

Missing Turtle Tail for Sexing

Can a missing tail cause reproductive problems in reptiles?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

I recently acquired a hatchling Western painted turtle from a pet store. We noticed that its tail was bitten off — most likely by one of the larger hatchling red-eared sliders that shared its tank at the pet store (others also had tails missing). The turtle is active, eats well and seems otherwise healthy. At this early age and without a tail, sexing the turtle is not possible. Question: When mature, will it be able to breed without the cloacal opening? Can I expect any other health issues due to the missing tail? I have successfully kept and bred other aquatic turtles over the years, but do not know what to expect with this one.

Wow! This is one question that I wish had been accompanied by a photo or two that might help me in answering your questions. But, even without photos, my hypothesis is this: Your painted turtle must have a cloacal opening and vent, or it would not be able to pass urine or feces. If that was the case, it would die from a toxic build-up of waste. The vent is the external opening for excretion of waste and is also used for reproduction.

Because the cloaca of the female is at the base of the tail, I suspect that you must have a female. The cloacal opening is farther down the tail in males, to better allow contact during reproduction. If the tail had been bitten off of a young male, injury to the vent would have been more likely.

If you have owned your little turtle for a while, and it is eating and acting normally, as you have written, then chances are that it will do well in life. Does it have a nub of a tail? I think it would be best if you have a herp vet examine this turtle so that you will know what it does and doesn't have. Chances are that the initial injury is already healed, there shouldn't be any additional problems from the bite itself.

I have actually seen this type of injury many times from hatchlings being housed with larger turtles, who mistake little tails and limbs for tempting morsels of food. It is very important for pet stores and owners to pay close attention to what is going on in the habitats with herps of various sizes, for just this reason!

You asked about reproduction with your little turtle, and I can't answer that for you. Once you have it evaluated by a herp vet, he or she should be able to help you with that dilemma. If the parts are all there, a female should be able to reproduce, hopefully. I'm not so sure about a male, as there might have been an injury to his copulatory penis (or even an amputation or partial amputation).

Please have a herp vet evaluate your turtle so that you can get some of your questions answered more definitively. Good luck with the little guy.

Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP has been an avian/exotic/herp animal veterinarian since 1981. She is a regular contributor to REPTILES magazine.

Need a Herp Vet?

If you are looking for a herp-knowledgeable veterinarian in your area, a good place to start is by checking the list of members on the Association of Reptilian and Amphibian Veterinarian (ARAV) web site at www.arav.com. Look for DVMs who appear to maintain actual veterinary offices that you could contact.