



Gulf Coast Turtle and Tortoise Society

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Newsletter - Summer 2003

The **Gulf Coast Turtle & Tortoise Society** is an all-volunteer, nonprofit, organization dedicated to the welfare and conservation of all species of turtles and tortoises. The members of **GCTTS** offer such services as rescue, rehabilitation, release, and adoption of turtles and tortoises. We maintain a telephone and e-mail hot line to answer questions and handle emergencies. We also maintain a website with information about turtle and tortoise care and with a forum where questions can be posted and answered. Newsletters are mailed to members. Education is one of the central focuses of our group. We are active year round giving seminars and participating in expositions, and we provide care sheets and presentations on turtle care at no charge. Correspondence, inquires, and donations may be sent to the above address. Please send Newsletter submissions to Beverly Logan: Beverly@GCTTS.org

Upcoming Events and Items of Interest

September 3-7, 2003

IHS & ETHS Symposium and Breeders Expo
Crown Plaza Resort, Hwy 290 Pinemont/Bingle Exit

11AM – 6PM

This year the **East Texas Herpetological Society** is hosting the **International Herpetological Society** annual meeting right here in Houston. Among the international cast of expert speakers will be: Rick Hudson talking about the Asian Turtle Crisis, Dr. Mark Peckham describing A Day in the Life of a Reptile Veterinarian, and Patti Shoemaker discussing the Natural History of the Alligator Snapping Turtle. The **IHS** meeting will be held September 3-6. For more information, visit the **IHS** website: www.kingsnake.com/ihs/index.html. The **ETHS** Breeders Expo will be held on September 7. We need GCTTS volunteers to man our information booth at the Expo and to bring turtles and tortoises to exhibit. If you can help, please let us know at 281-443-3383 or info@GCTTS.org – Thanks!

ETHS meets Friday every other month, 7:45PM at the Houston Zoo (Brown Educational Building). For more information: www.eths.org

Volunteers Needed: To patrol Galveston for signs of the Ridley's return: information at: <http://houstonpress.com/issues/2003-06-05/news.html/1/index.html>

If you have e-mail, you can subscribe to the very informative e-newsletter, the HerpDigest. Just go to : <http://www.herpdigest.org/> and sign up. It's free.

GCTTS Director Wendy Browne will be presenting a basic program on turtles and tortoises for Jesse Jones Park & Nature Center Saturday, August 9 at 10AM. Anyone wishing to bring turtles or tortoises to exhibit at this program please email info@gctts.org. This program is free and open to the public. Jones Park is located off FM 1960 , West of Hwy 59 at 20634 Kenswick Dr, 281-446-8588.



GCTTS HOTLINE & FORUM "Fate of a Turtle" Beverly Logan

Most calls to the GCTTS Hot line and questions in the on line discussion forum are related to unwanted turtles, problems with diet, illness, or husbandry. Most are about water and box turtles with a few about tortoises. Many of the questions reflect the mistaken belief that it is simpler and less expensive to keep turtles and tortoises in aquariums inside the house, and that it is difficult to build outdoor habitats. It is clear from the questions that often a turtle is acquired on impulse, perhaps off the side of the road, from a store, or as a gift from a friend. Here are a few examples of my experience with this issue.

At 10:30 one Sunday evening, a neighbor rings the doorbell with a surprise. He has a very large alligator snapping turtle running around frantically in his trunk. What my neighbor does not understand is that this turtle cannot be safely handled, it is illegal for him to have it, I can't take it, and now it cannot be returned to its pick up point - the road home from Galveston.

One day it's a 14 inch red eared slider found in a friends back yard, next to the bayou. "Thought you would want it in your back yard", she says. "No," I tell her, "I don't have a pond." She doesn't know that sliders must be in water in order to be able to eat.

A sister in law brings a river cooter found in her back yard. I ask her "Do you have any water close to you?" "Oh sure, behind my house" she replies. She doesn't understand that cooters move around looking for nesting sites and should just be left alone.

The third knock was accompanied with a box with a box turtle from the country. They had to keep it in the box until they could return to the country house with it.

Friends and family in these circumstances looked puzzled why I did not readily take their gifts, but instead thanked them and asked them to do the right thing - return the turtles to where they had been found.

One late evening, on a Friday night, I did get a wonderful gift as Mike my husband came home from work telling me "I helped a very large turtle across the road before the railroad track coming out of the plant" - in the Houston ship channel area.

The fate of all turtles is a concern in GCTTS members' hearts, and I hope that this dedication will continue. It is very rewarding at times as well as sad at times with the illnesses, injuries and pickups from the wild. Turtles do touch all our hearts somehow or another as we try to do what is best for them.

The following e-mail, sent to our vice president, speaks for itself, a turtle in an improper environment and an owner coming to the realization that properly caring for turtles is not easy.

Attn: Bob Smither:

I've read the information on your Web site and wondered if you could help me with a red eared slider I rescued at the end of August (with the intention of returning him to the wild when he was healthy enough).

I live in Dallas and saw that you don't ship, mail, etc, but wondered if you could either advise me or refer me to someone who can take him. I liked that you let them go or require people who adopt turtles of a certain size to keep them in ponds, not aquariums.

The turtle I rescued has positively thrived and grown much bigger, much faster than I would have ever thought. I'm sure you've heard this before: caring for him has cost much more time and money than I had ever realized, and before I knew what was involved in caring properly for an aquatic turtle, I was setting aside personal problems so I could attend to "Snapper" instead. I kept thinking it would reach a point where he'd be set and just need basic maintenance and I could get on with the rest of my life (like working). It hasn't, just keeps getting worse.

No sooner had I gotten his first tank set up when he outgrew it and I had to start all over again with a larger tank, which already poses crisis problems nearly every day that

take much of my time, energy and resources (with little effectiveness, I might add). I have never had an aquarium, so I'm spending a lot of time researching how to do this right for a turtle, going back and forth to the pet and aquatics store nearly every day.

"Snapper" was 1 1/4 inches long when we got him less than five months ago, but his shell now measures 5 inches in length and he's four inches wide)! The Problem is, I'm self-employed and have set aside a lot of time when I should have been working caring for Snapper and trying to ensure he had everything he needed. It was okay for the first three or four months, but he keeps needing still more and I can no longer afford to provide it (nor am I skilled or experienced enough to make it work).

The 29 gallon tank I bought just one month ago is already too small (and it was the very largest I had space for). The brand new filter and power head aren't powerful enough to process his waste; the water is disgustingly filthy after only a day or two, and the room constantly smells like a sewer and we have to burn candles in the house.

No matter how hard I try, I can't keep the water clean and yesterday, it was so dirty after being changed just four or five days ago, that all the fish died. I changed the water late last night and the water is already yellow and stinking again. I'm starting to worry that the poor water quality will adversely impact the health of my turtle (who's in GREAT health right now), but figure--for the short term--it's probably no worse than most creeks.

I put him in the bathtub tonight while I cleaned his tank and saw that that's really more the right size for him than his tank. I think he needs to be outside in a pond, which I'd wanted to build for him in a future house, but I live in a townhouse now and don't know when I'll get into a house.

Like I said, after he was caught by a teacher at her ranch, she brought him to school and he languished in a tiny plastic critter carrier and wouldn't eat. My original intention was to make sure he was healthy and then return him to the wild. But people at the pet store told me 75 percent of baby turtles are eaten by predators. I do think it would be good to release him to the wild (once he's too big for predators!) or give him to someone experienced with turtles, who will keep him in a pond that is similar to his natural environment and give him the care he needs for the next thirty years or so.

Can you suggest whom I should get in touch with? Do you think that if he eats out of my hand, he's not going to be able to survive long in the wild? I want the best thing for him, but I personally can no longer spend an hour a day every day cleaning his tank. I've got to start getting medical attention RIGHT AWAY.

Thanks,
Barbara

Hello Barbara,

You do have quite a large undertaking with a large red ear slider in the house. It is very noble on your part as well to help with an unwanted water turtle, as we here at GCTTS know first hand what you are going through. It is very difficult to keep a turtle healthy in an indoor enclosure. They really need to be outdoors as much as possible.

You asked about releasing "Snapper," This should only be done after he has been thoroughly checked by a qualified reptile vet and then only when the weather is warm. It is possible to introduce diseases to the wild population through released pet turtles. A qualified vet can make sure this doesn't happen.

Good Luck,
Beverly

Leopards in Houston?

By Ann Smylie

The leopard tortoise (*Geochelone pardalis*) is native to the savannas of southern Africa, where temperatures are high, the humidity is low and the land is covered in grasses and coarse scrub. This is not a description of Houston, Texas!

From June through early September my leopard tortoise, Leo, lives in an eight foot by eight foot outside pen with sunny and shaded areas and a large water dish where he may drink and soak. I hope to install a raised dog house where he can stay during our humid nights.

When temperatures drop in mid-September, Leo comes inside to a large off-the-floor container lined with hay and heated for at least twelve hours a day by a full-spectrum UV bulb and a ceramic heat lamp for the rest of the day. Adequate food and water are provided. Like desert tortoises, star tortoises and sulcatas, leopards are grazing tortoises. They must be fed a proper diet to stay healthy. They should not be fed any animal protein, such as dog food or monkey chow as this causes liver and kidney disease. They also should not be fed fruit, lettuces or vegetables such as squash. These foods pass through the tortoise's digestive system too quickly for proper digestion. Leopard tortoises should be fed large amounts of grasses, leaves and flowers of plants such as hibiscus, clover, dandelions, grape leaves and mulberry leaves, alfalfa and grass hays. Once a week, a very small sprinkling of a vitamin supplement may be added and cuttlebones are a good source of calcium.

For ten years I have tried to provide a livable habitat for a tortoise that is definitely out of its element. As I write this article Houston is rainy and under a Hurricane warning and July has been a wet month. While my red foot tortoises thoroughly enjoy wallowing in the mud, poor Leo must stay inside longing for a dry, sunny, warm day.



Arboretum Turtle Program A Success!

On June 22, 2003 the GCTTS held a slide show presentation and turtle discussion in conjunction with the "Urban Nature Series" at the Houston Arboretum, with Dr. Larry White. It was an unqualified success. We had 12 different species of turtles and tortoises for our exhibit, brought in by our member volunteers and Dr. White. Eager guests were entering the exhibit before we had a chance to set it up!

The GCTTS would again like to thank Dr. White for his participation in making this program possible. First, he showed slides of different turtle and tortoise habitats, giving brief descriptions of how to set them up and which plants could be used. The slides included basic set-ups along with some more elaborate ones, which were done by friends of his in Arizona.

Questions were asked of Dr. White throughout the presentation and others were encouraged to describe their own ideas and successes with their individual set-ups. Many new ideas were exchanged and some of us have already begun implementing these new ideas for our habitats.

Dr. White stayed after his part of the presentation and answered a variety of questions for us including dietary requirements for specific species, health problems, conservation efforts, etc.

Personally, I would also like to thank all the volunteers who helped make this a great show. They came early to set up and stayed late to clean up and brought their turtle and tortoises for the exhibit. We had a wonderful time and learned new and interesting facts, which can only help us in our efforts to rescue and rehabilitate turtles and educate the public on their plight. We hope to see all of you at the next program. For those of you who couldn't make it, just look at what you missed and maybe we will see you next time.

Deb Parrish – GCTTS President



“Jessie” is an African spur-thighed tortoise, *Geochelone sulcata*. The spur-thighed tortoise is readily available in the pet trade, often available as hatchlings. These tortoises are vigorous, strong willed, and enthusiastic diggers, and as shown in the photo, these tortoises get BIG! Just ask owner Deb Parrish who is always available at GCTTS events and willing to tell you about the many things “Jessie” can get into as a three year old **sub** adult.

American Snapping Turtle Found in UK (Estimated 20 Years Old)
Express & Star (Wolverhampton, UK) 7/19/03 (Jim Dunton)
From HerpDigest, Volume 3, Number 47

Nessie he's not, but a mini monster has washed up after years of haunting a Walsall pool, terrorising ducks and fish. RSPCA officers yesterday pulled a snapping turtle the size of a pizza dish out of a brook near Goscote. Inspector Tim Dixon, of the society said the young anglers who found the turtle - and nicknamed him Lucky - were lucky not to get bitten themselves. "It could have easily taken one of their fingers off," he said. "These things do grow up to be quite aggressive." With a shell diameter of 14ins, Mr Dixon estimated Lucky was up to 20 years-old, and had probably lived most of his life in the wild. "People get bored with them, and because they're difficult to re-home, they just get released back into the wild - even though it's illegal," he explained. "He would have been a popular thing to have around about the time of the Mutant Ninja Turtles craze."

He added that Lucky would have found the pool, just north of Slacky Lane, an ideal habitat for feeding on small fish and ducklings. "I'm presuming that because we've had quite a lot of heavy rain in the past couple of days, he would have been more active," Mr Dixon said. "After he ran out of things to eat in the pool he probably started looking further afield." But the quest for pastures new will instead spell the end of Lucky's freedom. After plucking him out of a shallow part of the brook, RSPCA officers have now found a home for Lucky at Drayton Manor Zoo. Mr Dixon said although Lucky was the first common snapping turtle he'd ever picked up in Walsall, one or two usually surfaced across the wider region every year. (Editor: It should be noted that common snappers are also now found in Japan.)

Adoptions will be on hold from October 1, 2003 to April 15, 2004 for hibernation. Any one wanting to adopt should contact Wendy Browne. We can always use help in overwintering water, box turtles, and tortoises – if you can help please let us know. These animals just need monitoring and indoor winter housing. It has always been our policy that those that help with overwintering will have priority when it comes to adopting, provided all GCTTS Adoptions guidelines are met. You must be able to pick up and return the turtles in spring to a central Houston location.

Can you help with copies? We are sending out our Newsletter by e-mail as much as possible, but we still need several hundred copies for our prospects and for our members that prefer the mailed version. If you can help make double sided copies, please let us know at 281-443-3383 – Thanks!

Gulf Coast Turtle & Tortoise Society Membership Application

Membership fees are our major source of funds. Your membership supports our many outreach and rehabilitation efforts. Members receive the GCTTS newsletter and can vote for our Board of Directors. Membership dues are:

Regular:	\$15.00 per year per address
Contributing:	\$25.00 per year per address
Sponsoring:	\$50.00 per year per address

Please mail your membership application and dues to:

**Gulf Coast Turtle and Tortoise Society
1227 Whitestone Lane
Houston, Texas 77073**

Name(s) _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

Phone _____ E-mail _____

What species of turtles and/or tortoises do you currently have? _____

Volunteer Opportunities:

Public Speaking ____ Booth Assistance ____ Exhibiting your Turtles ____ Helping at Programs ____
Hotline Assistance ____ E-mail Assistance ____ Website Assistance ____
Newsletter: Writing, Artwork, Layout, Typing, Copying Other _____

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