is going to be in care for several months an outdoor pond of some kind, fenced from predators, would be ideal. (An old bath-tub would be suitable). If you use chicken-wire for fencing, the lower part will need to be covered with shade-cloth or fly-screen, as Turtles can climb reasonably well, considering their rigid body shape. However, make sure the Turtle is able to climb in and out of the water or has an artificial sun-baking platform, and has access to both sun and shade.



It needs sun to synthesize Vitamin D, and to inhibit algal growth and fungal skin infections. A sprinkling of calcium powder or a piece of cuttlebone in the water will help prevent calcium deficiencies which can cause soft or distorted shells, especially in juveniles.

Food

In the wild Turtles eat small crustaceans, fish, worms, aquatic insects, water snails and frogs eggs. As they have no tongue or teeth, they can only eat **underwater**. This is most important to remember.

In the past, Australian Turtles kept as pets have died of starvation because their owners assumed they were like the European tortoises which live on land and eat vegetation.

A diet for a Freshwater Turtle in care should include as much of their natural food as possible. However this is sometimes difficult to get and most petshops now sell Turtle food which they will usually eat after a day or two.

The brands we've found they'll eat are "Nutrafin Max Turtle Gammarus Pellets" and "Aquatic Turtle by Exo Terra" (fortunately they come in containers which seal well so they keep quite a while). There is also another frozen turtle food that we've found the smaller turtles prefer. It's made by "Fish Fuel Co" and has a small pink label "Turtle Dinner". It comes in convenient sized chunks which thaw out within a few minutes.

Otherwise you can try liver sliced into worm- size pieces, or mince coated with Wombaroo Reptile Supplement.

Remove all uneaten food within an hour as it will foul the water and possibly cause infections.

Don't be worried if the Turtle will not eat initially - they will not eat if they are cold or stressed.

Large Turtles require feeding around 3 or 4 times a week and small ones need feeding daily. Keep smaller Turtles separate as the bigger ones tend to hog all the food. Food can take up to 3-4 weeks to be digested.



As adult Turtles hibernate in winter, do not attempt to feed them during this time. If fed during winter the food could possibly rot in the gut, causing death. Juvenile Turtles don't appear to hibernate fully so it's a little trickier to judge their food needs or the necessary temperature.

Contact a more experienced reptile carer, or read further notes on care (see suggested reading on next page).

Release

Once the wounds have healed, all four legs are working equally and the Turtle is eating well, a release site should be chosen.

Ideally this would be a large dam, well away from busy roads!

Try and release well before winter so they have time to build up their weight before hibernation.

Don't feed the day of release as partially-eaten food may become stuck in its throat.

Suggested Reading

Keeping Long-Necked Turtles Chelodina species. Darren Green Published by Australian Reptile Keeper Publications. (2000).

Care and Handling of Australian Native Animals. Ed. Suzanne J. Hand. Published by Surrey Beatty & Sons. (1997).

Care of Australian Reptiles in Captivity. John Weigel. Published by the Reptile Keepers Association. (2000).

Caring for Australian Wildlife. Sharon White. Published by Australian Geographic Pty Ltd. (1997).

Australian Freshwater Turtles. John C. Cann. (1999). Published by Beaumont Publishers P/L.

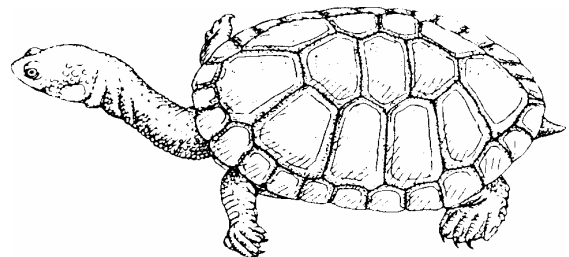
Internet Links

www.vhs.com.au/pages/Turtleinto.html

www.chelonia.org/Articles/easternlongneck.htm

www.austmus.gov.au/factsheets

www.reptilepublications.com.au



N.B. The above notes are based on the personal experiences of Len and Christine Riding and should be read in conjunction with other books and notes on reptile care.

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