

Box Turtles

They can be great pets, but leave them in the wild.

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Numbers of wild box turtles have been dwindling for awhile now. Always buy a captive-bred box turtle and leave the wild ones alone!

I was mucking about on the REPTILES Facebook page yesterday, when I noticed a posting from a Fan (official Facebook lingo) who said he had caught a baby eastern box turtle and was looking for suggestions about how to set up a good terrarium for it. I posted back that I knew it was tempting to keep the turtle, but would he please release it back where he caught it. I notice that today the post is gone. I hope I didn't embarrass the poster, but I do think it's important that people know box turtles should be left in the wild. Like other reptiles, their populations have been dwindling.

This can be a tough message to get across, especially to youngsters who just want to keep the reptiles they catch as pets. Let's face it, that's how many of us older reptile folk got started: catching our own. I don't frown on that in general, only if the populations of the animals in question are at risk. I encourage kids catching and keeping herps. True, it's a bit more of a sticky situation these days if you want to collect your own wild-caught reptiles than when I was a kid. Nowadays you're usually supposed to have a license, such as a fishing license, to remove reptiles from the wild. State governments want their little piece of the pie.

Now that I think about it, I don't know whether or not this was also a rule back when I was a kid catching pet reptiles. Maybe it was. I hope not, now that I've confessed.

It's tougher for today's children to meet wild reptiles. There are fewer woody areas in many cities in which to develop a taste for things herpetological. Not to mention fewer animals, too. When I was little all I had to do was cross the street, poke around in the woods there, and often I was able to come home with a salamander or a frog. And even, on an especially glorious day, an occasional box turtle. One time my brother caught an eastern box turtle and it closed its shell on his finger. I don't know if Rob was lacking in strength or afraid of damaging the turtle, but he couldn't extract his finger and resorted to placing the turtle in a bucket of water to get it to release his finger, but only after severing the very tip.

Box turtles are neat turtles, and they can make engaging pets. They come by their common name because of the hinged plastron that allows them to seal off their leg and head openings, providing added protection from predators. The eastern (*Terrapene c. carolina*) is an attractive reptile, especially male specimens due to their red eyes. There is also the ornate (*T. o. ornata*, a subspecies of *T. ornata*, the western box turtle), which has a very pretty black-and-yellow-striped carapace, the Florida (*T. c. bauri*), the three-toed (*T. c. triunguis*).

Box turtles are different from other turtles in that most other turtles are primarily aquatic. Box turtles are primarily land-dwelling chelonians. They'll enter water on occasion, but they are not aquatic and you're not going to see stacks of them basking on logs overhanging bodies of water, as you would sliders, painteds, maps and many of their kin. If you do, please take a photo and submit it to not only REPTILES but Ripley's Believe It Or Not! Nor will you find box turtles slogging around at the bottom of a pond, as you might snappers, stinkpots and mud turtles.

Box turtles are captive bred now, though not terribly widely just yet, but this is further reason to not remove them from the wild. Pet box turtles, which may live for decades, need large enclosures, such as a turtle table. Luckily, it just so happens that an excellent article about turtle tables can be found right here on ReptileChannel.

(By the way, I was of course kidding when I mentioned previously that the box turtle severed the tip of my brother's finger. I just wanted to see if you were paying attention.)

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