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ORNATE BOX TURTLE

(*Terrapene ornata ornate*)

Ornate box turtles have one of the largest natural ranges of any box turtle species – occupying nearly all of the American Midwest. Ornate box turtles are easily identified by their dark brown carapace with bright yellow markings radiating from the upper posterior section of each costal shield. The bodies of ornate box turtles are mottled brown and yellow/cream with yellow, orange and/or red markings on the face and forelegs. Like all other species of American box turtle, ornate box turtles possess a hinged plastron. Male ornate box turtles usually have a slightly concave plastron and possess red irises, and female ornate box turtles have a flat plastron with brown or yellow irises. Males also have longer, thicker tails.

Ornate Box Turtle Availability

Ornate box turtles are a pet store favorite in the United States and are some of the most popular box turtle species offered for sale in the pet industry today. Ornate box turtles come from a variety of sources, including wild caught, farm raised, and some captive bred. Additionally, given the large number of ornate box turtles sold annually, they are a common resident in reptile rescues.

Ornate Box Turtle Size

Adult ornate box turtles are typically between 5 to 7 inches in length, with most ornate box turtles topping out around 6 inches.

Ornate Box Turtle Life Span

Box turtles, in general, have been recorded to live as long as 100 years, with most living between 40 and 60 years. The records for ornate box turtle longevity indicate animals living as long as 32 to 37 years. However, the longevity for box turtles is largely dependent on their diet, habitat, the cleanliness of their enclosure and stress. Optimizing the conditions for your ornate box turtle will lead to a long and healthy life.

Ornate Box Turtle Caging

Hatchling ornate box turtles can be kept in plastic shoebox-sized enclosures with a large, extremely shallow food and water dish (large enough to soak in, shallow so they don't drown). Adult ornate box turtles may be kept in small groups in 30- or 40-gallon breeder tanks or commercially available turtle/tortoise tubs, or they may be kept outdoors in turtle pens at least 4 foot by 4 foot in size with 12- to 18-inch vertical barriers. It is vital that water dishes be kept very clean and changed regularly to avoid bacterial infections.

Ornate box turtles should be kept on a sandy soil substrate deep enough to burrow in, generally no less than 4 inches deep, or at least 12 inches deep in outdoor pens. This can be covered lightly with twice-milled cypress mulch for aesthetics. For ornate box turtles kept indoors, it is usually wise to provide a mound of moistened sphagnum moss to burrow in on the cool side of the enclosure. Hatchling ornate box turtles should be kept in slightly more humid conditions than adults. An average humidity level of between 40 to 50 percent is the nominal humidity level I've kept adult ornate box turtles at. To prevent dehydration in hatchlings, I often keep them between 60 to 70 percent humidity.

Ornate Box Turtle Lighting and Temperature

Ornate box turtles of all ages should have access to UVB fluorescent lighting, in addition to a spot lamp to provide a hotspot. If kept outside in a turtle pen, the access to regular natural sunlight negates the requirement for either of the above lighting elements. For indoor caging, both cool and warm ends should be provided with the ambient temperature being about 80 degrees Fahrenheit. A 75-watt spot lamp should be used to provide a basking site between 90 and 95 degrees, and the cool end should be kept between 70 and 75 degrees. Under no circumstances should a heat rock be used to provide the heat for a box turtle, as this will almost always lead to potentially life-threatening burns!

Ornate Box Turtle Diet

Like all American box turtles, the ornate box turtle is omnivorous. In the wild ornate box turtles actively hunt and consume grasshoppers, crickets, beetles and earthworms. Additionally, ornate box turtles will graze on low-growing vegetation, berries and even mushrooms. In captivity it is important to provide a varied assortment of foods, as the diversity of the ornate box turtle diet can lead to them being picky eaters. Commercially bred cockroaches in addition to crickets, mealworms, earthworms, hard-boiled eggs, ground beef and even canned cat/dog food (which should be your last choice due to the high fat and processed meat content) make for excellent sources of protein. Berries, sliced melon, mushrooms, mustard greens, collard greens and dandelion greens round out the vegetarian side of the menu. It is important to your ornate box turtle's health to provide a rich calcium source for your turtles as well as a source rich in beta carotene or vitamin A. Therefore, insects should be dusted with a high quality vitamin and mineral supplement prior to being offered.

Ornate Box Turtle Handling and Temperament

Ornate box turtles bred in captivity are more tolerant of handling than wild-caught or farm-raised turtles, but overall, ornate box turtles are not difficult turtles to handle. Also, turtles unaccustomed to captivity can be easily stressed and should be given a couple of weeks to settle in to their new situation prior to any regular handling. Caution should always be exercised with ornate box turtles as they are slightly more aggressive than other box turtle species and will not hesitate to bite in defense of a perceived attacker.

Ornate box turtles are very active, alert, and full of personality that other turtle species can sometimes lack. If set down on the ground, ornate box turtles will almost immediately explore their surroundings with a speed and boldness that captures the hearts of their keepers. This is not your "sit-and-watch-the-world-go-by" turtle. The ornate box turtle embodies every bit of the spirit and character that is associated with the Midwestern United States.

Observation Journal

Professional breeders and biologists always keep a record of each animal. PHS does the same for the over 1700 animals currently housed at the facility. While this is a very time-consuming task, it is vital for the life and health of each animal. We teach PHS Summer Camp students how to accurately record and keep a journal and how it benefits both the owner and animal.

Below is an example of an Observation Journal for a ball python:

Male: Noah		Card #1	
Ball Python, Spider <i>Python Regius</i>		Born: mid 2009 Arrived: 2009	
+			
Date	Action	Weight	Notes
1-22-10	shed		Finally complete
1-23-10	mouse		
1-29-10	Fed mouse; bit; didn't eat		Neosporin and damp paper towels, healed nicely
1-30-10	f/t mouse		
2-4-10	mouse		
2-6-10		175g	
2-7-10	mouse		
8-8-10		200g	
2-10-10	mouse		
2-14-10	mouse		
2-19-10	mouse		
2-24-10	mouse		
3-2-10	mouse		
3-5-10	shed		complete
3-13-10	mouse		
3-18-10	mouse	241g	Bit <i>again</i> , Neosporin, doesn't look too bad
3-22-10	mouse		Healing very nicely

Keeping an accurate record of feedings, shedding, and regular activities is important. It will be easy to notice a change in behavior which indicates possible illness or problems if you have records to review. A simple spiral notebook kept next to the enclosure is all that is needed.