

GCTTS Monthly Post for June, 2005

News Items of Interest to our Members and Friends

Please register an email address with us if you have one so we can send your event notices by email and save volunteer time and postage! Your information is never shared and is secure.

Articles Anyone?

The GCTTS Monthly Post welcomes articles from GCTTS Members. If you have any information about our favorite animals, please send it to info@gctts.org. We will consider it for our next Monthly Post. Thanks!

BCBE Breeder Sale June 18 & 19

The Bayou City Breeders Expo will be held from 10 AM to 5 PM on June 18 & 19, 2005 and will feature supplies, feeder animals, gifts and ONLY captive bred herps. GCTTS has been invited to again offer an educational booth at this event and volunteers are needed. We are in special need of volunteers for Sunday (Father's Day). Members and those interested in joining GCTTS with a basic knowledge of turtle/tortoise husbandry are welcome to offer care sheets to visitors, address the reality of healthy turtle care and other topics such as conservation, species identification and herp vet referrals. Please let us know at info@gctts.org or the hotline, 281-443-3383, by June 15th if you plan to help at our booth or exhibit a turtle.

The Expo will be held at the Clarion Inn, located at 500 North Belt East, between Imperial Valley Dr. and the Hardy Toll Road. Admission is \$4 for children under 12 and \$6 for adults.

The June 2005 expo features additional educational opportunities in the form of live local venomous and non-venomous snake ID displays and speaker talks and presentations, which are included free with your paid admission to the expo. This is an excellent opportunity for interested residents, especially scouts, to learn more about our native snake species and how to correctly identify venomous snakes. These displays and lectures can help Boy Scouts meet some of the requirements for their Reptile and Amphibian Merit Badge. Additionally, all scouts that wear their Scout dress uniforms to the Expo will receive half-price admission!

Complete info on this event can be found at:

<http://www.houstonherp.com/BCBEbody.html>

Annual East Texas Herp Breeder Sale!

The 15th Annual East Texas Herpetological Society's Breeder Expo and Educational Exhibit will be held Sunday, September 11th at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, located at

12801 Northwest Freeway (Hwy 290) in Houston.

Breeder shows like this one are the best places to obtain captive born reptiles. The Expo will be open to the public from 11 AM until 5 PM.

GCTTS will have an educational booth at this very heavily attended event, and are in need of volunteers. If you can help man our booth or exhibit animals, let us know by August 10th. A good working knowledge of turtles and tortoises will be needed for this event. We are also looking for set-up help at 9 AM. Admission is free for our volunteers.

More information on the conference, expo and sale:
<http://www.eths.org/html/expo2005.htm>

Children's Program Requests

The Hitchcock Public Library has asked GCTTS to make a presentation about turtles and tortoises on July 5, 6, 7, OR 8 and we are still looking for speakers for the Library. Hitchcock is on Hwy 6, about 5 miles west of I-45 in Galveston county.

The Houston SPCA has asked GCTTS for a speaker for June 9th, June 23rd, and Aug 4th at 11am for children 9-11 years old. The SPCA is located at 900 Portway Dr, just north of Memorial Park. Wendy Browne will be the speaker on June 9th and 23rd and Julie Young will speak at the Aug 4 event. Anyone wishing to assist or exhibit turtles, let us know.

GCTTS has been invited to make a presentation at the Friendswood Public Library this summer. GCTTS member Bob Smither will be at the Library, 416 South Friendswood Drive, Friendswood, Texas 77546 (281-482-7135), from 1:30 to 2:30PM on June 15, 2005. The Library would like to have an additional turtle presentation during the summer. Times and dates available are every Wednesday in June and July from 1:30-2:30 p.m and the presentation would be directed toward 8-10 year olds. If you are interested in doing another of these talks, or assisting our speaker/exhibiting turtles at the June 15 program please let us know.

If you would like to make any of these presentations or exhibit your turtles, please let us know before at info@gctts.org or the hotline 281-443-3383.

Thanks!

Acclimating Baby Box Turtles to Outdoor Accommodations

Julie Young - GCTTS member

The last time you heard from me, I told how I had overwintered indoors my 25 baby box turtles from the hatching of 2004. With this installment, I'd like to tell how those babies were acclimated to their outdoor habitat.

In their wild habitats, box turtles live year-round outdoors. If, for whatever reason,

you have kept box turtles indoors for the winter months, to be healthy, they should be put outdoors when the weather warms up. Care should be taken to help the turtles adjust from their "coddled" existence indoors, to the whims of Mother Nature outdoors. Although all turtles will need to go through an acclimation process, for this article, we will restrict our discussion to baby box turtles.

While in their indoor habitat, the babies lived in a stable, predictable environment, with constant warmth, even humidity, regular lighting periods, handy hiding places, sanitation, easy-to-find food, and freedom from predators. Babies who are being moved from indoors to outdoors will have to deal with a whole new set of "rules". Some of these you can provide for them (safety from predators), some you can help them adjust to (temperature), and some they will have to figure out on their own (finding shelter).

First and foremost, make sure the pen where the babies will live is escape-proof and predator-proof. You can find information on constructing secure enclosures by reading or surfing other GCTTS material. Be sure the pen has a tight-fitting cover. Because babies can be eaten by relatively small animals such as squirrels and rats, I used 1/2" hardware cloth, weighted down on all sides by bricks and boards, and also made sure there were no holes in the sides or bottom that would allow a varmint in or a baby out.

When: No, you cannot put your babies out just because you are tired of cleaning cages and monitoring babies! Start thinking about putting your babies outdoors when the weather warms up in the spring. This can vary from one area of the country to another, and also depending on the type of turtle you have. A good indicator is when you see other reptiles or turtles moving about. The temperature should be fairly stable and it should not be a rainy period.

The babies should be acclimated to being outdoors gradually. At first, you will be putting them out for only an hour or two at a time, using a temporary container. Next, they can spend the day outside, but should be brought back in at night. Eventually, when they are acclimated and the weather is stable, they will move to their permanent enclosure for good.

Here's a nifty way to house the babies when they are going through their in-at-night, out-during-the-day adjustment period: Use a plastic container that's easy to sanitize, such as one of those made to store sweaters or Christmas wrapping paper under your bed. Using a 1/4" or 1/2" bit, drill holes here and there in the bottom. This is for drainage, in case the babies are caught outdoors in an unexpected rain. Make sure the container is covered - do not use the plastic lid that came with it, as it won't allow air circulation, and it will hold too much heat inside and may bake the babies. It also must be predator-proof. I used a metal wire shelf from an old refrigerator. Place the container outside where it will be in the shade all day. Baby turtles are too small and delicate to withstand direct sunlight for any length of time. But their shells still need sunshine in order to "toughen up"; there is enough of the right sun ray light bouncing around even in shaded areas for this to take place. Do not place substrate of any kind in the container - the babies will burrow into it and then will not get the effects of the sun's rays. Likewise, do not provide houses or hiding places. The babies will not be happy about this, because their natural inclination is to hide. But they can always seek the security of their caves when they are returned to their regular habitat at night.

Light: Hopefully, while you were housing the babies indoors, you turned their overhead lights on and off at about the same time as the sun was coming up and going down. If not, start doing so a few weeks prior to putting the babies out, so they can adjust to normal day/night cycles.

Temperature: Babies are delicate and can fail quickly if the temperature they were accustomed to indoors changes drastically when they are moved outdoors. The daytime outdoor temperatures should be about 75:-80:, and nighttime temperatures no more than 10: degrees less. This spring in my area (Houston, Texas), we had warm days, but unusually cool nights. I did not want the babies to go through extreme temperature changes, and I knew the ground was not warm enough to retain adequate heat, nor were their tiny bodies large enough to hold heat all night. We also had quite a bit of rain this spring, and that can mean respiratory infections for turtles. All this meant that I delayed putting the babies out quite a bit longer than I would have liked.

Sun: Babies need to become accustomed to being in the sun. They also need exposure to the sun to help keep their shells hard. But being placed directly in the sun can quickly bake a tiny baby, so use care when acclimating your babies. They should never be placed directly in full sun.

Feeding: When the babies are in the acclimation period, going out during the day and coming in at night, feed them indoors in their accustomed manner. Once they go outside, continue to feed them whatever they have been used to during the winter. I knew my babies were going to find hiding places once they got outside, and that I would not see each of them on every day. I also worried that they might not discover where the feeding place was. So, the day I put my babies out for good, I fed them at the time I put them outside, which was the usual morning feeding time for all my outdoor turtles. To make sure the babies didn't scurry off to parts unknown, I provided their favorite food - live, wiggly worms. Sure enough, the babies went right for the worms, and in the process, they learned where the food was place every morning. But to make sure they found their food, for the first weeks, when I put food out, I scrounged around in the pen, looking under logs and plants and tile pipes, to round up the babies and bring them to the feeding spot. Yes, this stressed them a bit, but, after months indoors, they were pretty used to being handled, and it ensured that they knew where to find their meals. Now, a month or so later, they greet me at the same time every morning sitting on their feeding tile.

Water: Baby turtles should be able to find their own way to water, but I'm not always confident that my babies are all that bright - especially after they've lived in a controlled environment indoors where food and water were readily at hand. So I placed several soaking bowls (plastic lids from pet-food jars) around the pen. I also make sure to water every day, so drops of water accumulate on leaves and such. I believe the babies take more water from these sources than from the soaking bowls.

Sanitation: You kept the babies' indoor container spotlessly clean, (hopefully) sanitizing it once a week. Outdoors, the babies will suddenly be exposed to all sorts of germs and bacteria unfamiliar to their immune systems. This is OK - even good - as this is how they develop immunity to nature's ailments. But you can give them a head start by keeping clean those areas you can keep clean - in particular the feeding spot and the water dishes. Remove uneaten food every day. Discard old water, wipe and

rinse bowls, and provide clean water every day. Disinfect dishes and bowls at least once a week.; more frequently is better.

Let Nature Take Its Course: Remember, turtles are wild animals. Once set outdoors permanently, your babies will quickly revert to "wild" ways, meaning they will seek hiding places and seclusion. They should be allowed to live as undisturbed as possible. They will, however, come to recognize you, and they will definitely learn when feeding time is! Some turtles are more outgoing than others, and will become quite tame; others will always "run for the hills" when they see you come. That's just their way!

GCTTS Joins Coalition to Help Save Ridley Sea Turtles

Bob Smither - GCTTS member

The Gulf Coast Turtle and Tortoise Society has joined a coalition with the Sea Turtle Restoration Project (STRP) and its Texas Office (Help Endangered Animals, Ridley Turtles; HEART) to help the endangered Kemp's ridley sea turtle.

Since the year 2000 there has been a South Texas Closure designed to keep shrimpers out of a zone from Corpus Christi to the Mexican border that extends five nautical miles into the sea. The Closure runs from December 1 to the middle of July. After the Closure ends, shrimpers from Texas and other states enter the protected zone, putting Kemp's ridleys, greens, and other sea turtles at great risk. Unfortunately, many uninformed shrimpers continue to break the law and either do not use Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) or simply tie them shut with monofilament line. Historically there has been an increase each year in turtle strandings shortly after the Closure ends in July.

The National Academy of Sciences concluded that shrimp trawling kills more sea turtles than all other human activities combined. Because of non-compliance, federal laws requiring the use of TEDs in shrimp nets have not stopped the needless drowning of endangered sea turtles along the Texas coast. There continues to be high stranding counts of Kemp's ridleys and other sea turtle species during the shrimping season along the Texas coast.

More adult Kemp's ridley sea turtles wash up dead at Padre Island than anywhere else in the world. About half are pregnant females coming to nest.

Nearly half of all dead adult Kemp's ridley sea turtles found stranded in the United States during the last five years were found at Padre Island.

Because of the efforts of conservationists and the US and Mexican governments Kemp's ridleys at their prime nesting beach at Rancho Nuevo, Mexico have had their nests protected for several years. As a direct result of this effort, and the Headstart program championed by HEART, for the first time in many years there are nesting ridley turtles on Texas beaches. Kemp's ridleys have been imprinted at the Padre Island National Seashore (PINS) for more than 20 years. This effort is finally beginning to pay off with the number of nests along the Texas coast increasing. So far in 2005 there have been 5 nests reported at the PINS. In 2004 there were 42 nests of ridleys along the Texas coast.

Enforcement of the TED law is difficult, and the agencies responsible are understaffed. The establishment of a year round clearly marked "do not fish here" zone will make it easier to spot shrimp boats that are violating the law.

The GCTTS, STRP, HEART, and other concerned organizations are asking the state of Texas to extend the current Closure outward to a nine mile limit and to make it effective year round.

After Board approval, GCTTS member Bob Smither recently sent the following to Carole Allen of STRP and HEART:

"The Gulf Coast Turtle and Tortoise Society is proud to join the Sea Turtle Restoration Project and Help Endangered Animals - Ridley Turtles in supporting a permanent year round protected area of a minimum of nine nautical miles with no shrimp fishing allowed along the Texas coast from the Corpus Christi Fish Pass south to the Mexican border to protect the Kemp's ridley and all sea turtles and other marine organisms."

Carole replied:

"Thank you, Bob, and the GCTTS board. It's good to hear from you again in the turtle world. Please thank everyone for me. The GCTTS is a great, strong voice of support. Carole"

I encourage you to visit the STRP site at:

<http://www.seaturtles.org/actionalertdetails.cfm?actionAlertID=87>

and the HEART site at:

<http://www.ridleyturtles.org/>

to learn what YOU can do to help the Kemp's ridley sea turtle.

Texas A&M has a ridley tagging project - to learn more visit:

<http://www.tamug.edu/seaturtle/index.htm>

It is hoped that an extended Closure will help protect this most ancient and endangered inhabitant of the sea.

FM 543

Beverly Logan - GCTTS member

The most frustrating scene is a turtle in the road or at least trying to cross the road.

A turtle just described is usually on a 70 mph interstate highway or country highway road, with a turtle shell image flashing fast in front of your eyes, right?

GCTTS often hears from commendable folks who have stopped their cars in traffic exclaiming: "I almost got killed, to save the turtle crossing the road from getting hit!."

The most dramatic turtle crossing I have ever seen was with a particularly determined three toed box turtle. Returning home one Sunday morning from the Logan family farm, a small three toe box turtle, head held high, was making his way home walking across I-45, a four lane highway, near Huntsville. There was no way to stop in traffic rush at this time to help this turtle get across a median and two more lanes on the other side.

You can also witness turtle scenes maybe once while living in Houston. Turtles crossing roads in the bayou city of Houston, where there are a lot of streets running along side the many bayous and deep drainage ditches.

The GCTTS helpline is always asked the next question, "What should I do with the turtle we picked up crossing the road on the way home?" Take it back. But the turtle picker upper has just come home 300 hundred miles or more, and won't be going back that way anytime soon!

And then there is always a friend's encounter with a turtle. The avid Texas trail riding horseman friend rings the door bell, "I got something for you in my van." I was of course exclaiming, "It better not be a turtle!" Yep, a big 9 inch Texas red ear slider. Again, "take it back!" I thought our trail rider friend was never going to speak to me again with the disappointed look on his face. "Don't you want to put it in your backyard? I thought you would want it." It went right back to that Houston bayou trail it was found on that day.

Now, I have to be real honest. On the way to the Logan family farm a couple of weeks ago I made my husband Mike, the driver, turn around in the middle of Friday mid morning country traffic, to pick up a Texas three toe box turtle. Yes, this turtle was enough in the road to get hit. This spot was just a quarter mile from the family farm entrance that is on a well traveled two lane highway.

After greeting his folks, we explained the scary part, there was an 18 wheeler coming right down on us, just after we turned around to pick up the turtle! And I was standing right there on the side of the road, ducking the wind from the 18 wheeler first before I got the turtle out of the road.

My father in-law asked, "Where did you get it, down the road a piece? Oh, I saw it facing the other side of the road this past week in the same place." he said. "I know that it has to be the same turtle, as I saw it more than once going to town in the same area".

O.K., now I am in the same situation I have heard so many times before from others that have called GCTTS. This time is a little complicated. Exactly what side of the road should I go back and put this beautiful red headed male three toe Texas box

turtle on to help him get back to his wooded area? What direction does he desire, east or west? He may eventually get car hit as he was confused which way to go in my opinion based on what my father in law said.

After two hours of thought with the turtle sitting in the shed in a box, scratching loudly and climbing to go free, I sat navigating in my mind all the land areas I know so well all around. The Logan's farm has three big dogs with big mouths. The turtle can't stay here even though it is within its radius of where it was found just for the dog predator reason alone. I was still thinking harder on how to relocate in finding an immediate area not having the speeding cars dilemma. Pondering also with the question; was the turtle picked up and dumped by someone else out of his range, causing his confusion? Was he looking for a girlfriend?

It came to me finally. To drive in the car with the turtle and explore. We drove well across the other side of the highway onto an adjoining commuter connector small town highway to an area that also lined up where this turtle was found by us. We could see from this hill the whole area of the family farm. Now turning off onto a dirt gravel farm road we also noticed only two country neighbors live on this dead end road. A beautiful valley with a lot of land between neighbors sloped down with wild flowers in bloom and a pond water supply. By now the turtle was frantic, feet out swimming in the air while he was held in my hand. Does he smell something familiar?

Out of the car the red headed three toed box turtle and I went, stumbling across a cattle guard into the open field with the turtle in my hand still. The first thing he did when released in this luscious field is turn to the car walking slowly toward us. Oh no, now what is he doing, coming back to the road? We stayed and observed, he headed for the flowers and uncut brush along the side of this fenced valley for shade instead.

The next day I insisted to go back to see if he was anywhere in sight.

Thank goodness there was no turtle walking up and down or smashed on that gravel dirt road called FM 543.

Update on the Texas Diamondback Terrapin

Anita Peddicord - GCTTS member

Recently one of GCTTS members attended a meeting concerning the Texas Diamondback Terrapin Thursday the 5th of May held at Armand Bayou Nature Center. Here is a brief report:

USF&W (US Fish & Wildlife) and TP&W (Texas Parks & Wildlife) and other interested groups were there including a Dr. Wood who came all the way from New Jersey. About 16 people were in attendance. Discussion was on what should be done to determine if this Terrapin needs some kind of protection by law.

Things discussed were:

1. problems with getting accurate population counts caught by commercial fisherman (report of counts caught in traps are voluntary)

2. dealing with the language barrier between those speaking English and the Vietnamese fishermen
3. is there a need for TED's (Turtle Excluder Devices) on commercial crab traps?
4. not many field studies have been done to compare populations in the past to the present.

One interesting item briefly mentioned was that the sexes can be determined from the carapaces of dead terrapins. Where the fissures in the carapace meet, males have closed fontanels near the spine and females of the same size have open fontanels. This is due to the fact that the females grow larger than males. So, males a certain size are no longer growing and the females of the same size are still growing. I assume this is probably true of other turtle species where the female is the larger of the sexes.

Basically, I gathered from this meeting that more studies are going to have to be done before any protection of terrapins from trap by catch may be done or before they are listed as a species of interest or as threatened and therefore protected by state law. It seems that if any decision is made to give them legal protection, that is still some years off. This is the conclusion I came to at the close of the meeting. It was however, nice to see that so many different groups were concerned about the terrapin.

Can You Help the GCTTS Turtle Shuttle?

GCTTS operates over the entire greater Houston area and as such relies on people to help shuttle and serve as drop-off and pick-up houses for turtles & tortoises. Our rehab people are quite overloaded making arrangements to get incoming turtles and sending out turtles that have been adopted to their adoptive homes.

If you are able to help with transport, please indicate the areas of Houston you can help shuttle to and from. If you are able to provide temporary housing of incoming and outgoing GCTTS turtles & tortoises until they are picked up by a shuttle volunteer, please let us know.

We are also looking for someone to manage the "turtle shuttle". This would involve maintaining contact information on the drop-off, pick-up volunteers, and shuttle volunteers, and making all turtle shuttling arrangements.
Foster Help Needed!

Adult GCTTS members that are experienced turtle keepers and want to provide much needed help to turtles and tortoises can volunteer to help with our rehabilitation program. We always need help housing rehabs after they have been stabilized. These animals need a period of TLC, good conditions, and monitoring. Note that these turtles will need to be kept outdoors and isolated from any others you might have.

If you are not a GCTTS Member, please join us. See:

http://www.gctts.org/membership_application.pdf
or ask about membership at info@gctts.org or the hotline (281-443-3383).