

From the GCTTS Wiki

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GCTTS Members and Friends Picnic October 23rd!

The GCTTS annual outdoor picnic will be on Sunday, October 23rd, 1:00 PM, at the Smither's home in Friendswood. Bring your friends and your turtles and tortoises for a relaxing afternoon in the company of other turtle enthusiasts. GCTTS will have their adoption animals at the picnic and our rehabbers will be offering minimal pre-hibernation checks for anyone bringing their turtles. BBQ hamburgers and hotdogs so please let us know by Thurs the 20th how many will be attending and/or if you plan to bring-a-dish, ice or drinks. Check out Bob's gargantuan natural pond! Members only but you can join (\$15.00) when you get there!

The Smithers are at 2600 Ware Dairy Road, Friendswood, Texas, 77546, 281-443-3383.

If you come from FM 528 (West Parkwood Ave.), Ware Dairy Road (no street sign) is the third right that you can make off of Moore Ranch Road. If you come from Highway 35, Ware Dairy Road is the first left after Mandale Street. After turning on Ware Dairy Road, the Smither's home is 0.2 miles straight ahead.

If you come from downtown, drive South on I45 past the 610 Loop. Exit Nasa 1 and turn right on Nasa 1. Drive about 7 miles to Moore Rd and turn right on Moore Rd. Turn right on Ware Dairy Road.

Map to the Smither's:

http://maps.yahoo.com/maps_result?addr=Ware+Dairy&csz=Friendswood%2C+TX+77546&state=TX

Hope to see you there!

Westover Park Turtle Rescue!

Imagine that you are trapped in water and no matter how hard you try you simply cannot get out. This is the situation that a large red eared slider turtle was in after she somehow found her way to the fountain

at the entrance to Westover Park in League City, Texas. Normally red eared sliders spend a lot of time out of the water basking in the sun, an activity that allows them to adjust their body temperature and to maintain the health of their shells. Large mature females like this one need access to land to avoid becoming egg-bound, a potentially fatal condition.

The fountain could have been designed to trap turtles. It has smooth vertical walls and the water level is about 8 inches below the top of the wall. The water in the fountain is about 2 feet deep, affording the turtle with no way to gain a foothold and to scale the walls. The hapless reptile has had no choice but to thread water for at least the past month. As air breathers, like us, turtles can and do drown.

Concerned neighbors have fed her, but attempts to rescue her by net failed as the turtle is very shy.

Members of the Gulf Coast Turtle and Tortoise Society (www.GCTTS.org; 281-443-3383) learned of this turtle's plight and determined that the only way to rescue her was to trap her. A floating trap was quickly assembled and baited with catfish parts and shrimp. After a little more than 24 hours in the pond, the turtle was in the trap when it was checked around sunset on Wednesday, August 24th.



The rescued turtle is in surprisingly good condition, a testament to turtles' strength and will to survive. After she is fed heavily for a few weeks, she will be released in a safe location where she will have access to both water and land.



Update - Three more turtles were trapped from the Westover entrance fountain. There were a total of

three females and one male red eared sliders. After making sure that they were all of good weight and that they were eating, the four turtles were released into suitable habitat near Houston on September 20, 2005.

The Westover Park resident who first brought this situation to our attention has placed a secure ramp in a corner of the fountain. The ramp allows a turtle to easily exit the pond. Any more turtles that find their way to this fountain will have a means of escape thanks to this caring person.

Children's Program Requests!

GCTTS has been asked to present a program to Boy Scouts at Schmalz Elementary off I10 and Barkers Cypress in Katy, Tx. Their meetings begin at 7:00 pm on the last Monday of the month. There will be about 40 boys ranging from 6-11 years old. Their families usually attend as well.

Katy ISD has offered an educational booth to GCTTS again this year at their Super Saturday annual fair. Saturday Nov 12. This will be casual with people stopping by our booth for educational material and questions or just to see our exhibit turtles!

GCTTS has been asked to man a booth for Armand Bayou's annual Creepy Crawlers nights. This Halloween based event will be both evenings, Oct. 21 & 22 from 6:00 to 8:30 PM, with lots of children and parents. We will have a turtle exhibit, educational material available, and answer questions for those stopping by our booth. If you can help either night, let us know. We do have one volunteer already for each night but 2 would be ideal.

For an outreach guide with a sample talk to get you started call the hotline and leave your mailing address or see:

<http://gctts.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Public/PublicTalkGuide>

Thanks!

Box Turtles Available to a Good Home!

One of our GCTTS members in Clear Lake is offering some of their 3 toed box turtles. Their husbandry is excellent and offspring are forcing them to part with some of them. They have four baby three-toe box

turtle babies (one from this year--about the size of a quarter), two from a year ago (about three times that size) and one which is about two years old and is ~ 3 inches across. Available free of charge and will be using the GCTTS adoption guidelines, but are not part of the GCTTS adoption program. Serious inquiries only send your contact information to info@gctts.org or the hotline 281-443-3383.

Keep 'Em High And Dry

by Julie Young, GCTTS member

We all know that turtles like their hidey-holes. They like to disappear into hollow logs, hide under fallen logs, burrow into a pile of leaves, or dig down into the earth. What's also important to know is that turtles NEED their hiding places.

In the wild, turtles are shy and reclusive by nature - and as a matter of survival. When chelonians are forced to live out in the open, or are continually barraged by intrusions and disturbances from dogs, children, or even their owners, they can become stressed. And stress opens the first door to illness. A turtle who is not at his optimum will have difficulty fighting off infections of just about any type.

That's why turtles in captivity must be provided with someplace where they can hide and feel secure. The type of hiding place is matter for another article. Here, we want to talk about the physical condition of the hiding place.

First, it is imperative that the spot you allow your turtles to dig into and hide in is clean. Dirt (as in soil) is OK - in fact, it's preferable, as it's natural, and contains organisms that help digest and fight bacteria and diseases. But uneaten food, feces, rotting vegetation, and chemical substances (fertilizers, insecticides) are not OK.

Another important factor is that the turtles' retreat must be dry. A chelonian who spends a lot of time in a damp location is likely to fall victim to fungal infections. These infections usually affect the shell, creating off-color discolorations on the bottom of the shell (because it comes into contact with the moist earth), flaking on both the upper and lower shell, lesions on the skin, and even sores that eat into the shell or flesh.

So, it's imperative that the hiding spots you provide are high and dry. Do not allow sprinklers to douse the area, not even a little bit. If you have plants that need watering, ... well, move them to another spot. When watering is essential, do it in the morning, so that the moisture can evaporate over the course of the day. Make sure the area is elevated, so rainwater cannot accumulate. This may mean that you'll have to move your turtles' hiding logs and homes, or even build a small berm or hill on which to place their

logs, so they can burrow under without becoming waterlogged.

It may mean a little work for you, and it may cause you to redesign the layout of your turtle pen. But the issue of staying dry is important to your turtles' health - so it should be important to you.

The Saga Of Bad Boy!

By Marlaina Barr



We all know that turtles of every description are escape artists. We'd like to share the story of a most exceptional escape artist - and one who seems to have the nine lives of a cat!

Many of you may remember me speaking before of Bad Boy. He is a male Eastern box turtle who had lived in my communal pen with a number of other box turtles for several years. Bad Boy (who hadn't yet acquired that name) was in our adoption program, and found a home with a woman who had appropriate housing. In the enclosure, the woman also had three male three toed box turtles she had adopted previously from us.

One week after the adoption, I got a hysterical call from the woman. Bad Boy had attacked one of the other turtles, and had ripped the face of the animal. Needless to say, I got Bad Boy back (along with her three toed to rehabilitate - it's eyeball was hanging out, among other injuries).

So Bad Boy went back into my back yard. Exiled from the communal turtle pen, he had free range of the yard. He was a very people-oriented turtle. He learned to hang out under the BBQ pit by the back door and beg for snacks. He feared nothing.

But Bad Boy needed a permanent home. One of our members I have known for years and trusted as an experienced box turtle keeper, offered to take him. At his home, Bad Boy would have his own private pen. He was again adopted out. Two years passed and this member moved to New York but he did not call and let us know he was looking for a home for Bad Boy as he should have.

At the annual East Texas Herpetological Society (ETHS) sale, a rehabber happened to mention that the Texas Wildlife Rescue Commission (TWRC) had taken in an especially aggressive box turtle. The animal was an Eastern box turtle, a male, and it had attacked someone's turtle. Bells went off in my head! Could this possibly be Bad Boy - the Bad Boy? I told her Bad Boy's story, of his adoptions and "anger management" problems. If this was the same animal, I wanted him back! When the turtle was handed over to me, sure enough, it was Bad Boy. What a coincidence!!!

So Bad Boy went back to housekeeping under our BBQ pit and compost pile.

A good year had passed when Wendy Browne, a GCTTS director, offered to take him. Besides his aggressiveness, Bad Boy developed mild respiratory illness after his first two hibernations, so he needs special care throughout the winter. Wendy is an experienced turtle keeper, knowledgeable about health and husbandry, and she's trusted with difficult specimens. Again, Bad Boy was adopted out.

Bad Boy lived, in an isolated pen, without incident for some time. A couple of years later, Wendy's two Eastern box turtles - a female and our friend Bad Boy - were stolen from her yard. The female soon mysteriously reappeared in Wendy's yard... Our guess is that the two turtles were put together and that Bad Boy attacked the female. The thieves probably realized they had more than they had bargained for, so they gave up the female. But they kept Bad Boy. This was in the spring of 2005.

Well, in September of 2005, Wendy was driving home, and about two miles from her house, she saw a turtle on the side of the road. Not wanting the animal to be hit and injured, she stopped, thinking she would move him to the side of the road. But wait! One look and she knew! It was Bad Boy - fat, sassy, healthy - and glad to be home!

Trials Of South American Tortoises

By Beverly Logan, GCTTS member

Approaching the fall months of Houston weather usually means over wintering tortoises inside. Those of us that have South American species of the Redfoot or Yellowfoot tortoise certainly are probably not looking forward to this time of year. I for one am not wanting those cold fronts coming and body aches of lifting tortoises in and out after their being in a nice summer garden fenced habitat. Tortoises also would rather be in the good ole outdoors I know, because mine may show dismay in some form or another when brought indoors. Can I still lug in the 15 pound female yellowfoot, that is probably gravid, and the 12 pound male redfoot? Haul them out of their favorite summer garden retreats with heads always held high roaming and grazing?

When I first researched these two species I knew they both had to live inside for over wintering in Houston no matter what age. I especially noted the female yellowfoots get LARGE (warning). The first decision made was to have them winter inside in a small plastic dog house under the kitchen table. This lasted for about five years. The first tortoise I had, the yellowfoot, was just a mere 7 pounds. She had the freedom kitchen floor with a strong basking light.

I bet new owners of juvenile tortoises are most likely thinking like I did then. There is plenty of time for larger quarters in the long future away of big messes. Back to the future again. I never thought the redfoot hatchling would grow very fast or big. It was only 3 inches when a GCCTS member gave me this Houston captive hatched tortoise. This one grew to the 8 inch size within a mere four years.

The first over wintering years for my two tortoises was in a small plastic green dog house in the kitchen. Simple cleaning efforts were soiled paper removal in the mornings and afternoons. Times changed and the female yellowfoot did double in size as warned. This yellowfoot's togetherness was to sit right in front of the refrigerator door waiting before daylight, blocking the door. The novelty, when the refrigerator door opened, was a big push and shove scene. There is nothing more concrete than a rather large willed pushing tortoise wanting to just climb in and peer up at the foods inside. She apparently smelled where the dandelion greens were hidden.

Again, the same ole October blues were recurring with my questions for every tortoise keeper I knew. "How do you house your tortoises during these wet rainy winters, northers, and then some?" Oh, Heat, don't forget the warmth they need? There was no perfect solution I found.

The work load was doubled. Vocalizations from family members was on the rise with the air quality in the kitchen not so good. Another worry, the gravid female yellowfoot always backed up to the table base doing a routine, I could not understand. That rear-end lifting mystery act had me puzzled as she was now a 12 year adult female. Then I finally saw the tortoise act just described one spring outside. The female yellowfoots' raised back end was digging an in ground cavity laying eggs fast in the garden.

Today, after the two years past inquisitions of over wintering tortoises I am still cleaning a much bigger area, in fact the largest Dogloo house available, but OUTSIDE. Now I clean with the garden hose daily. The two tortoises are heated with a hanging heat emitter that works for me. A wired in, indoor/outdoor thermometer is for temperature accuracy. I still lug them in and out on warm ground days, which are few and far until the first day of spring. I watch the weather reports twice daily to be sure the two don't get too hot or cold in their outhouse.

Over wintering tortoises in Houston can sometimes be severe. Observations when over wintering non-native tortoise species that have to come in from of the garden can help longevity. Look for symptoms of dehydration, not eating, and especially assimilation hole digging in adult females.

Helping a female gravid tortoise in the fall means dirt should be added in quarters. A long time tortoise keeper friend had to put her female redfoot outside briefly every night for a week in the October falls until her tortoise deposited its eggs. Her tortoise successfully dug a small cavity outside and laid her three eggs. The friend retrieves them that night for inside incubation. One of her eggs hatched on Christmas Eve. This hatchling tortoise is the South American adult redfoot mentioned above is still living with me.

Turtles Taking Over as the Kings of the Sea

By Jane Margolies

New York Times News Service, September 18, 2005

Submitted to GCTTS by William Montgomery

Forget swimming with dolphins. The next big thing might just be sea turtles.

These mysterious dinosaur-era creatures - which can live 80 years, swim thousands of miles from the beaches where they were born, and yet, somehow, manage to return to the same spots to lay their own eggs - are an increasing object of fascination for many Americans. And the travel industry has taken notice. Tour operators offer turtle-watching expeditions. Hotels brag on their Web sites about the turtles that come onto their beaches, and they promote discounts in nesting season, steer guests to nighttime walks and hatchling releases, not to mention fill gift shops with turtle-emblazoned towels and even serve turtle-shaped desserts.

Natural Habitat, a Boulder, Colo., tour operator that organizes expeditions to see Olive Ridley turtles in southern Mexico, says interest has jumped 30 percent since it began offering the trips five years ago. Nighttime walks along Florida's Atlantic coast, which are conducted by trained guides authorized by the state Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, attracted 95,415 people over the last 11 years and are booked weeks in advance.

This year, people who wanted to sign up for a walk in the Sebastian Inlet State Park in Melbourne Beach, Fla., in July were advised to mark their calendars for June 15, when the park, a division of the state Department of Environmental Protection, began taking reservations, and to start calling at 8 a.m. Some walks fill up on the first day.

Every little hotel on a nesting beach makes sure to mention turtles on its Web site. "When we redid our Web site two or three years ago, we put that on," said Monica White, owner of the Croton Arms Resort Apartments in Pompano Beach, Fla. "We tell them what's available in our area."

More than \$1.65 million of the \$2 million needed has been raised to build the Georgia Sea Turtle Center, on Jekyll Island, a research, rehabilitation and educational facility to be built in a decommissioned 1903 power plant in the historic district.

At some resorts, turtle tourism ranges from structured offerings (at the Marriott Casa Magna in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, a marine biologist monitors the beach, moves eggs to an on-site nursery and organizes evening hatchling releases) to more laid-back encounters (the owner of 3 Rivers, an environmentally

friendly lodge on the island of Dominica in the West Indies, offers to wake up guests and rush them down to the beach in the middle of the night if he gets word that a nesting female has appeared). Some are geared to children (at the Four Seasons Nevis, youngsters learn to make turtles out of paper plates and can take part in a turtle-drawing contest), others to aspiring scientists (guests staying on Little St. Simon Island, a private barrier island off the southeast coast of Georgia, can help excavate nests after eggs have hatched and record data on birth rates).

For some nature lovers, a turtle sighting - whether the result of a carefully choreographed program or a chance encounter on a beach - can be the high point of a vacation. "I'm still on cloud nine," said Gigi Alpers, a retired airlines reservations agent from Rego Park, Queens, who came upon a 900-pound leatherback during an early morning walk in Aruba in May. She found the experience more thrilling than spotting leopards, lion cubs and white rhinos on safari in South Africa last year. "When I saw what it took for this huge creature to lay her eggs, then cover them up, then make a false nest, then slowly make her way back to the water, well, I was in awe."

Sea turtles have been swimming in the oceans of the world for more than 100 million years. But over the last couple of centuries their numbers have dwindled because of hunting (turtles are killed for meat, skin and shells; their eggs are eaten and, in some countries, used as aphrodisiacs) and commercial fishing (turtles drown when accidentally caught in trawl nets).

In the 1950's, an American biologist, Archie Carr, began calling attention to the problem. His work tagging and recording data on green turtles in Tortuguero, Costa Rica, which he chronicled in "The Windward Road," published in 1956, led to the founding of the Caribbean Conservation Corporation, a leading sea turtle research organization based in Gainesville, Fla. Eventually, all seven of the world's species - from the Kemp's Ridley, which is about two feet long and weighs no more than 100 pounds, to the leatherback, which can grow to eight feet and more than 2,000 pounds - were listed under the Endangered Species Act.

Since then, several countries have joined the United States in outlawing hunting and egg collecting, and shrimp fishermen operating in many parts of the world must now use nets with turtle excluder devices, which allow the animals to escape. Small turtle populations in various locations have been stabilized, and some are thriving.

But it's still open season in many lands, and even where hunting and egg gathering are prohibited, beachfront development nibbles away at turtle nesting and foraging habitats. Community, fishing, religious and environmental groups, including the National Wildlife Federation, have been working to stop a Four Seasons resort from being built on a leatherback nesting spot in what is known as the Northeastern Ecological Corridor, on the north side of Puerto Rico. Elizabeth Pizzinato, a Four Seasons spokeswoman, said, "These issues are being worked out" in the project's development with the help of environmental experts.

Where hotels and houses exist, their lights sometimes lead turtles astray, drawing them inland where they tumble into chlorinated pools or wander onto streets, where they have been hit by cars. Such occurrences have led East Coast beach communities to pass lighting ordinances (and given hoteliers another reason to remind guests to turn out their lights).

Karen Eckert, the executive director of the Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network, a Duke University nonprofit organization that gathers data collected by scientists in the Caribbean, says that her group is now completing a handbook with guidelines for hotels. Its key recommendations: retrofit lighting, keep beaches clean and clear and reduce foot traffic at night.

Dr. Eckert and others like her want to prevent beaches from being overrun by nighttime turtle seekers, who scare the skittish creatures away. They also want to keep people from climbing on top of turtles, taking flash pictures of the females while they're laying their eggs, handling hatchlings unnecessarily or in any way delaying their entry into the water, where they float for several years, until they are mature enough to mate. Only one in 1,000 hatchlings survives to maturity. "The beach stuff is what we worry about," Dr. Eckert said. "That is the most vulnerable stage. You are walking hundreds of people right into the delivery room."

Still, scientists say that it seems that no harm is done when a trained guide takes a few people to watch a turtle lay her eggs (from the rear, where they're least likely to distract her), or look on as inchlong hatchlings wiggle their way up out of their sandy nest and scabble down the shore.

But, of course, the turtles themselves have to cooperate. Turtle populations nest in different seasons in different places. Nesting females will lay eggs three to five times a season, usually at two-week intervals. But as with other things in nature, there are no guarantees.

So found Martin Lawrence, a neuroscientist at Mc Master University in Hamilton, Ontario, who was with his wife and three children in St. Martin last spring. The family then flew to Dominica to see turtles. They never did. "Every night we went to bed primed, our clothes ready, so that if a call came in we could just scoot over there," he said. Even though a turtle came onto the beach the night before their arrival and the night after they left, none appeared during their stay. "We were disappointed," he said.

A Hippo and Tortoise Tale

by Jennifer Ludden

All Things Considered, July 17, 2005

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4754996>

It sounds like a fable or a fairy tale. The main characters are an orphaned baby hippopotamus and a 130-year-old giant tortoise. The hippo was rescued from a natural disaster of biblical proportions, and the tortoise was meant to be dinner a century ago. But the story of Owen the hippo and Mzee the tortoise is absolutely true.

The animals are both the wards of Dr. Paula Kahumbu, general manager of Lafarge Ecosystems, which runs a sanctuary in Mombasa, Kenya. She tells Jennifer Ludden the story of a highly unlikely friendship and the children's book she helped write to tell the tale.

Foreward from 'Owen & Mzee'

December 26th, 2004 started off as a normal, quiet day. My son Joshua and I were out for a morning walk along the beach in front of my home when suddenly the sea began to race in. Within minutes the ocean became threatening. The tide had risen well beyond the high water mark. At that instant it became apparent the Tsunami that had started nearly 4,000 miles away far across the Indian Ocean would impact us as well. In less than 12 hours the Tsunami had finally reached the coast of Africa from its point of origin in Banda Aceh.

We ran from the beach back to my house where my sister and her children were waiting for us. They were all crying having just seen on television the haunting images of the devastating Indian Ocean Tsunami. Although we escaped the waves, a one year old hippopotamus 80 kilometers away was not as lucky.

Just before Christmas the unseasonably heavy rains near Malindi town washed a family of hippopotamuses down the Sabaki River and out to sea. The residents of the town tried in vain to urge the family back up the estuary. When the Tsunami hit Malindi, the sea turned angry, the sky clouded over and for a moment the hippos disappeared and were forgotten as all efforts went to rescuing the stranded fishermen.

The next day only one hippo could be seen. It was the baby and he was stranded on the reef. Hundreds of people came to watch the efforts to rescue the hippo. It took ropes, boats, nets and cars --though the hippo was tired he was still fast and slippery. It took a brave rugby tackle to finally capture him, and the cheering of the crowd could be heard over a kilometer away.

Lafarge Eco Systems agreed to provide a home for the baby hippo and I rushed to Malindi to collect him. Tangled in fishing ropes, angry and tired, the hippo did not seem to appreciate our rescue at all. As we left for Mombasa, the crowd unanimously agreed to name him 'Owen' in honor of the volunteer who tackled him to the ground.

Exhausted, confused and extremely frightened, Owen immediately ran to the safety of a giant tortoise when we released him in Haller Park. Mzee, our 130 year old tortoise, just happened to be nearby and he was very surprised by Owen's odd behavior cowering behind him as a baby hippo does to its mother. Mzee quickly came to terms with his new friend and even returned signs of affection. The unusual relationship between this baby hippo and the ancient tortoise amazed people the world over and has featured in most countries on television and in news papers.

Owen and Mzee continue to spend their days together in the pond, feeding and patrolling. Owen nudges Mzee to come for walks, and Mzee sometimes even follows Owen. Hundreds of people have witnessed this incredible spectacle first hand at Haller Park which is open every day to the public. Owen will eventually be moved to a bigger pond in Haller Park were he can socialize with other hippos.

Dr. Paula Kahumbu
Chief Environmentalist, Haller Park
Mombasa, Kenya

Photos by Peter Greste



Owen the baby hippo and Mzee the 130-year-old giant tortoise share a snuggle.



Since he was rescued, Owen has trailed after Mzee, but he will eventually be sent to live with another hippo.

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