

## Box Turtle Care and Hibernation

### Box turtle care and hibernation information.

*By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP*

**Q.** I have recently received an ornate box turtle. When my family got it, its beak and nails were overgrown. We took it to our reptile vet, who gave it an operation with anesthesia. After he got the beak back to normal at our last visit in August, the turtle ate well. However, in the following months the turtle barely touched its food, didn't go after its worms and almost always was in its cardboard "burrow." The only time it came out was when it tried to climb out of the cage, even though the cage looks big enough. The turtle is hibernating now, and I'm worried that after it comes out of hibernation, it'll still be sluggish. Is there something wrong with its cage? (The cage has greenish hard flooring, a food dish, a small water bowl it likes to soak in and its cardboard box.) Are we not giving it enough places to dig, soak or crawl under? Is this a disease? Why is it staying in its box all day and night?

**A.** You didn't tell me anything about the temperature range that you are keeping it at. That is very important information for me. That said, I would also like to tell you that ornate box turtles are very difficult to properly maintain, and are definitely not recommended for beginners. Unfortunately, when you acquired your pet, it already showed signs of neglect. This doesn't bode well for your turtle, as it is often difficult to return an ill ornate back to good health once it is ill.

My next concern is that your turtle is now hibernating. It is never a good idea to allow a sick or turtle of questionable health to hibernate. Instead, it is better to keep it awake and have appropriate diagnostics performed, and then treat the condition. This is because during hibernation, the metabolism slows down and any untreated infections remain dormant in the animal.

Ornates do not do well in glass aquariums. I don't think that its caging is appropriate. They do best in a well-landscaped outdoor enclosure (in parts of the country where this is possible) that are escape-proof and predator-proof, or in large, indoor terrariums. They should have a bottom substrate of at least 3 to 4 inches of light peat-based potting compost mixed with damp sphagnum moss. Hard flooring and rocks don't provide the necessary moisture that they require. A dry tank with excessive heat is a scenario for dehydration, which is very dangerous in ornates. This may be why it liked to spend time soaking in his water bowl. Ornates should be maintained with a temperature range of 80 to 85 degrees Fahrenheit, with a gradient down to about 70 degrees in the cooler area of the habitat.

Next, ornates are very carnivorous omnivores, and will eat earthworms, crickets (calcium dusted), mealworms, waxworms, slugs and pinky mice, as well as dark green leafy and over-ripe fruits.

Did your herp vet explain about the necessary requirements for caring for your new turtle? Did he perform a fecal-parasite exam? Ornates are usually wild-caught and often suffer from parasitic infestations.

I suggest that you wake up your box turtle and make an appointment with a herp vet knowledgeable about ornate box turtles. It should receive a thorough physical exam, a complete blood count (CBC) and chemistry panel, and a fecal parasite exam. Radiographs (X-rays) may also be necessary. You obviously really care about your turtle, so please don't hesitate to get it the necessary vet care that it really needs.

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